"""Who are you?" She ground out, the icy words slicing through the air.

That arrow could punch straight through my chest. And she knows it.

As if reading his mind, the girl's mouth twisted into a smirk, "You really shouldn't test me. It'd be a shame to ruin such a fine body for such a simple question."

Rhaegar hoped the shadows aided him in the lies he was about to tell.

"We are landless knights from the South. We heard rumors of increased wildling attacks along the Wall and figured we'd take it upon ourselves to help protect the greatest part of the Seven Kingdoms. What knight doesn't wish for wild adventures in the snow?"
The girl scoffed, but lowered her bow. "If you're landless knights, then I'm the Maiden herself. That flowery speech will get you nothing but trouble here."

**

After avoiding an undesirable betrothal, the Crown Prince is sent to spy on the Starks for the King, who is convinced the Warden of the North plans treachery. Rhaegar finds there is more to the North than endless snow, Lyanna is exhausted by duty in a male-dominated world, while Ned struggles with a conflicted heart and Rickard looks to his legacy.

Notes

Hi and thanks in advance for reading!

After months of being a passive reader, I finally decided to try my hand at writing out some of my ideas. First fic, so comments appreciated. I may make edits to chapters as the story evolves.

Note on character ages - all are generally consistent with canon with the exception of the Stark siblings. All the Stark siblings have been aged up approximately two years (not one as originally stated).

Events start towards the end of 278 AC, when news of Steffon Baratheon's failure to find Rhaegar a bride in Essos reaches King's Landing.
Rhaegar

Steffon Baratheon had failed.

Not that Rhaegar had been particularly fond of the Essos plan to begin with, but it did throw yet another snag in any plans. In truth, he felt guilty that the trip had cost the Lord and Lady of Storm's End their lives. He had always liked Steffon when the man had been to King's Landing. Such needless loss of life. Now his senseless cousin was a Lord Paramount, but that was another issue altogether.

The Baratheon’s trip had garnered him an additional year of freedom – now, he had to convince his father he needed yet more time. He wasn’t sure the best approach, as he knew his mother had been communicating with the ruling Princess of Dorne, and he expected a proposed match was to be offered soon. Convincing Aerys to rule against the match shouldn’t be too difficult a battle though. Aerys didn’t trust the Dornish. Not that he trusted much of anyone these days, but the Dornish had never been Aerys’ favorites.

He didn’t remember much about Elia Martell – she hadn’t been well during much of his visit to Dorne when he was younger. Dark hair, dark eyes, olive skin. She wasn’t a remarkable beauty, more mutedly pretty, and it often seemed as though she was too fragile to touch, but she did hold herself regally and exhibited cutting wit while conversing. They had been corresponding for a few moons, and she seemed an adequate companion.

Her health was his primary concern. Among nobility, marriage was so often for political reasons, and he had no illusions of a marriage with love or passion. His marriage would undoubtedly be to consolidate an alliance. But he needed a woman who could bear him three children, if not more.

*The dragon has three heads.*

Childbirth took its toll on even the strongest of women. To take to wife a woman who was often
described as frail seemed quite foolish.

The thought of going against his mother’s wishes did not please him, yet he knew his best approach would be to convince his father of the Dornish Princess’s unsuitability – Rhaella Targaryen, like most of their Targaryen ancestors, could be stubborn to a fault should she put her mind to something. Mariah Martell, Elia’s mother, had been one of the Queen’s closest companions, and Rhaegar feared it was blinding his mother to the truth about her friend’s daughter.

He would speak to Arthur first. House Dayne was sworn to House Martell - Arthur and his sister Ashara had spent some of their childhood at Sunspear. While he disliked forcing his dearest friend to divulge personal, and potentially improper, information on his liege’s daughter, Arthur understood how dire his need. Might be Rhaegar could even speak to Ashara. It was more likely the woman had the information he sought – Arthur had been an honorable man even in his youth - and it was by Rhaegar’s recommendation that his mother had invited Ashara to Court in the first place.

Hopefully, his friend could aid him. He didn’t want to think of his alternative source of information.

*No, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I don’t trust the eunuch, with all his “little birds.” Best leave that as a last resort.*

Sighing, he headed towards the training yard, knowing that was the quickest way to find his best friend. As Arther loved to remind him, one didn’t simply become the legendary Sword of the Morning by sitting on one’s arse.

In the end, Arthur’s knowledge of the Princess was limited to childhood stories, and Ashara’s information was far too vague to be truly detrimental. Fortunately, she had given him enough to drive his inquiries in a specific direction. Alas, in the end he was forced to speak with Varys.

He knew his father had brought the new Master of Whisperers to court in part because of him – Aerys didn’t trust his own son. Rhaegar had no illusions that Varys spared him when it came to whispering in the King’s ear, but he also wasn’t sure Varys wanted him gone. The Prince had certainly spoken against his father’s actions, albeit with only his most trusted companions, and Aerys had burned men for lesser crimes. Considering the extent of the Spider’s web of knowledge, Rhaegar knew he was only one step from the pyre, but Varys had yet to bring out the ropes to tie him to it. This gave him a modicum of comfort, as it indicted Varys’ motives were far more complex than simply fanning the flames of his father’s madness.
He gives each of us just enough information, but never the whole story. In no time at all, he has made it so we feel helpless without him.

To be fair, the man had his uses and he had proven himself most helpful in solving Rhaegar’s Dornish problem.

She has a lover and is certainly not a maiden. The Princess had moon tea delivered to her room but a few days after her mother, the ruling Princess of Dorne, resumed her correspondence with the Queen. Even that had her on bed-rest for weeks.

His mother had been quite displeased by the news, though she hadn’t thought to question it. The Dornish reputation for sexual licentiousness was well known in the capital – Elia, at two and twenty, had been a woman grown for several years. Aware of her husband’s distrust of the Dornish, Rhaella had agreed with her son that the proposal could not possibly go forward. To avoid the wrath of Dorne, and the potential humiliation of a Princess with a public display, Rhaella wrote to her friend to explain the situation. Mariah Martell proved to indeed be a smart and savvy woman – her short response was quickly followed by the announcement of Elia’s betrothal and subsequent marriage to Ser Baelor Hightower.

Aerys, who had some knowledge of his sister-wife’s designs, seemed only modestly offended by the course of events. In one of his rare good moods, Aerys had even suggested Rhaegar travel the realm to find a bride. With no designated timeline, Rhaegar planned to use the time to travel to the Citadel in Oldtown. A bride could wait.

This plan had unfortunately unraveled completely when news of the betrothal between Brandon Stark and Catelyn Tully had been announced during one of the Small Council meetings. While great houses were known to make marriage alliances, it was still rare – great houses generally married into the families of their bannermen. To have the eldest daughter of a great house married to the heir of another was reason to pause. House Stark rarely engaged in Southern politics, which made the occurrence all the more unusual. When coupled with the fact that Rickard Stark’s second son, Eddard, was fostered with the new Lord Paramount of the Stormlands, Robert Baratheon, in the Eyrie under Jon Arryn, Lord Paramount of the Vale, the news would lead even a rational man to furrow his brows.

Aerys Targaryen was not a rational man.

After spending the better part of an hour ranting about the traitorous North, Aerys had finally turned to his son.
“Boy, you’ve always been interested in the North, no? You send enough bloody letters to my great uncle at that Wall at least. Maybe a trip to that frozen hell will help you with that damn prophecy you’re always reading.”

Indeed, as far as unwanted trips went, perhaps Rhaegar could salvage such a journey.

Not exactly Oldtown, but perhaps Aemon can help. He always said there were rare books at Castle Black and Winterfell.

His father had continued, “Yes, you will go to the North and find out what treason these Northerners plan. They dare defy the dragon!” His father’s gaze landed on him again, a glint of malice shining through, “And you will do so in secret. No royal pomp and circumstance, let Rickard Stark walk right into a trap.”

Rhaegar wasn’t sure what exactly the trap was or how he would learn enough about the Warden of the North’s plans without gaining entry into his keep, but the Prince recognized a pointless argument when he saw one.

Of course, Varys couldn’t let an opportunity to create more intrigue go. All it took was a simple statement, phrased as a leading question: “Your Majesty, I do believe Lord Stark has a daughter of whom he is quite fond – she must be close to her majority?”

Seven hells, don’t give him any ideas.

Tywin Lannister, the Hand of the King, who had been largely silent up until this point, decided to join the conversation. “The girl is said to be wild and reckless, hardly an appropriate spouse for even a minor lord. Why else would she remain hidden and with no betrothal.”

While he was certain Tywin’s interference was purely selfish – the Hand had made it obvious he still harbored plans to have Rhaegar marry his daughter, Cersei, in spite of Aerys’ previous rejection of the suit – Rhaegar hoped the comment dissuaded his father enough to let the matter go.

While news from the North was incredibly limited, particularly around Lord Stark’s only daughter, he too had heard the few rumors that did circulate. The Wolf Maid was said to shun all lady’s arts, preferring to hunt with her equally wild brothers, and her temper was said to match that of her oldest brother, Brandon. Rhaegar had formally met Brandon Stark on a few occasions, but his clearest
memory was of the man sparring at the last tourney – the man seemed almost feral, less measured in his swings than a knight of the South, yet undeniably a fearsome opponent with his wild strength and wolf-like quickness. The one time Rhaegar had spoken more than a few words of greeting with the heir of Winterfell, at a feast two years prior, Brandon had been freely telling stories about his younger brothers. When one of his companions had mentioned his sister though, the man’s anger had flared suddenly and the topic was rapidly changed.

_Are they just protective? Or are they hiding something?_

Rhaegar shook his head to clear the thoughts – they were inconsequential. He highly doubted the girl would be a presentable candidate for marriage, given she had never even been to court, and the lack of other potential arrangements could only mean there was something wrong with her. Likely she was plain, and with uncouth manners, she would only be a liability to her father and any future husband.

He had missed the rest of the discussion, though caught his father’s order to simply look out for the Stark girl. Aerys didn’t like secrets and Rickard Stark seemed to be hiding more than one.

Dismissed to see to his preparations, he went to find Arthur and Oswell.
Of Northern Duties

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for the kind words!! I have quite a lot of content written, but am still refining a lot of the transitions, so hopefully will be able to update in a rather timely manner. Chapters may be of varying lengths and will bounce around POVs.

The plot has expanded immensely from my original idea, so while I'm planning on a longer storyline, relationships are still evolving.

This is a long one, so might have missed mistake or two - please let me know if you see any errors!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lyanna

The cold air burned in her lungs as she dismounted her horse. The fresh snow had made her early morning ride treacherous and the temperature had plunged as the clouds had cleared. A fool would look at the clear sky, the sun shining, and make the mistake of thinking the day to be warmer. Growing up in the North, Lyanna knew it to be the exact opposite – without the clouds to trap any natural heat, the temperature dropped precipitously. These were the kind of days that killed the unsuspecting man.

Taking the reins back from the stable boy, she led Silverwing back into the stables, glancing back to see her black direwolf shaking off the fresh snow. She had found Nymeria and her sibling whimpering beneath a bush on one of her rides nearly four years ago, two dark spots tucked into the snow. The mother had been a short distance away, dead by some horrific gash. After much debate, her father had allowed her to keep the two pups as long as she cared for them – direwolves, after all, were the sigil of House Stark, and hadn’t been sighted south of the Wall in almost two hundred years.

Aside from Lyanna, the male pup, Torrhen, had grown fond of her younger brother, Benjen, and, surprisingly, her father – his favorite place in the keep seemed to be curled up around Rickard Stark’s feet during court sessions, the image strangely reminiscent of the Stark Kings’ statues in Winterfell’s crypt. But to the surprise of no one, Tor truly loved her oldest brother, Brandon. They were
practically kindred spirits, wild, rash and restless.

Nymeria was Lyanna's, through and through. As with Tor and Brandon, Nym and Lyanna share many of the same character traits - willful but measured when utterly necessary, playful with a love of danger. The direwolf was at her side whenever possible. Lyanna was certain the wolf was starting to read her mind. Or maybe she was just more predictable than she had thought.

Both direwolves had grown to the size of ponies, their sharp fangs and lean bodies the very image of a dangerous predator, but were generally well behaved when given adequate time and space to hunt. Father had kept the news of their presence at Winterfell quiet – as he did with most information from the North – so as to not garner too much attention. He had even asked Lyanna to remain vague in her letters to her middle brother Ned, who was fostering in the South.

Nonetheless, Nym and Tor were extremely intelligent and had become comfortable with many of the members of the household, though several servants, notably the newer ones, continued to avoid the animals like the plague.

Tor, his grey coat streaked with snow, bounded in the gates after a moment to nuzzle his sibling affectionately.

Satisfied that they would make their way within without causing undue trouble, Lyanna turned her attention back to her grey courser, brushing her down and feeding her. A temperamental creature like her rider, Father had originally intended the mare for Benjen – the horse clearly had other plans and initially refused to let anyone other than Lyanna approach her. After proving herself more than capable of handling the large beast despite her smaller stature, Father had allowed her to keep the charger.

Other than her partner-in-crime Benjen, a year her junior, animals were Lyanna’s favorite companions. With both older brothers off fostering by her fifth name day, Lyanna had grown used to having few companions her age. When her mother died more than eight years past, Lyanna lost her primary female influence. Up to that time, Lyanna’s time was already spent on typically male interests, and the loss of her mother led Lyanna to shun most activities previously enjoyed with Lyarra.

Father took Mother’s death hard, and it was two years before he even broached the topic of Lyanna’s education in lady’s arts. By then, Lyanna had already taken on almost all of her mother’s household tasks, her way of honoring her mother without touching a needle and thread, alongside lessons with the Maester. With his wild child resistant to any change and pushing to train with a real sword, Rickard Stark resigned himself to compromising – he would only require a basic knowledge of lady’s arts, in exchange for lessons in archery and knife work. Lyanna was still bitter about his interdiction on carrying a sword like her brothers, but she accepted the bargain, given it was truly
more than she had hoped for.

Over the next five years, her father had come to depend on her more and more, with Brandon returning to Winterfell rather infrequently after earning his knighthood and riding around with his new knight friends. Benjen had spent two years at Last Hearth; that was an excruciating period of time, when Lyanna thought she would die of loneliness, but thankfully Father had called for his return after realizing Brandon intended to stay south for longer. Ned had only been home once, four years past – they exchanged letters, but she wasn’t sure she would even recognize him now.

Silverwing nudged her face, shaking her out of her daze. Staring into the mare’s black eyes, for a second her mind accidentally slipped into the horse.

*She was cold and tired of being brushed in the same spot. Could the girl just put the blanket on and feed her? Lyanna saw herself standing in front of the horse, eyes blank. Maybe the girl had those sweet squares that she sometimes brought as a treat.*

Blinking to bounce back to herself, Lyanna felt Silverwing dip her head towards the pocket of her breeches. Laughing quietly and stroking her horse’s muzzle, she pulled out a sugar cube, which was promptly accepted. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen through Silver’s eyes, though it still put her a bit on edge – just as the dreams of hunting in Nymeria alongside Torrhen disconcerted her. She draped the blanket over Silverwing’s sleek body and after filling the feed bucket, exited the stables to find Benjen. Hopefully he was still in the Great Hall, breaking his fast. She was starving and something told her this would be a long day.

Lyanna found Maester Walys waiting outside Father's solar, his acolyte scurrying down the hallway with a number of scrolls, presumably to find the library. She sighed internally, wishing Acolyte Brynden was joining the meeting with Father instead of Maester Walys.

Lyanna's relationship with Maester Walys had never been easy - Walys had come to Winterfell a few years ago, bringing his Southern ideals and politics with him to the snowy North. By that time, Lyanna had already taken on most of her deceased mother’s responsibilities as Lady of Winterfell with the assistance of the previous maester, Maester Norbert. Despite being born in the Crownlands,
Norbert had been a Northerner at heart, having spent many years with the Flints before moving to Winterfell upon Lyarra Stark's request. He had been an intelligent man, with a sharp wit and gentle soul - he had given Lyanna a purpose following her mother's death and had never questioned her lack of interest in lady's arts. The only thing she ever truly disliked about the man was his advice on fostering her brothers away from Winterfell, but fortunately for their relationship, she only learned it had been his suggestion after his death.

Norbert had developed a canker in his later years, which may have pushed him to encourage Rickard to give Lyanna more responsibility earlier than usual, as he was unable to provide quite as much support. Whatever the case, duty had been thrust upon her, and she had done her best. She had been sad when Norbert had passed away, as it was only a few years after her mother's death, the pain and grief still cutting deep.

Acolyte Brynden had been Norbert's assistant, a young bastard from Ramsgate, who was bookish and shy but quite skilled with architecture. Brynden had secretly helped Lyanna plan some of the restoration of Queensgate, Lyanna's little getaway at the Wall, but he was usually completely occupied by the plans for Moat Cailin that Lord Stark had commissioned. Despite his quiet nature, Brynden had been a good adviser to both her and her father.

Walys, on the other hand, sought to rein her in from the beginning. He very much disapproved of her wild ways, saying she was no true Lady (not that she was trying to be one). From the moment he arrived four years ago, he had counseled her father that should she be allowed to roam wild, she would never find a suitable marriage match. In fact, he had almost had an apoplectic fit when Father had allowed her to raise two direwolves – too bad he survived, Lyanna would have been rid of the man's noxious presence then. The man viewed her as little more than a pawn in the political game great men played.

Much to Lyanna's displeasure, Walys' ideals had gained some popularity with her father for a few turns after she began to bleed - suddenly, she was no longer just another one of his rambunctious children, but a maiden flowered. Those moons after her first moon blood were the worst of her life, as Father sought to limit her riding and archery training, going so far as to have Walys send for some Southern widow to teach her needlework, dancing and courtly manners.

What a terrible waste of life! Brandon had returned that year to find his sister swinging between deep depression and utter fury at being “caged.” In one of his rare cases of rational thinking, Brandon had protested the arrangement after hearing the Southern widow yelling at Lyanna that no man would marry her if she bled so much on her embroidery. Father had been surprised to hear of all the ridiculous threats Lyanna had endured over the months, gradually seeing the depth of his daughter's unhappiness. Even the more outspoken servants came forward when they heard he was hearing about the matter, detailing the concerns they had with their mistress's state and limited time for her real duties around Winterfell.
When Maester Walys agreed with the widow’s assessment, claiming a lady should defer to men and Lyanna need not concern herself with all the duties of Winterfell, Rickard Stark had laughed. To Lyanna’s pleasure, he had then proceeded to excuse the awful widow, explaining that Lyanna was a woman of the North, not some simpering Southern damsel in distress. Affairs had promptly returned to their prior state, to Walys’ misfortune. While Walys continued to have Father’s ear on political maneuvering, encouraging Lord Stark’s ambitions regarding the South (the betrothal and alliance with the Tullys had his fingerprints all over it), Lyanna became more integral in the daily operations of the North.

At present, they found themselves in a sort of agreement of neutrality – they served Rickard Stark in their respective capacities, respectful of his wishes and allocations of duties. Fortunately, the Lord of Winterfell was rather involved in daily responsibilities, ensuring the two of them worked together as well as possible.

Lyanna nodded to the guard in front of Father’s solar as he allowed her entry, knowing Maester Walys would follow her within.

Rickard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, stood behind his desk, leaning over a stack of papers. A typical Northman, Rickard cut an imposing figure, standing at almost six and a half feet, with broad, muscled shoulders emphasized by his simple wool and leather garments. His dark brown hair had only a few flecks of gray and his dark beard was trimmed close to his face. Her father’s eyes were Lyanna’s favorite attribute – a piercing pale gray-blue, always alive and sharp. She had been on the receiving end of her fair share of glares from those eyes that seemed to cut through her soul, but she also prided herself on those rare moments when the pale blue pools had shone with love and respect.

He smiled at her in greeting while nodding to Walys. Given Father’s stance behind his desk, both her and Walys remained standing.

"There are several matters to discuss, the first being Brandon’s upcoming betrothal. Lord Tully has tentatively agreed to the arrangement between his oldest daughter, Catelyn, and Brandon. Terms are still to be determined, but I would appreciate both of your inputs on any necessary items. Lyanna, you will assist me in determining the financial terms, given your familiarity with the current state of affairs in the North." Lyanna nodded immediately, thrilled that her father was allowing her to take the lead on such an important matter. She noticed Walys was about to protest - a few years ago, he would have been in charge of such matters for Lord Stark - but Father cut him off with a stern look, "Maester Walys will draft the formal language once we have come up with a few possibilities. Understood?"

Maester Walys tried to mask his disapproval, but Lyanna managed to catch the grimace cross his face.
"Aye, my Lord, an acceptable arrangement."

"Good. Lyanna, you have been corresponding with Lord Manderly regarding trade out of White Harbor, correct?" Once again, Lyanna nodded.

Father had been busy with a number of disputes among his Lords - chief among them, Roose Bolton's ill-advised attempt to blackmail Lord Karstark into accepting a marriage proposal - so he had tasked Lyanna with handling correspondence with Lord Manderly.

White Harbor was the only true city in the North, a large port that conducted trade with the rest of Westeros as well as Essos. The long winter had put a strain on supplies in many parts of the North, particularly Winterfell with the larger than typical population of Wintertown. In one of the only times they worked well together, Lyanna and Maester Walys had spent many moons reducing inefficiencies in supply usage in the keep and the surrounding town, as well as determining potential trade opportunities to pay for any shortages. Father had requested she work with Lord Manderly on their findings, which had been surprisingly positive - timber from the North had been found to burn longer and without as much smoke as most wood from the South. The North had quite an abundance of trees, and with the proper management of reforestation, the North could well afford to begin trading in earnest. Not only would the trade provide surplus resources for difficult winters, as demand from the South would increase during the most critical months, but also generate excess capital during easier months. Outside of timber, Acolyte Brynden had also suggested exploring along the mountain ranges for any metal deposits – this would have to wait until spring or even summer though, given the heavy snows accompanying this winter.

She quickly briefed her father on the recent updates, though he knew much of the information already. Instead, the update was largely for Walys, who Lyanna had slowly edged out of the recent discussions. The man was always busy with some other arrangements with southern lords and their maesters, in any case.

_The man is most certainly trying to sell me off to the highest bidder, with me turning six and ten in a few moons. He knows the pact Father made when Mother died - he’ll probably have a contract in front of Father the morning after my nameday._

The rest of the discussion proceeded as usual, with Lyanna providing updates on any household concerns and Walys detailing any news from the South. Eventually, Father arrived at the key reason for the meeting.

"I will be away for several moons handling business south of Winterfell. I will make a stop at White Harbor first, to complete the trade discussions and then Lord Tully wishes to complete negotiations
in person. I intend to meet Brandon at Moat Cailin before proceeding to Riverrun, so he may meet his betrothed. Brandon will then return directly to Winterfell while I remain to complete terms. I will then hopefully meet Ned somewhere along the Trident, since it has been some years since I have seen him. Acolyte Brynden will accompany me, though he will remain at Moat Cailin to see to preparations for additional clearing at the towers. I will spend some time at Greywater Watch before stopping once more at Moat Cailin to return home. Plans are subject to change, but I imagine it will be near six moons with the state of the weather so far this winter. Clear?"

Both she and Walys nodded their ascent.

“Lyanna, you will act as Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North in my stead, serving in the full capacity.” Lyanna took a quick breath in, slightly shocked at the decision – her father trusted her with a lot of responsibility for a significant period of time.

Walys was clearly displeased by the decision, “My Lord, if I may, Lady Lyanna has not yet reached her majority. Surely she is already overburdened by her duties as the Lady of the house…”

Father silenced the Maester with a raised hand, “Lyanna, do you think yourself unable to fulfill the duties as outlined?”

“No, Lord Father, I believe I will be able to fulfill them. I greatly appreciate my Lord’s trust in my abilities.”

Father turned to Walys, questioning whether the man had any further objections.

“My Lord, it is just highly unusual to require a young maiden to play such a role, especially when there are others who may easily serve in your stead.”

“Walys, do you think to tell me how to run my kingdom?”

“Nay my Lord, I am simply counseling that perhaps there are those better suited-”

“Better suited than a Stark? Maester Walys, I will remind you it is the Starks who are the Lords of Winterfell and the Wardens of the North – why would another serve in my stead when a Stark stands within the walls, more than capable and willing to rule?”
Because he thinks I can’t do it. He wants to rule in your stead.

Walys bowed his head in an act of contriteness, though Lyanna could see the annoyance in his eyes. “I did not mean to question my Lord’s authority. I will do my best to support the Lady Lyanna in your stead.”

Father nodded, “I’m glad to hear it, Maester.”

As if the man had read her earlier thoughts and in a clear attempt to regain some semblance of control, Walys just had to bring up the dreaded subject of her reaching majority, “One thing to note my Lord – as I’m certain you are aware, your upcoming travel will likely mean you will miss your daughter’s upcoming nameday.”

I’m standing right here, you idiot!

The man was not done, “As Lady Lyanna will be achieving her majority at six and ten, I thought it timely to recommend we look at potential arrangements for her future.”

Lyanna fought to resist the urge to roll her eyes – the man could not be more obvious unless he was shouting an asking price at an auction – but her father handled the matter before the situation could devolve.

“Thank you for the reminder Walys. I am well aware of my daughter’s age, but any possible discussions will wait until my return. Lyanna, I’m sorry to miss your nameday, but Brandon will be here.”

“It is quite alright Lord Father, you know I am not one for elaborate affairs in any case.”

Father chuckled, “Indeed, a true Northerner. Maester Walys, you are dismissed - I would speak to my daughter alone, if you will. I expect those letters for my signature before my departure in a few days time.”

Walys bowed and turned to leave, not bothering to acknowledge Lyanna aside from a brief glare.
When the door clicked shut, she let out a sigh, allowing some of the tension locked in her shoulders to ease.

Father beckoned her closer, taking his seat as he gestured for her to sit across from him.

“Lyanna, I know you and Walys do not always see eye to eye in certain matters,” Lyanna did roll her eyes at this, “but I must request you do your best to not antagonize the man while I am away. You are a very capable young woman, but you cannot run Winterfell alone.”

“I won’t be alone, Father, I have Ben and Sella and Jory, maybe even Bran will make himself useful-”

“Lyanna,” her Father cut her off, “you know better than most how much time and responsibility running Winterfell is for me, even with you and Walys assisting. Or do you think you are more capable as Lord of Winterfell than I am?” Lyanna had the good grace to blush, ashamed, “Hmm? Nothing to say?”

Lyanna looked at her hands, folded in her lap, “No Father, I would never presume such a thing.”

“Good. Acolyte Brynden will be with me, so Walys should have a sufficient amount of work to occupy him outside of his ordinary duties.”

Lyanna scoffed, mumbling, “Probably busy taking advanced bids for my maidenhead…”

Father glared at her, but his face softened when he saw sadness in his daughter’s eyes, as opposed to defiance.

“Lyanna, you know I promised your mother I would wait until your majority to make such arrangements. Even now, I intend to delay the discussion as long as possible – you are still far too integral in the running of this keep to ship you off. Take comfort in that, my dear. When the proposals start arriving, we will accept the one best suited for Winterfell and for you. But this is your duty. I am confident you will approach this task with the same vigor with which you approach all of your responsibilities.”
“I do not fear my duty Father, I fear the type of man Maester Walys hopes to send me to! He has made it quite clear that he views me as little more than an obstacle to his influence over you. Did you know he suggested another portrait session for my nameday? The man wants to request twelve copies – twelve copies! What, does he intend to send one to every unmarried Lord in the South? To him, I am merely a pretty object to be sold to the Lord with the largest coffer of gold, destined to be caged by some loathsome Southerner.”

Rickard Stark let out a sigh as his daughter finished her little rant.

I said too much. Dammit Lya, you never did learn to keep your mouth shut…

But Father’s words took her by surprise.

“I am aware of Maester Walys’ intentions.”

Lyanna wasn’t sure whether to be outraged or thrilled by that statement. Fortunately, Father continued.

“Walys has been a good advisor when it comes to the South. The North has been absent from Southern politics for a long time – even since the time of Aegon the Conqueror, it has been rare for the Lords of the North to partake in the drama of Court. Yet our absence has been translated into disgrace, insignificance, dishonor. I have done my best to limit the news out of the North in an attempt to quiet any gossip, yet gossip remains.”

Lyanna was unsure of the direction the conversation had taken, but curiosity led her to feed into her Father’s words. “But Father, it does not matter what the gossip says about us. Even the Targaryen’s have limited power here. We live by our own standards.”

Father’s eyes were burning with an intensity she’d rarely seen, “Indeed we do. Lyanna, it may not matter what gossip the Court whispers – they may call us wild and violent, so long as the North is granted the respect it is due. We are not to be trifled with. We are the blood of the First Men, the former Kings of Winter. Our land and our people hold a natural power that should never be underestimated.”

Lyanna realized there was much more to this conversation than what was being said out loud, but she didn’t have enough pieces to put together the puzzle.
“What does this have to do with Maester Walys?”

Father chuckled, his eyes losing the fire they had held only briefly, “Yes, Maester Walys. Despite his useful advice over the past years, it has become apparent to me that you are indeed correct – he wishes for more power and sway. His assistance in matters directly concerning the South is appreciated, but he does not understand the North. His treatment and approach with you has been the most blatant example of that. He has become less secure in his position as you have gained more responsibility, and I fear we may see more instances of him overstepping as he feels his control decline.”

Lyanna was silent, thinking about her father’s words. She had not thought him so aware of Walys’ maneuvering, but it was clear she had underestimated him. A pang of guilt shot through her as Father continued.

“Ah, you are surprised I know. Lyanna, do not think I am unaware of the happenings in my castle – I know much more than you or Benjen or Bran give me credit for.”

*Unfortunate for Bran - he is the only one at risk with that. He ought to stop those late night trips to Wintertown…*

“In any case, given that we can ill-afford such oversteps, you may be pleased to know that I have written to the Citadel to discuss the possibility of a new Maester.” Lyanna’s eyes widened in shock. “I will be sending the letter tomorrow, though the response will likely arrive while I am away. I would have you review the response and then we will discuss the best way forward upon my return.”

“Father, but what if Maester Walys finds the response? He may not be pleased by the prospect of you replacing him.”

“I have stipulated that the change would only be in order to bring in a Maester with roots in the North – an opportunity to allow a Northerner to return to his home. Acolyte Brynden had a suggestion of a Maester he trained with at the Citadel, a Maester Luwin, whose father was from the North.”

“Perhaps you should have a copy of the response sent to Riverrun? Or Acolyte Brynden at Moat Cailin?”
Father shook his head, “Nay, Lyanna, you are being silly. Maester Walys is still an honorable man and a skilled maester, thus we will continue to give him the respect his order commands. Now, I recommend you start working on the terms for Lord Tully – I must see Jonnel Cassel regarding the guards to accompany me on the journey.”

Resigning herself to a few hours of work surrounded by ledgers, she rose and flashed a quick smile at her father, dipping into a quick curtsy before leaving for her workroom. Her mind kept cycling through her father’s words, trying to link the vague ideas to previous conversations she’d heard. Everything was a muddle, but every road led to one point.

*Father is planning something.*

Chapter End Notes

A few notes (i.e. random thoughts/blathering) on this chapter:
- I’ve always wondered whether Rickard Stark was aware of Walys’ political maneuvering. From what we know about the Starks, I suppose it wouldn’t be surprising if he got manipulated due to his belief in honor and honesty. The same fault is in fact one of the key reasons for Ned Stark’s downfall in King’s Landing in canon. Then again, Rickard made some very apt political moves - even with Walys’ assistance, the man was clearly intelligent enough to begin developing strong alliances. It was these alliances that largely made Robert’s Rebellion a success, after all. In any case, Rickard will be a bit more aware of Walys’ ambitions in this story, but we’ll still see his own ambitions take shape.
- I’ve also found Lyanna and Rickard’s relationship to be interesting to explore, mostly because there is such an immense variety in how fics portray it. I always imagined it was somewhat similar to the relationship between Ned and Arya, a mix of love, sternness and frustration, and much of canon points to a pretty lenient Rickard when it came to his daughter, at least as she was growing up. Given I aged her up a year and pushed out Lyarra’s death so that Lyanna was older when her mother died, I figure the father/daughter relationship would be a tad more mature.
Ser Gerold Hightower arrived to take his place outside of the King’s chambers as the sun set. He had offered to serve an extra watch for the Lord Commander, given he and Oswell would be free from the duty for many moons as they traveled north with the Crown Prince.

While a journey to the tundra appealed little to a Dornish man like Arthur, he couldn't help but be relieved to avoid the horrors of King's Landing and Aerys' descent into madness for a few moons.

“He questioned Ser Gerold, hoping the man at least knew where Ser Barriston, who was guarding the Prince today, was.

“I believe he was heading to his chambers after the Small Council released. They finished a quarter of an hour ago.”

*I would have known that had the King deemed to attend his own Small Council meetings.*

He nodded to his Lord Commander, striding in the direction of the Crown Prince’s apartment.

Maegor’s Holdfast was a relatively dreary place, even more so since the Defiance of Duskendale. Paranoia and anxiety caused Aerys to forbid entry into the inner keep within the Red Keep to all but those requiring entrance. The number of approved entrants had dwindled since then to no more than the Royal family, the Kingsguard, the Small Council and a set number of seasoned guards. It made the large castle seem ghostly quiet. With the dismal cold and wet weather of winter, Arthur could
see why everyone in the place seemed short on patience and long on misery.

He indeed found his friend in his chambers, bent over a number of papers. The Crown Prince had a deep frown on his face, and those indigo eyes flashed with annoyance as he glanced up when Arthur entered.

“Do you know how much my bloody cousin cost us for that pointless affair?”

“Outside of the delay to our thrilling trip north and the ungodly amount of grief we will get from your increased frustration?”

Rhaegar glared at him before looking back at the papers.

Arthur slumped into an armchair, “Your Grace knows figures have never been my specialty, I couldn’t even begin to guess a monetary value.”

His friend waved a dismissive hand, “The number doesn’t matter, it’s the fact that it exists at all. This whole delay was an utter waste. My father only spoke to Baratheon once, apart from the bloody ceremony he demanded. The only benefit of the whole affair was that the entire court saw that my cousin is nothing but a dashing whoremonger. My presence was not required in the least and I cannot understand why the Hand requested I delay further.”

"You know he has sent for Lady Cersei."

Rhaegar shook his head, dismissing that idea as well, "My father will never agree to it, Tywin is wasting his time. It's like he wants to provoke my father into further offending him."

Arthur shrugged at that - he didn't understand Tywin Lannister's motives any more than the Prince did. Perhaps the Lord of Casterly Rock was trying to provoke Aerys. It certainly wouldn’t take much.

Sighing, Rhaegar changed the subject, "How has Ashara settled in? Gods, it's been almost a year now, hasn't it? I feel bad for not having seen her more."
"Very well actually, and do not concern yourself overmuch, she understands your Grace is busy with the realm. But she enjoys her time with the Queen and has taken well to your little brother."

"Good, it is nice of her to spend time with Viserys. It would be good for the boy to have another kind figure in his life outside of Rhaella. My mother speaks well of Ashara, so I am glad she has settled in. Hopefully the incident with Baratheon didn't damper her spirit."

Arthur scoffed, "My sister has heard worse. In any case, she would never allow a man like Baratheon break her spirit."

Rhaegar nodded, "It certainly helps that she has such a renowned knight as a brother. She must be the envy of every maiden, to have the Sword of the Morning defend her honor."

"I think they envy her friendship with the Crown Prince more than her relation to a lowly Kingsguard."

A knock at the door interrupted before Rhaegar could respond. The door opened to reveal an acolyte carrying several pouches and a large bowl of some black substance. Rhaegar directed the man to put it on a side table, as the young man outlined some quiet instructions regarding the usage of the black substance, detailing soak time and reapplication.

Arthur looked at his friend questioningly as the acolyte bowed and departed.

"Varys' suggestion. Some sort of natural dye for my hair."

"You're going to dye your hair?"

Rhaegar chuckled, "Don't look so shocked, Arthur. It's only temporary. The acolyte says I'll have to use it once or twice while we are away to keep it dark."

"Is that truly necessary? What if it doesn't come out?"

The Prince cocked his head to the side, "Ser Arthur, I didn't think you were such a fan of my hair."
He laughed at that, glad to see his friend jesting, "Only because I fear for the swooning hearts of all the court ladies - what would they do if their beloved prince lost his glorious silver hair."

Rhaegar snorted, "The court ladies can deal with a disappointment or two."

"Ah, but my friend, they already deal with the disappointment of not having your heart each and every day."

"Alas, they shall continue to suffer that particular disappointment."

"A pity. Your Grace, you know that knights are to save the maidens from distress, not cause more of it."

"That is why they are lucky to have you, Ser Arthur. The legendary Sword of the Morning, saving all the damsels of court from the mad Crown Prince."

Arthur sighed dramatically, "Your Grace asks a great task of me, I only hope I am worthy of such trust."

Rhaegar flashed him a vicious smirk, "I would trust no other man with the delicate hearts of the ladies of Westeros."

Arthur chuckled, crossing to examine the black dye the acolyte had brought before looking back at Rhaegar thoughtfully.

"So, a dark haired Targaryen, huh?"

"A dragon in disguise."
Lyanna

Lyanna found herself staring out the window of Father’s solar into the snowy expanse of Wintertown, the rolling white hills spanning leagues beyond. The chilly wind was a stark contrast to the roiling heat of the solar, where the servants had stoked a large fire early in the morning, despite her not being within the room.

Lyanna had spent the morning in Wintertown, overseeing a few small issues that had arisen among the inhabitants due to the long winter. While the temperature and snows had been no worse than prior winters, the season had endured over several years. This meant that even now, small groups of people were arriving to the town to rely on Winterfell as their last stores of supplies dwindled. Sparse supplies and close quarters had become a recipe for conflict.

Handling smaller matters in Wintertown had been one of the first large responsibilities Father had encouraged Lyanna to assist him with. Lyanna would ride down into town with her father to meet with the townspeople, watching the way in which father gathered the facts of any issue and thought through an appropriate solution. Lord Rickard Stark was known for his strict sense of justice, something he had passed on to his children - Lyanna, having spent all of her life at Winterfell, had heard the lectures and diatribes twice as much as any of her brothers. After a few years of observation, Father had actively involved her in the discussions of resolution, even allowing her to lead the process recently.

But Lyanna was learning that applying justice appropriately could be much trickier than her father made it seem.

No party was ever truly satisfied, and Lyanna had been frustrated to see that some men were not keen to take the word on resolution from a girl of fifteen namedays, even if she was the daughter of Lord Stark and the acting Lady of Winterfell.

Many had made the assumption that she would be more lenient, and petty crime had swelled for a few weeks after the common people came to understand that Lord Stark had left his daughter in charge. Some questioned why her father had not named her younger brother or even commanded the heir of Winterfell, Lord Brandon, to return to take on the duty.

Maester Walys had of course found himself quite occupied in those weeks, unable to provide more
than basic historical precedence for the cases. It had taken the advice and encouragement of Father’s
captain of the guards, Jonnel Cassel, to get her through those early issues.

“If I may say, Lady Lyanna, Lord Stark trusts your judgment in carrying out these tasks, else he
would have left someone else in charge. He sees an iron will in you, my Lady. You must show
your people that same iron. Show them you are a Stark.”

Justice was dealt with that iron will, and all in residence soon discovered the daughter to be as
unyielding as the father. Whispers of the law and justice served by the acting Lady of Winterfell
quickly put a damper on the increased crime. The atmosphere when she entered the Great Hall or
Wintertown was now one of respect, as opposed to barely contained insolence.

The North admired strength. That she was a woman in the end made little matter to Northmen. If
Lord Stark trusted his daughter and she could prove herself capable, they would honor the Warden
of the North’s decision.

Of course, such actions would be considered unlady-like in the South, and Lyanna had no doubt a
tale or two would filter down to Court. The thought made her smirk - let them think her uncouth.
She had no need for the love of Southerners.

That morning, after seeing to the distribution of food and greeting some of the new arrivals, she had
chosen to spend some time at a small orphanage in town. The long winter had led to an influx of
parentless children and Lyanna had found the orphanage after catching a few skinny tots running
around in the muddy street a few moons ago. The establishment was run by three gentle women,
who had barely enough to feed themselves but still opened their home to the children.

Lyanna had taken to visiting when she could to play with the kids and read to them. Today, she had
brought supplies down from Winterfell, hoping to alleviate some of the pressure the recent
snowstorms had put on the townspeople. Thankfully, the shipment of food from White Harbor had
made it before the most recent storm had dumped over a foot of heavy snow on the Kingsroad.

It had been just over a moon now since Father had left. Fortunately, his business in White Harbor
had been completed easily, allowing him to make for Riverrun rather quickly, stopping only briefly
at Moat Cailin to survey the work being done to clear the site. The recent snowstorms had made the
Kingsroad a nightmare in addition to slowing much of the work being done on the ruins, but Acolyte
Brynden had been left in good spirits. The acolyte had written a few days ago, his raven making it
through the snow by chance, detailing some of the exciting findings he had made with regards to the
castle’s original foundations.
Lyanna smiled thinking about the way the excitement seeped from Brynden’s words - only he would find such joy from stones buried in the earth.

A knock sounded on the door, startling her out of her thoughts.

“Enter,” she called, closing the window and walking back to her father’s giant desk.

Maester Walys made his way into the solar, shuffling under his black robe. He carried several letters and a ledger.

“Good afternoon, my Lady. I pray your time in Wintertown proved productive?”

“Indeed, Maester. We’ll have to send someone to survey a few of the structures at the outer limits of the town once the storm has passed - with the newest arrivals, only the last few buildings remain empty. I fear we may have to use them should the winter last much longer.”

“A reasonable course of action, my Lady.”

Per her father’s wishes, Lyanna and Walys had come to a sort of agreement of neutrality. Lyanna could tell he was not providing nearly as much counsel to her as he did to her father, but up to that point, it had yet to bother her overmuch. He was still bitter about Lord Stark’s decision to pass over him as castellon, so naturally snarkiness pervaded almost every comment he made. It made Lyanna’s blood boil and clearly made him uncomfortable, so keeping their interactions to a minimum was in the best interest of everyone.

“What news do you bring, Maester? I hope the ravens have not been unduly hampered by this storm.”

“It is hard to say whether we lost any, but we have received several letters in spite of the weather,” he approached the desk to hand her a few letters, two still sealed and a third already opened. “A letter from your father, confirming his arrival at Riverrun with Lord Brandon,” indicating the opened letter, “and a letter from your brother, Ned.”

“And the third?” Lyanna asked, while examining the messy seal.
“I did not open it, my Lady, but the seal resembles that of the Night’s Watch.”

“Ah, okay, thank you Maester Walys. Anything else of significance?”

“Nothing of grand significance, my Lady,” the Maester started, before detailing the work he had been doing with those soldiers afflicted with frostbite as well as the transcription he had been completing of a book on Northern justice and laws to be sent the Citadel.

_Speaking of the Citadel, the response to Father’s inquiries should have been here by now. I wonder how many letters never make it to my hands, dear Maester Walys._

The two of them finished by discussing the stores and finances of Winterfell, attempting to reconcile the figures following the arrival of the supplies from White Harbor.

“Very good, Maester Walys. Now, there has been some cases of chill in the new arrivals - would you mind seeing to one or two of them on the morrow?”

“My Lady, it is unusual for Maesters to work on the common folk. If Acolyte Brynden were here, I would send him...”

“Alas, Acolyte Brynden is not here. It shan’t take too much of your time, Maester, I promise. One of them is the pregnant wife of a mountain clansman leader - a Norrey, I believe. The Starks have always considered the chiefs of the clans to be among our lords. We cannot afford to have the clansmen unhappy.”

Walys grimaced. “Perhaps it would be best to have the woman brought to the Keep, where I can work with her.”

“Very well, I will ask Jonnel to send some men to escort her up.”

“If that will be all, my Lady?”

“For now, Maester Walys, yes. I will bring a letter for my father by on the morrow. Could you please ask the guard to find my brother?”
“Of course,” Walys sketched a shallow bow, “my Lady.”

Lyanna turned to the letters Walys had brought as the old man shuffled out of the room, closing the door before informing the guard to find Benjen.

Father’s missive was brief, outlining his arrival at Riverrun with Brandon in tow. He gave a quick description of the Tully girl, Catelyn, and disclosed some details about the initial discussions with the girl’s father, Lord Hoster. Beyond that, he inquired about news from White Harbor and Acolyte Brynden.

Ned’s letter was longer, describing his journey to King’s Landing with Robert Baratheon. Robert’s parents had died late last year, making Robert the new Lord of Storm’s End. Ned was not one for detailed descriptions, so Lyanna learned relatively little about the capital of Westeros, but apparently Robert had gotten himself into some trouble towards the end of the trip.

_Challenging the Sword of the Morning? Gods, the man must be an arrogant idiot._

Ned would meet up with Father in a moon or two at the Inn at the Crossroads, since it had been over four years since they had seen each other. With Father so far south, it would be an easy opportunity for father and son.

Lyanna set the letter aside, certain Benjen would wish to read it - her youngest brother might die of jealousy over Ned meeting the legendary Sword of the Morning, even if it was due to his friend’s stupidity.

Finally, Lyanna opened the unknown scroll, curiosity and hope peaking. Skimming to the signature gracing the end of the short letter, she felt her heart jump.

It was from Maester Aemon.

_My Lady Lyanna,_

_My congratulations on your recent appointment as the acting Lady of Winterfell. It is a great testament to your Lord Father’s belief in you to name a daughter to such responsibility at so young an age. Forget not that duty can be a burden under which even the strongest falter. Often the right choices are not the easiest ones._
As to your inquiry, I will consult with the scrolls at Castle Black, but remember that dreams are oft just our imaginations running wild. But I will admit my curiosity, for I have but heard tales of those who were able to walk the land in the minds of a beast.

Maester Aemon

Re-rolling the scroll, Lyanna tucked it into her dress as Benjen entered.

“Ben! You’ll never believe who Ned met in King’s Landing,” she smiled at her youngest brother, giving him Ned’s letter as she walked towards him, “Let’s train, I need to shoot something.”

The courtyard was filled with laughter in no time as the two Starks exchanged tales of legendary knights and japes over missed targets, all thoughts of dreams and business arrangements temporarily forgotten.

Richard

The journey north had taken far longer than expected, their progress hampered by sudden storms and the ever-present snow. It didn’t help that none of them knew quite what to expect of a Northern winter – winters were plenty unpleasant in the Crownlands, but this was something else. The days were shorter and the deteriorating weather made camping more difficult the further north they traveled, resulting in more time spent searching for adequate accommodations. The King’s command to remain undetected also had resulted in less than stellar accommodations, particularly when storms all but stopped travel altogether, leading to overcrowded inns and sparse fare.

Rhaegar wanted a taste of the blasted North, and he's getting it. We're the unlucky bastards along for the ride. How can the Northerners possibly be a threat when they have to focus on surviving this hellhole? And couldn’t these damn books be found in Oldtown?

They were all tired and frozen by the time they reached Wintertown, the town outside the walls of Winterfell. He remembered the time a few years ago when they had come across Brandon Stark at a
tourney - he had described the town as thriving in the winter and barebones in the summer months, with only a few establishments for entertainment (the discussion had, of course, been around local whorehouses). They’d all been deep in their cups, so he hadn’t paid much attention to Stark’s descriptions.

Alas, thriving was putting it lightly.

Winterfell rose in the distance, built into the natural slopes of the land. Even from a distance, the keep looked magnificent and daunting, the grey towers disappearing into the low clouds. Rows of buildings lined the main road, the town bustling with movement in spite of the low temperature. Not for the first time, Richard felt genuine respect for the Northerners – he didn’t know how they survived this bloody cold, let alone the ice and snow. Small wonder they were fearsome warriors and harsher people; this was no place for the weak.

As with the rest of their journey, accommodations proved to be difficult to find in the town, but eventually they found the inn off one of the muddy roads closer to the castle. The were able to rent a single room for a small fortune and finally found themselves tucked into a corner of the inn’s main room with ale and a full meal.

Unsurprisingly, the Crown Prince's patience was shot – they were already a fortnight behind their delayed itinerary and they still had a week’s journey to reach Castle Black. Within the first few moments of conversation, it was clear Rhaegar couldn’t care less about his father’s “ridiculous” request to spy on the Starks. The King had already delayed their trip by a moon when he required, for no apparent reason, Rhaegar’s presence when his cousin Robert Baratheon was in King’s Landing to formally receive his titles. This had prompted the Prince to start the journey already frustrated. Nay, Rhaegar’s interest was firmly at the Wall, so he wanted to depart on the morrow.

Richard exchanged a glance with Myles at this news - both of their horses had thrown a shoe in the last few leagues. Unless they wished to purchase new horses, they couldn’t possibly depart in the early morning.

“Your Grace,” Richard murmured quietly to not be overheard, choosing his words carefully, “mayhaps Myles and I could better serve you here – both of our horses require new shoes to start, so we would only delay your departure for the Wall. By leaving us here in Wintertown, we could make some inquiries regarding the Starks. In fact, we were both acquainted previously with Lord Stark’s heir, Brandon – should he be in residence, it may prove most useful. Might be nothing of interest to His Majesty, but better to have the knowledge in the first place.”

Rhaegar looked at him, pondering his suggestion. Richard still found the neutral mask Rhaegar wore at most times perplexing, particularly when trying to gauge his reaction to some proposal. The Prince’s dyed hair didn’t help at all – the black strands, usually pulled into a braid, fell past his
shoulders in a silky curtain around his pale skin, emphasizing his strong features. The dark color also caused the Prince’s indigo eyes appear almost black, making the lack of emotion on his face even more disconcerting.

“A solid idea, Lonmouth, and a more efficient usage of time. I’m sure you and Myles will be sufficiently accommodated here. Observe the Starks and determine if there is anything to my father’s suspicions.”

Myles spurted his next question before thinking, “And what about the Stark girl?”

Rhaegar grimaced slightly before answering, “She is part of the Stark family, is she not? Your observations will thus include her, though go no further than basic needs. My father just granted me a temporary reprieve from all this marriage nonsense – I have no intention of squandering that time by courting some Northern maiden to appease my father’s fabricated plots.”

The rest of the meal was accompanied by lighter topics of discussion, and at the end of the meal Rhaegar, Arthur and Oswell retired, as they would be leaving at first light. Richard and Myles remained for another few flagons of ale, stumbling upstairs to crash into what were undoubtedly the most comfortable straw pallets they had slept on in two moons.
"Lya, are you certain you wish to do this? Bran will be home in less than a fortnight, we could even send a rider to hasten his journey."

"Benjen, Father left me to rule in his stead as Lady of Winterfell. He trusted me with all the responsibilities that entails. The blood of the First Men flows in our veins - this is the Old Way."

"But Bran is his heir and our brother! Nobody would think it improper should you wait to pass judgment until he is home so that he may at least swing the sword. There are those who would expect Brandon to do it, as the heir and oldest Stark in residence."

"Do you think I cannot do it?" she asked him imperiously.

"Lya..." he softened his voice. “This is not throwing a man in a cell for a few days, forcing him to pay back his debts, or even taking a finger or two for theft. The punishment for desertion is death. It is a terrible thing to take a life."

As his words sunk in, he watched his sister fall back in Father's chair, slouching as the weight of the situation seeped into her soul. For the first time, Benjen noticed the circles under her eyes, the tired cast of her skin.

Father had been gone almost three moons and Benjen knew it was taking its toll on Lya. Serving as the acting Lady of Winterfell was no easy task, particularly in the middle of winter when Wintertown swelled with temporary residents. Lya hadn't given up many of her regular duties either, though she had started allocating more of them to Sella, the head housekeeper, as she spent more time on judicial matters.

Not for the first time, Benjen cursed Maester Walys. The man was nigh near impossible to work with and he was doing the bare minimum to help Lya, claiming increased medical cases due to the frosty chill left him little time for household matters.
And now there was a desertion from the Night's Watch.

Benjen knew the situation was difficult for Lya as acting Lady of Winterfell, but also personally, for he too felt the acute pain of dawning reality. He and Lya had grown up reverent of the Night's Watch - for centuries, the Starks had helped man the Wall, considering it an honor to serve the North and the realm in such a capacity. They had even dreamed of running away to take the Black before Father could find out, disguising Lya as a boy like the tales of Brave Danny Flint. Lya was unquestionably one of the best horsemen in the North and with her archery skills, she would have made a fearsome ranger.

Benjen had once joked with her that she might find being a wildling more appealing, but Lya's face had grown fierce as she practically spit the next words, "I would never desert - desertion is for honorless cowards."

Yet here she sat, faced with the prospect of taking a man's life for that same action. Not only that, but the man's tales of increased wildling attacks on rangers, of dwindling resources, of barely trained boys being sent to their deaths, half starved and weary from long watches, had shattered every image of the dignified Night's Watch of Benjen and Lya's dreams.

This was a burden Benjen was loath to watch his sister take on. He had witnessed his first execution several years ago, the bastard son of a lower lord found guilty of murder. He remembered the terror in the man's eyes, the whistle of Ice, the Stark ancestral valyrian blade, as Father swung it down to sever the man's head from his neck, and the blood. There was so much blood. Father had spent an hour alone in the Godswood after, cleaning the beautiful greatsword.

He took no joy in beheading the man.

Father had explained to Benjen, as he explained to each of his children after witnessing their first executions, that the Starks followed the old way, the way of the First Men. Their ancestors believed that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword - that to take a man's life, one owed it to him to look into his eyes and hear his final words.

Benjen knew his sister was impulsive, quick to action. Like all of them, Father's words about justice and honor had been seared into her soul. But this was not an action she would be able to take back.

His sister's voice was flat when she finally spoke again, "I will write to Father for his counsel. But we cannot delay for long."
Benjen nodded, a small sense of relief passing through him. He only hoped Brandon arrived soon - surely his older brother could manage this burden for their sister.

*Serve your damn house for once. Protect our sister from this.*

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**Cersei**

As she strolled through the corridors of the Tower of the Hand, Cersei knew King’s Landing was the place for her.

A place consumed with gossip, plotting behind closed doors, jewels and elaborate dresses, where wealth and power ruled. And Cersei had plenty of the two - her father was Hand of the King and the Lannisters were the wealthiest house in the Kingdoms.

Her twin brother Jamie was quickly gaining a reputation as a fearsome sword, his skill with a blade his second most popular attribute, behind his stunning good looks.

All that was missing from her life was her husband, the only man more handsome than her dearest twin. It had been several years since she had last spied her prince, Rhaegar Targaryen, mounted on his sleek black stallion, his silver hair blowing in the wind, framing sculpted cheekbones and incredible indigo eyes. Though she had yet to become a woman then, she knew he was the only man for her - the only one worthy of her beauty and wealth.

Everything had fallen apart on that horrid last day of the tournament.

It was all the Mad King’s fault. He had been upset and insulted by the demonstration of her father’s wealth, instead of taking it as a show of her father’s fealty. She knew her father had taken a gamble,
with the King’s madness growing, but he had been so confident when he told her she would be Queen.

“You are my most able servant, Tywin, but a man does not marry his heir to his servant’s daughter.”

She had cried herself to sleep that night, her dreams shattered.

But she knew it wasn't over, especially after the marriage proposal between the Targaryen’s and Dorne fell through - her father told her it was the Crown Prince himself who had ruined the betrothal. Cersei knew that with the pretty Tully girl marrying the wild Northern heir, she was the last real option for Rhaegar. Her beautiful, courtly Rhaegar would never marry that wild Stark bitch.

Cersei was loath to admit she had sunk so low as to ask about the girl, but all she had heard had made her comfortable in her position. While few knew much of anything, one of her servants told her the girl was a tiny, feral beast. Cersei imagined a wolf girl like her little brother Tyrion, deformed and a blight on the Stark honor. No wonder Lord Stark kept her locked up in Winterfell.

Father had called her to court as soon as he could arrange it but she had still missed her Silver Prince’s departure for the North. Father hadn’t told her why the Prince was in the North or why he needed to be gone so long. Her only comfort was that Father reassured her that Rhaegar had not been pleased by the King’s suggestion of the Stark girl.

*He’s mine.*

That had been more than three moons ago, and since then, Cersei had settled nicely into life at Court. She was not particularly fond of the Queen, who barely left Maegor’s Holdfast. Frankly, Cersei found her company rather dull - Rhaella Targaryen might be beautiful, but she was a broken woman. To make matters worse, most of the Queen’s handmaidens were from lesser Houses and perfectly content to wile away their days sewing and making idle conversation.

The only lady with an ounce of spunk was that Dornish woman - Ashara Dayne. The sister of Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, Ashara had somehow managed to befriend the Crown Prince and establish herself as a Court beauty, though the latter was probably due to the fact that Court knew Prince Rhaegar had suggested the woman to his mother. With a joyous and kind nature, she floated amongst the courtiers like a natural, but she still had a sharp mind and the dry humor of the Dornish. The woman did cut a pretty picture, with her dark hair, tan skin and lively purple eyes.
Of course, Cersei couldn’t stand the woman, yet she found herself determined to befriend her. There was far too much mischief and knowledge in those eyes for Cersei to discount her completely, and her friendship with the Prince could prove most useful. Besides, better to keep your biggest competition close - she saw the way men stared at Ashara, and Cersei could not afford to make an enemy of a woman that might compete for Rhaegar’s eye.

Not that the woman was serious competition - the Daynes, while an old and respected house, were still of lesser Dornish nobility. Seated far in the South, they carried little political weight or wealth beyond the presence of Ser Arthur Dayne in the Kingsguard and Lady Ashara’s status as one of the Queen’s Ladies-in-Waiting. The woman could offer little beyond her beauty and companionship, which may be enough for a lesser Lordling, but not for Cersei’s Rhaegar.

Tywin Lannister was not happy about the Dayne woman’s presence, but had no way to dismiss the woman given her connections.

Father had encouraged her to become close with the younger Targaryen son as well - Viserys - as Ashara Dayne had done. Alas, the child was proving entirely loathsome. Cersei had offered to care for him on a few occasions, but the boy had been utterly horrible, running through bushes and brambles, hiding from her in corridors, and hitting her with his little wooden sword. In truth, Cersei had no idea how the Dornish woman managed him without going mad. After the little brat ran to his mother crying and screaming that Cersei wouldn’t let him play, Cersei had had enough - certainly, her time was better spent building her network at Court. It was the first time she had ignored her father’s wishes.

Fortunately, Father had been much too busy to track her movements around Court. With the Crown Prince on some secret trip to the Wall and the King largely uninterested in the daily functioning of the realm, Tywin Lannister had once again taken on many of the ruling duties that he had performed before the Crown Prince had achieved his majority.

Ah, the Crown Prince again. Rhaegar Targaryen, the perfect knight and gentleman. Father said he was shaping up to be an admirable future King, a rare and precious compliment from Tywin Lannister.

She didn’t know when her Prince would return from his trip but even without his physical presence, she thought of him daily. Since coming to Court, her dreams had been filled with images of her Silver Prince, their golden-haired, violet-eyed children running around the Red Keep. And the crowns... first, a simple crown of entwined silver and gold, fitting for a Princess. And of course, the Crown she’d always dreamed of - of pure gold, with the images of dragons and lions entwined, rubies sparkling from their eyes. A Queen crowned by her glorious husband in the Great Sept.
The Golden Queen for the Silver King.

It would all be perfect. It had to be. Here in King’s Landing, she felt closer than ever.

*I will be Queen.*

Now, if only she could find a way to get Jaime in Kings Landing permanently...

*Maybe Rhaegar will have an idea. He’s such a caring man, I’m sure he would understand my desire to have my twin brother close.*

Smiling to herself at the thought, she returned to her chambers to prepare for her evening meal with Father.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for a bit of a short one - but we do get a shot of King's Landing while everyone is partying up in the North. Almost done with the next few POVs, so should be able to post another chapter in the next day or two.

As always, thank you for reading and enjoy reading everyone's comments!

And shoutout to BriEva for the idea about the Night's Watch desertion - was searching for some sort of conflict/connection with the NW, and this fit perfectly.
Thank you again for all the support!

Long chapter here as Brandon comes home to Winterfell - going to see the wolf's blood roaring to life a couple times here and in the next chapters.

As always, please feel free to comment - I love hearing everyone's feedback and ideas as I continue to flush out the ever expanding story!

Brandon

As the shadows of Winterfell slowly approached, Brandon was picking through the crowds of Wintertown, reflecting on the seat of his House. As the heir to Winterfell, this would all be his one day. The thought was not nearly as pleasant as most people would assume. And this time, he returned home a betrothed man, fresh from meeting his future Lady of Winterfell.

That thought was even less appealing.

Catelyn Tully was indeed a very pretty girl - thank the gods - with fair skin, long auburn hair and clear blue eyes. She was of an age with his sister Lyanna, though their personalities could not have been more different. Where his sister was wild and playful, Catelyn was refined and tempered. The only similarities seemed to be their commitment to family and honor.

The girl hadn't been completely immune to his flirtations, but to his disappointment, she had remained rather steadfast in her propriety. He had half hoped she would be rather like Barbrey Ryswell, a willing and overeager partner. Then again, he had no desire to marry Barbrey, so perhaps it was better to distinguish his future wife from his conquests. And Barbrey was getting rather needy - she had even asked him to fight his father over the betrothal with Catelyn.

As if I have any particular sway with Father. Or any desire to use that sway for her.

Alas, his interest in Barbrey was waning. He intended to remain at Winterfell for some time, so he fortunately would not have to deal with her demands. Maybe Lyanna could help him - it wouldn't be
the first time she had covered his tracks, though this was quite a bit more complicated than a lowborn woman...

He knew he would have to marry. However, like the prospect of eventually taking the mantle of Lord of Winterfell, the concept seemed an poor fit. He was not cut out for such responsibility.

Not like Ned, who wrote of duty in his letters like it was some deity to be revered.

Not like Benjen, who even at fourteen wished to devote his life to duty, dreaming of joining the legendary Kingsguard or the Night's Watch.

Even Lyanna, who shared the wolf's blood with him and was prone to wild and willful actions, had shown herself more than capable of the responsibilities mandated of her as a noble woman.

No, only Brandon had tasted true freedom these last years, and once sampled, he found himself loath to give it up.

In truth, his little sister was proving to be a blessing from the old gods - not only had she taken on many of the duties usually granted to the heir of Winterfell over the course of the years, but Father had also named her as his proxy in Winterfell during this trip. Father had merely requested Brandon assist her by fulfilling his duties as the heir to the North. This, of course, granted Brandon a large degree of flexibility during his stay.

He knew that Father sometimes wished it was Lyanna who would inherit the title - Lyanna herself had certainly harbored those dreams for a time - but Rickard continued to hold out hope that Brandon would take to his duties over time.

At twenty, that hope had yet to come to fruition.

He arrived to an exasperated Lya and a thrilled Ben. His little brother had shot up a few inches since Brandon's last visit, easily hovering above his sister's smaller figure now. Nearing fifteen, Ben was still a lanky kid, but with time and training he would grow into his frame. Ben had barely contained his excitement at Brandon's arrival, as it meant he would have someone to train and ride with. As his youngest sibling explained, Lya had been far too busy to do anything but work. Lya had just rolled her eyes, muttering that Benjen was always welcome on her early morning rides, he just chose to be lazy.
Things went smoothly at the beginning, as they spent the early part of the afternoon in Father's solar. Lya outlined the state of Winterfell and the broader North over the past ten moons since Brandon's most recent visit. Maester Walys joined them to discuss the outcome of Father's negotiations with Hoster Tully, and he was able to review the final marriage contract that would seal his fate to a woman he barely knew.

Reviewing the contract was the first strike of the flint.

While he knew little of the background conversations that had led to the eventual outcome, he could tell the arrangement was favorable for the North. He was surprised to see Lyanna and Walys on neutral terms - they had never gotten along in all of Walys' time at Winterfell - but he supposed they had come to an agreement of mutual indifference.

_Mutual indifference as they work together to seal my fate._

The next strike was when Walys suggested Brandon take over as the Lord of Winterfell in Father’s stead, given he was the heir.

Brandon agreed with Walys that it wasn’t typical for a daughter to rule in her father’s stead when two of her brothers were home, but he honestly didn’t want the responsibility. Plus, Father had been explicit in his trust of Lyanna when they had parted, so Brandon was happy with the present situation.

But the fire in Lya’s eyes made him frown, as she heatedly explained to Walys that Father had left her as the acting Lady of Winterfell in his stead, even when Bran and Benjen were in residence.

_It is my birthright; she must realize that what Father did was highly unusual. What, does she think I’ll burn Winterfell to the ground?_

The final strike came once Walys had been dismissed, when Lya told him Father knew of his late night visits to Wintertown’s brothels and that he should restrain himself.

Something cracked and the fire exploded inside him.

“Who are you to tell me what to do?” he yelled, jumping out of his seat across from her, “You may speak for Father around the keep, but you do not rule me, dearest sister.”
“Brandon, I speak to you as both your sister and the ruling Lady of Winterfell.” Lyanna’s voice was steady as she stood behind Father’s desk, but he could tell she was barely holding back her rising anger, “Do you care so little for the honor of our House? All I ask for is some restraint!”

He was still yelling, “I don’t care what you ask, I am still the heir to Winterfell. If I want to visit the brothels of Wintertown, it is well within my rights.”

“I have spent moons running this castle and Wintertown, earning the respect of the people and building their trust in the Stark name. I would appreciate it if you didn’t return to Winterfell just to run around rampant, dishonoring yourself!”

He stalked towards her, “It doesn’t matter – whatever you do, Winterfell will be mine. It’s my birthright. In fact, Walys is right, I should be the one serving as Lord of Winterfell while Father is gone.”

Her resolve broke, as her voice rose angrily, "It's not like you ever wanted it before!"

"It doesn't matter if I wanted it or not,” he sneered, “it's mine."

Both of them were so caught up in their anger that they didn’t notice Benjen open the door.

Lyanna was furious now, spitting words at him as they stared at each other, "You act like it's just some title with no responsibility. Being the Lord of Winterfell means more than just a fancy name for the admiration of whores. It represents a duty to your people, to your House, to the North. But you've never cared about any of that, you've never cared about serving your people. You've never had to manage the stores to make sure your people don't starve, or heard the pleas of a mother of four who lost her husband and has nowhere to go. You've never even spoken to your Lord bannermen and heard their worries about their defenses against the wildlings or the unfavorable terms of a marriage contract. You don't know the first thing about being the heir to Winterfell, so of course Father didn't put you in charge when he has a Stark who does. Even Benjen knows more about running Winterfell than you do!”

Brandon stalked up to his sister, “Oh sweet sister, isn’t that the irony – you may know more about ruling the North, but you will never actually rule it. No,” he sneered, “you will still be sold off to some Lordling to bear his little runts, destined to be caged in your pretty little Southern dresses. Father only let you run Winterfell in his stead so that you could experience it before you’re sent off to waste away.”
He knew he’d gone too far when he saw how red her face was, the fury coupling with unshed tears.

“Just go,” she yelled, pushing him towards the door, “get out! Run off to your drink and your whores! You clearly care more about your cock than you do your precious birthright!”

“And I will still be the heir in spite of it!” he yelled over his shoulder as he pushed past Benjen through the door.

He strode down the corridor, his anger bubbling beneath the surface of his skin. Maybe he’d go to the training yard – hitting something sounded appealing and he could use the exercise. Or maybe he would search for another kind of exercise…

Benjen’s voice rang out as he caught up to him, "Bran-"

"What, come to join in the fun?” he growled, whipping around to face his younger brother, “Rant about how I’m a horrible brother and a blight on the Stark honor?”

"Bran, she's doing the best she can. She barely sleeps or eats,” Benjen’s voice softened, a tinge of desperation in his still childish intonation, “She's so committed to doing a good job for Father. I'm worried about her.”

"She brought this upon herself.” Brandon snarled.

"Bran, you shouldn't blame Lya-"

"Why not, Benjen? She has humiliated me by serving as regent Lady of Winterfell in Father’s stead while I’m home. What will the rest of the North think, that he appointed her over his heir? Over you even?”

"But she didn't choose this. It was Father's decision, he even announced it in the Great Hall and sent letters to all of his Lords. He chose Lya when he could have chosen me, or even Maester Walys. He knew Lya would do the best job. That’s why he didn’t need you to come home until now. He knows you don’t want the extra responsibility."
Brandon paused at the last phrase, and suddenly his fury seemed to fade. His voice turned passive.

"She's right, isn't she?" he asked in a monotone voice, "I don't know anything about being the heir to Winterfell. Once she started taking things over, I let her - it was easier and she always seemed good at it."

"She is good at it, Bran. That's why Father trusts her. He respects her judgment. She's taken on a lot since Mother died, and remember, in her mind we all left her."

Brandon nodded. Lyanna had been the closest with Mother, and then he, Ned and even Benjen had gone off to foster elsewhere, leaving Lyanna alone.

Of course she had taken on responsibilities around the castle, all alone with no siblings to play with. She had even told him once that caring for Winterfell made her feel closer to them and Mother, since it was an extension of the Starks. And no wonder Father trusted her - she was the one who was always on hand if he needed another Stark.

"Bran, Lya didn't tell you about the deserter, did she?"

Brandon shook his head, "No, there was a deserter? We started fighting before she said anything about that."

Benjen sighed, "There was a deserter from the Night's Watch. He was caught a fortnight ago. I convinced Lya to stay the judgment because the punishment..."

Brandon finished his sentence, "- is death."

Benjen nodded, "Father never wrote back, so he must have missed the raven. Bran, Lya is strong but this..."

Brandon understood what his youngest brother was implying. Tradition mandated that Lya would have to carry out the punishment should she pass the sentence. The punishment for desertion was death by beheading. An image flashed through his head, the slender figure of his little sister, black cloak and dark hair blowing in the wind, standing in the snow and hefting the giant Valyrian
greatsword of their House above her head, poised to strike the head off of a grown man.

No matter how strong his little sister was, Brandon shared his youngest brother’s desire to protect her from the guilt of taking a man’s life, even if the punishment was just.

Brandon sighed, clapping his brother on the shoulder, “I’ll speak to her - it should be me to swing the sword. We’ll do it as one. The wolf pack, working together.” He felt his brother relax under his grip and Brandon flashed him a small cheeky smile, “Gods know, she’d never be able to lift Ice anyways.”

They had gone together to speak with Lyanna, who had apologized for trying to rule him. Brandon had taken his sister into a giant embrace, murmuring his own apologies into her hair.

They were two of a kind, the wolf’s blood running through their veins. Quick to anger, quick to forgive. She understood him on a level no one else ever could, as he understood her.

The three siblings had decided to carry out the execution in the morning. Benjen would announce the crime and the legal precedent, Lyanna would pass the sentence as the ruling Lady of Winterfell and Brandon would carry out the punishment as Lord Stark’s eldest son and heir. The three Starks in residence, working as one to carry out justice in their Father’s stead.

And now, Brandon found himself wandering down the snowy streets of Wintertown towards a tavern off of the main road. The streets closer to the castle were illuminated by torches provided by Winterfell, a recent addition made by Lyanna to help the townspeople through the deepest parts of winter. It was a blustery night, so the torchlight flickered low, shadows skittering along the muddy road.

He opened the heavy wooden door of the tavern, allowing the warmth and light to flood over him. The smell of ale, meat pies and sweat pervaded the space, a quiet ruckus at each table as Northmen japed and jostled one another. The small tavern was quite full with every table at least partially occupied, no doubt due to the temporary booming population of Wintertown.

Brandon greeted a few men he recognized, Stark guards off-duty. Normally he would sit with them, hearing their stories of his siblings’ recent mischief and the marital statuses of the new female servants. Tonight though, he had come to escape his siblings and Winterfell.

Making his way to the bar in the back, he glanced at the men occupying the other tables. One was
full of mountain clansmen, gruff looking young men who seemed far too serious for Brandon’s
current mood. Another table was quiet older men around his father’s age, though they seemed to be
common folk. Most of them recognized him, or at least recognized the look of a Stark, and nodded
respectfully.

*My future bannermen.*

The last two customers of the tavern were tucked into a smaller table close to one of the walls, out of
the way but still giving them a view of the room. They were most definitely not Northerners, lacking
the typical roughness of the North.

*Southrons in the North in the middle of winter. Must be idiots.*

Curious, Brandon grabbed his tankard, flashing the barmaid Alyn a smile, and made his way towards
the two unknown men. They glanced up as he approached and a laugh thundered out of him as he
recognized them.

“Others take me, Myles Mooten and Richard Lonmouth in the North!”

The two younger men grinned as he slapped their shoulders and slid into an empty chair.

“Brandon Stark,” Richard chuckled, taking in the enormous Northman, “just the man we were
hoping to see.”

“Last I saw you was at Lannisport, no? Gods, has it really been almost five years?”

Myles nodded, “Aye. Last we saw, you were yelling ‘Winter is Coming’ as you defeated other
squires in the yard.”

Brandon laughed full-heartedly at the memory. “You Southrons are too focused on your courtly
manners - you underestimate us Northerners! We may not all be knights, but we are real warriors.”

“You certainly look the part of the savage Northman now.”
“And now that we’ve experienced this damn winter,” Richard added, “I think we have a newfound appreciation for Northerners.” He huddled deeper into his cloak at the thought of the cold without.

Brandon chuckled, “This weather? This is mild! Wait till you see the snowstorms that last for days.”

Richard shivered at the thought, finishing his ale, “I think I’ll have to drink straight through that one.”

“The only thing to do, really,” Brandon finished his own tankard and waved over Alyn for another round.

Once drinks had been replenished, Brandon continued, “But look at you two, no longer little runts chasing after Rhaegar Targaryen. Has your pretty prince finally knighted you?”

Myles beamed proudly. “Just before we left to come North, actually.”

“Well, Ser Richard and Ser Myles,” he intoned, emphasizing their new titles. “So what are you two idiots doing in the North in the middle of winter?”

Richard shrugged, “The Crown Prince developed an interest in the North, and frankly no one knows anything about this place other than what we hear from the rare Northerner venturing south.”

Brandon laughed again, his tone joking, “So you two were sent to explore the Prince’s interest? Is Winterfell not good enough for a formal royal visit?”

He was temporarily distracted by yelling, which had erupted at the table with the young mountain clansmen, so he missed the look exchanged between Myles and Richard.

Instead of waiting for a response, Brandon continued, “Why didn’t you stay at Winterfell? My sister would have taken fine care of you.”

“When we learned you and your father were not present, we thought it best to remain in town...”
“Bah, are you Southrons scared of my savage sister?” Brandon’s laugh boomed across the room. “Lyanna may be a vicious little wolf sometimes but she would never turn honorable men like yourselves away!”

“So it’s true that she is running Winterfell?” Myles questioned curiously. “We’ve seen her in Wintertown on occasion and heard stories of her presiding over judicial matters.”

“Aye, my father left her in charge. Smart man,” his voice became morose, “she’s a better heir to Winterfell than I’ll ever be.”

Chugging the rest of his ale, Brandon slammed the tankard down on the table, his voice boisterous once more, “Where are you staying?”

“At the inn near the castle.”

“The Smoking Log! Excellent, I’ll come meet you tomorrow afternoon - you’ll stay with us in Winterfell the rest of the time. We’ll give you a real taste of the North, so you can bring plenty of stories to your Prince.”
Rhaegar

He was choking, every breath labored as the ash coated his nostrils, his throat, his lungs. The smell of charred wood, melting stone, burnt flesh pervasive. He was being swallowed by flames, lost in endless empty corridors as he half ran, half stumbled, searching for an exit, any exit, any reprieve from the pain shooting through body and mind.

Everything was ablaze, crashing down on him from the walls, the floor and the ceiling. The flames were a mixture of colors beyond the typical reds and yellows, flashes of emerald, violet, and cerulean flaring across every surface. Had the circumstances been different, he might have admired the intricate dance, the way the colors shifted as if weaving some elaborate pattern.

He felt the fire licking at his heels, the oppressive heat causing sweat to stream down his face and body.

An enormous set of doors appeared as he rounded a corner, heavy wood and iron, the only thing untouched by the flames. Foreign ancient designs were inlaid into the wood, swirling in a strange yet familiar song that drew him closer.

A flare of heat. For a moment, he thought he wouldn’t make it. But then his hands were pushing on the doors.

He recoiled as a bolt of frozen energy shot up his arms. Off balance from pushing the doors opened, he stumbled, falling to his knees as the doors slammed behind him. The cold air hit him like a wave, a cruel caress sending shivers through his damp body. He struggled to catch his breath, inhaling icy air, a balm for his fried lungs. After a few seconds, his eyes adjusted to the darkness of night.

Snow was everywhere. Massive stone pillars rose towards the night sky, the stars sparkling so brightly that it felt as though he could reach out and grab them. They dazzled the mind, singing a mesmerizing tune as if to say, “stay.”
In that moment, the world faded and he was lost in the nothingness of the stars. When he looked down, he saw himself, a dark figure kneeling in the snow, face upturned to the sky.

His eyes glowed ice blue.

The sight of his face without the Targaryen indigo eyes drew him out of his stupor, bringing his attention back to his frozen body.

There was a small glow at the end of the hall, cloaked in a snowy hazy but reminiscent of a campfire. It took all his effort to pick himself up off of the ground, shuffling forward towards the fire like a moth to a light. There were shadows moving among the pillars, too faint to delineate precise figures. After minutes or hours or seconds, the light materialized as a candle, blood red wax dripping down the long taper to pool in a maroon puddle, stark against the pure white snow.

Fire and blood.

By some force he couldn’t name, he reached out a hand to pass through the tiny flame…

Rhaegar jerked awake, hissing in pain as he pulled his hand away from where it hovered over the candle set to his right on the reading table. The skin in the center of his palm was a reddish pink, blistering a tinge.

He stared at the burn with mild fascination, his mind still whirreling with the images of this latest dream.

It was not the first time he had gone through intense dream sequences since arriving at the Wall. Indeed, he had been dreaming intermittently of burning hallways and multi-color flames since childhood - he’d usually interpreted it as a connection to the Tragedy of Summerhall, the night of his birth and the death of much of the Targaryen line.

He imagined the moons they’d now spent in the North, surrounded by snow, had a large influence on the second phase of the dream. Certainly, the image of his face staring up at him with those ice cold blue eyes had been seared into his soul, but he also recalled the lightness he had felt among the stars, floating away from his frigid body.

This had been the first time he had reached the light.
He shivered and pulled his fur cloak closer, shaking away the lingering remnants of dream, then glanced down at the ancient tome which had served as both sleeping aid and pillow for his nap. The book was on the language of the Children of the Forest, suggested by Maester Aemon as an alternative to the old Valyrian scrolls he’d spent much of the last moon studying. He had fallen asleep to a chapter containing rough sketches of the swirling patterns and designs the Children had often inscribed upon surfaces, whether they be trees or walls or the ground. Something stirred in his memory as he quickly scanned the page.

*Why does it feel like I’ve seen these?*

The candle began sputtering, the sign of another relatively sleepless night spent in the vaults beneath Castle Black. Rhaegar sighed, wondering if it was worth returning to his chamber to attempt at least a few hours of sleep. He grimaced, thinking about the letters awaiting him.

Very few people knew of his presence at Castle Black, something he hoped to maintain - the more people who knew, the higher the chance of news spreading to the Lords of the North. Given the North’s strict commitment to honesty and honor, Rhaegar imagined the Northern lords would not take kindly to the Crown Prince crawling around their lands in disguise.

*Darn my father for requiring this secrecy. Doesn’t he know the insult this is to the North?*

Rhaegar had of course informed the current castellan of Dragonstone, Ser Corlys Velaryon, of his intended trip to Castle Black - the castle and original Targaryen seat was his responsibility as the Prince of Dragonstone, and though he had a great deal of respect for Ser Corlys, he also had no intention of shirking his duties while gallivanting in the North.

However, he had hoped to limit any other correspondence to those matters of utmost importance. This was proving an entirely naive hope.

He, Arthur and Oswell had arrived over a moon ago to a lukewarm reception - Uncle Aemon had naturally told the Lord Commander their true identities, but to the rest of the men they were merely Southrons sent to consult with Maester Aemon on several matters for the Crown. Rhaegar, under the name Jae, would spend his time with Aemon in the library, while his companions Ser Walt, Oswell, and Ser Maron, Arthur, would offer to train with the men of the Night’s Watch.
His great uncle had begun their first meeting by handing him a stack of letters.

A few were from the Small Council, detailing minor issues that did not necessitate immediate action. The King had stopped regularly attending Small Council meetings shortly after Duskendale, so the Crown Prince had taken to handling most smaller matters relating to the daily ruling of the realm. Most of the Council seemed to view Rhaegar as at least a more stable source of royal judgment. While Lord Tywin, as Hand of the King, was more than capable of running the Seven Kingdoms in Aerys’ stead - he had done much of it for quite some time, after all - the Hand had supported Rhaegar in taking on more responsibility.

The Prince knew such actions were not without some ulterior motive.

Tywin’s intentions, though by no means clear, were also not completely opaque. There was one letter from the Hand in the bundle, summarizing several points of business. The short missive did not fail to mention the arrival of Lord Tywin’s daughter Cersei at Court.

Two were from Lord Jon Connington, one of his closest friends. Jon had been unable to join their trip due to some business matters relating to his lands in the Stormlands. His friend had been disappointed, but Rhaegar had told him it was good that he had a friend he could trust staying in the capital to monitor things. Jon had interpreted that as a signal to document key events in simple but long missives - his friend had a keen eye, but generally did not discern court gossip from actual politics, so the letters read like encyclopedic documentations of the scandals they had missed.

A final letter was from his mother, kind words veiling the true meaning behind them.

“...The King has blessed the Court with informative examples of his justice... your father has been very attentive... Lord Tywin is a most reliable servant to the realm...”

Despite choosing to only respond to those missives requiring his attention, a new batch of correspondence had arrived yesterday.

His father’s deepening madness was causing cracks to appear in the foundation of the realm. While paranoia dominated his mind, Aerys Targaryen was not a stupid man. In Rhaegar’s absence, all of the King’s distrust had become focused squarely on Tywin Lannister. During his periods of relative sanity, Aerys had inhibited the ability of the Hand of the King or the Small Council to act without royal consent, exacerbating the fragility of the existing power balance.
Raised understanding that his duty was to the realm and his people, Rhaegar was learning that the responsibilities of the Crown Prince were increasingly thankless.

There were no easy answers. To anything. Everyone wanted more, expected more.


He sighed, leaning to cradle his head in his hands. He hissed as his hair slid along the forgotten burn on his palm, but remained in the position, savoring the pain as it shot through his arm. He'd have to wrap it later, but at the moment there was something viscerally pleasing about the pain…

“Still here, my boy?”

Maester Aemon shuffled into the room, the links of his maester’s chain tinkling softly over his black robes.

“Aye,” Rhaegar answered wearily, attempting to banish his fatigue with a shake of his head.

“Fatigue slows the mind, Rhaegar. It is not advisable to miss one’s rest.”

Standing to fetch new tapers for the table, Rhaegar responded, “I know, Uncle. I find sleep difficult though, and even when I do…”

“Ah, dreams I suppose.” In spite of his diminishing sight, Uncle Aemon noted Rhaegar’s nod of assent as he took a seat at the other side of the table, next to the old books he had been studying yesterday, “You are not the only one plagued by dreams.”

Rhaegar went about lighting the new candles before he took his seat again, “What do you dream of, Uncle?”

“Me? I fear I am plagued by the dreams of many Targaryens before me, the same dreams which drove my dear brother to a madness that nearly destroyed our line, an obsession it appears afflicts
“Your father as well.”

“Dragons.”

“Aye, dragons. I see their shadows on the snow, hear the crack of leathern wings, feel their hot breath. But it is not my dreams for which I now seek answers.”

Rhaegar frowned, confused, “Do you search for someone else’s dreams?”

“Targaryens have not kept their dreamers as secret as others have. Though these dreamers see through different eyes and tread on different paths. They dream not of prophetic visions but of natural life, a natural life they may learn to live outside the realm of dreams.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Oh, Rhaegar, you may never understand. The North holds many more secrets than you or I could ever understand. I have spent many years here at Castle Black, and yet I still find myself discovering new mysteries of the North with every day.”

Unclear of the connection between the dreams Aemon was exploring and the North, Rhaegar’s curiosity was piqued, “What do you think of the North, Uncle?”

Aemon paused, a thoughtful look across his wrinkled face.

“The North is a complicated place, misunderstood by most but deeply loved by the people who call it home. There is a natural magic that runs beneath one’s feet in the North, an inexplicable energy drawing one in. Hard. Cold. Enduring. The people match the land, with a truly remarkable commitment to justice, honor and loyalty. They are honest and blunt, though rash and harsh. Targaryen power has never held as strongly here as in the South - it’s important to remember the North was never conquered. The Starks are the real power here, and they command immense respect and almost unfailing loyalty from their bannermen. The ancient title of the Kings of Winter remains a whispered memory, gone but not forgotten.”

Certainly not something to tell my father about...
Aemon continued, “There is much for Southerners to learn in the North. Duty and responsibility are held with a certain reverence, though Northmen struggle just as much as any of us with the weight of it.”

Rhaegar thought of his own duties and his shoulders seemed to tense as if the responsibility was a physical mass laid across his back, “It is a heavy burden for all of us to carry.”

“Indeed,” Aemon’s voice softened, “and you, my boy, will carry more than most.”

Images of memories and dreams flashed before his eyes as he allowed the statement to roll over him. He felt the doubt and guilt rising within him, threatening to drown him.

“Uncle…” he started, “how can I do this? How do I fulfill this duty?”

“A question for which no one has the answer. You do what every man can do - you do your duty to the best of your ability.”

“What if the best of my ability isn’t good enough?”

“It must be. You will be King, Rhaegar. A King must maintain the balance between the Crown and the nobility, he must serve the common people, put the realm first. Bad men have been good kings, and good men have been bad kings. Power corrupts the soul, but one must commit to ruling with an iron will.”

Rhaegar shook his head, “No matter how much I read and learn, I still feel as though I know so little, am so poorly prepared.”

“Mhm, my boy, ruling cannot be learned from ancient scrolls or the words of maesters long dead. Only by seeing, by doing, by trying, will one learn the true nature of power and responsibility. It is why you serving as the Lord of Dragonstone while Crown Prince is important, though the island is perhaps not the best representation, since it has been run largely by castellans over the years.”

The last thought reminded Rhaegar of the letters from Ser Corlys awaiting him.
“Speaking of, Uncle,” he rose, closing the book in front of him and stacking the pages of notes to the side, “I should retire to my chambers briefly to respond to the latest letters from Dragonstone.”

Aemon nodded, “Very well. I recommend you make use of the bed, Rhaegar - I will not have it be said I allowed a Targaryen to read himself into an early grave. I’m not sure your mother would forgive me.”

Undoubtedly, my father would not know whether to be pleased or frustrated by the inconvenience.

Making his way above ground, hoping the frigid air would clear his mind, Rhaegar crossed the courtyard to the King’s Tower, where he, Arthur and Oswell had been given chambers. Reserved for honored guests, the accommodations were far better than any they had on the road north, but were still sparser than what they would have had at any Lord’s keep.

The letters were handled quickly, with only the most recent letter from Dragonstone warranting a response - he would write a longer letter to his mother this evening.

Despite his desire to return immediately to the library, he allowed himself the leisure of laying down upon the bed, determined to nap for at least a few minutes.

Fatigue was upon him instantly, and he was drawn into the abyss of a deep sleep blissfully void of dreams.

Lyanna
They left at dawn, three solemn figures mounted on their great chargers, clad in the muted greys of House Stark. The morning air was crisp with a frigid breeze, but the day was clear with no signs of new snow. Their heavy black and grey cloaks fluttered behind them as they rode out the North Gate, several Stark guardsmen escorting them. Nymeria and Torrhen lopped ahead of them, the symbol of the Starks incarnate.

Lyanna was used to early morning rides - it was her favorite time of the day, the icy air and emerging daylight blanketing the Northern landscape with an ethereal beauty. Though Brandon would never wake so early, except to hunt, on occasion, she could convince Benjen to join her and they would race over the hills, laughing and watching the way the air seemed to shimmer around their figures.

There was no laughter this morning.

Duty was weighing heavy on their souls.

In fact, the beauty of the setting made the reality of the situation all the more somber. This was the way of nature, and as the Northerners had learned long ago, nature was a cruel mistress.

The man had been taken at a small holdfast in the hills just to the north of Winterfell. There lay an old outcropping of stones left from the days of the First Men and the Children of the Forest, long used by the Kings and the Lords of Winterfell for such executions.

The man was brought forward, his hands bound. He was of average height and build, still wearing the black dress of the Night’s Watch, though his furs were so dirty they almost looked gray.

Lord Commander Qorgyle had informed her that the man, Mathis, was a relatively new recruit, having only spent four years at the Wall. She knew not what he had been sent there for - the Lord Commander had not told her, and she did not ask. The result was the same. The man had sworn the vows of the Night’s Watch and he had chosen to desert.

The siblings and two guards dismounted, while the rest remained several paces outside the outcropping. The Starks stood together in solidarity, Lyanna between her two brothers, a direwolf on either side. The personification of the North, perfectly reflected in the three siblings, in both looks and demeanor. Over their heads, the standard of the Starks of Winterfell snapped in the wind, the grey direwolf racing across the ice-white field.
The wolf pack, working together to carry out the King’s justice in their father’s stead.

Lyanna glanced at her oldest brother, noting the grave expression on his face. She had never seen Bran so serious. He had taken off his usual boisterous demeanor and traded it for the face of the Heir of Winterfell. She imagined the same transformation had taken place in her own expression, the joy and laughter she carried most days replaced with harsh neutrality.

Brandon nodded at her.

It was time.

She stepped forward as Benjen read out the crime and the written law regarding such an infraction. The words were muted in her mind as she watched the face of the man that she was about to sentence to death.

When Ben’s words faded, she gave the command and the guards dragged the man to the large stone block that lay horizontal in the center of the outcropping. They forced him to his knees, his head only a foot from the divot created years ago for this purpose.

Trusting her voice to remain steady, she looked into the man’s eyes as she spoke.

“If you have any final words, now is the time.”

“I… I… I know I’m a… a coward… I only wish… please… write my wife… tell her I died fighting the wildlings…”

When the man had finished, Benjen held the scabbard while Brandon unsheathed Ice. The Heir of Winterfell stepped to the side of the stone, even with the divot over which the guards forced the man’s neck.

Lyanna never let her eyes stray from the man as she delivered the sentence.

“In the name of Aerys of the House Targaryen, Second of his Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, by the word
She refused to look away as her brother carried out the King’s Justice. She refused to flinch.

Brandon removed the man’s head from his body in one stroke, the Valyrian steel slicing easily through skin and bone. Warm blood spurted from the headless body, seeping into the snow surrounding the stone pillar, a crimson stain contrasting with the pure white.

The man’s head rolled to stop right before her feet, dead eyes staring straight into her soul.

For a moment, she was paralyzed.

And then Brandon’s hand was on her shoulder, leading her to the horses.

“Lya,” his voice was gentle, “Father would be proud of you.”

Lyanna stopped, looking at her brother.

“You were the one who carried out the execution.”

“I executed him, aye. But you passed the sentence.”

Bran held her face between his hands as he spoke the next words, deadly serious. “We both looked into his eyes and heard his last words. We saw him as a man. We understood the gravity of the act of taking a life. That is the meaning behind the Old Way, respecting one’s fellow man and the sanctity of life. That is what Father taught us.”

Lyanna nodded, and her brother pulled her into a warm embrace.

But she didn’t feel like she deserved love or warmth in that moment. For Bran was right - while he may have swung the sword, it had been by her word.
By the word of Lyanna of House Stark... I do sentence you to die.

My word killed a man.

She shivered as she mounted Silverwing, letting her gloved hands sink into the horse’s mane, as if the familiar act would ground her. Nymeria, as if understanding her mistress’ distress, padded over to her and nuzzled her leg. Torrhen was with Brandon, who had already mounted and gone to speak with the guards.

Benjen approached her and together they watched as Brandon turned around to beckon them forth.

“At least he looks the part of the Heir of Winterfell,” her youngest brother said, with only a hint of his usual sarcasm.

Lyanna spared her brother a tight smile, “Father will be proud of him. And you. Thank you for counselling me to wait. I don’t know if I could have…”

The image of the man’s head rolling to stop at her feet flashed through her mind, halting her speech.

Benjen reached out to grab her hand, “Lya, you would have been able to if necessary. You would have done what you needed to do. But this was a burden we could share. You do not need to carry it all by yourself. That is what family is for.”

All Lyanna could do was nod - she didn’t trust her voice at that moment.

They nudged their chargers forward, moving to meet Brandon.

And just as they had ridden out at dawn, the three Stark siblings rode back to Winterfell together, the family’s direwolves proceeding them, flashes of grey and black across the ice-white snow.
Happy New Year everyone!

Thank you for the continued support and interest! Hope you enjoyed these two POVs, have a few more written (including Walys and Richard) that I’m just editing before posting :)

As always, love hearing any comments or feedback!

As a note in response to Alex13, it is the end of 279/beginning of 280 AC (Lyanna is about to turn 16, AU reminder!).

Also, technically Aemon is Rhaegar's great-great-uncle, but I always figured R would address him as Uncle in familiar settings.
Happy Friday! Long chapter to start the weekend off!

FYI, Queensgate is the abandoned castle just to the west of Castle Black. Originally called Snowgate, it was renamed in honor of Queen Alyssanne Targaryen, who visited the Wall with her dragon Silverwing and encouraged King Jaehaerys I to support the Night's Watch.

Might notice a few of those names popping up in the story :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Walys

*These Northerners are as savage as the Court thinks.*

The three Stark siblings had departed early that morning to see to the execution of a deserter from the Night’s Watch. The fact that Lady Lyanna had attended at all would cause a man to pause. That she had almost carried out the beheading herself had sent Walys into a near frenzy. How would he have ever explained such a vile and violent action to a Southern man of noble birth? It was bad enough that the girl insisted on running around in breeches, riding astride like a man, and wielding bow and arrow instead of needle and thread.

To behead a man would have been unconscionable.

A savage indeed. Walys was half surprised the girl didn’t do it to ensure she was labeled as such - sometimes, he was convinced she wished to be a blight on her family as an unmarriageable, uncouth woman-child. Her brothers and even Lord Rickard certainly did little to discourage her wilful nature.

Fortunately, the girl was quite comely, and her name and blood ought to carry sufficient weight for a decent marriage. Walys had to admit begrudgingly that the girl was also quite skilled at running a household. A strong man would be able to bring her to heel.
Since finalizing the marriage with the Tullys, shipping Lady Lyanna off had become one of Walys’ primary political objectives. The Maester had found that Northerners did not have a head for politics like most noblemen in the South - they often preferred to remain in the North, caring little for the maneuvering of the Southern houses. In fact, the Starks had rarely seen much influence at Court at all, other than the Hour of the Wolf, when Lord Cregan Stark served as the Hand of the King for a day at the end of the Dance of the Dragons.

But Walys saw the potential. The Starks were a Great House, and should have far more power and influence than they had historically wielded. They ruled the largest kingdom, were fearsome warriors, and had a strict sense of justice. Though they were often ridiculed as savage and vicious, they were still renowned and respected for their fighting capabilities and honor.

All the Starks needed to propel themselves into the game was a knowledgeable player, who knew how to position them. Lord Rickard had been blessed with four children, allowing him to build alliances across houses, and ruled the North with a steady hand, eliciting the approval and loyalty of his bannermen. He only needed a helping hand to guide him in the game.

Walys was that man.

Growing up a bastard in the shadows of Highgarden, Walys had been powerless and belittled as some petty Lord’s by-blow. But he had learned to listen and to read. Information and planning was key. He’d spent his years at the Citadel studying law and history.

Now was his chance to play the game of greater men - this was his opportunity to wield the power and influence, even if it was from the shadows of a black robe. The Starks could achieve great heights, and it would be because of him.

Of course, Walys had a number of reasons for wishing to arrange an agreement and marry the girl off sooner rather than later.

Since Lord Rickard had set off for his extended trip, Maester Walys had begun to understand the true extent of Lyanna’s influence. That Lord Stark had chosen her over recalling Brandon was a statement in itself. Maester Walys had been decidedly disappointed by the decision - he had hoped to be appointed alongside the youngest Stark boy, Benjen, who would have been much easier to advise. Even Brandon would have been more tractable than Lyanna.

Admittedly, the decision had been a sound one from a strictly managerial standpoint - Lyanna was
by and far more capable than either of her brothers, despite her gender. She was respected by the servants and townspeople, and even the Northern bannermen. Over the years, she had taken on the duties that would have been filled by her mother as Lord Rickard’s wife, as well as several duties that would typically have fallen to Brandon as the heir.

In fact, Lyanna was the one to whom Lord Rickard allocated some of his own business, items Walys would have typically assisted him with.

Brandon himself would be a hopeless Lord of Winterfell, stubborn and rash as he is. Fortunately, Lord Rickard remained young and able, so it would be many years till Brandon took his seat. Walys would have to spend some time gaining his trust for the years to come. As it was, the eldest Stark sibling was too reliant on his sister.

Which only fed into Walys’ desire to be rid of the wild girl as soon as possible.

Lyanna was narrow-minded and ornery. She only cared for the North, misunderstanding the reasons for connecting the Starks to the rest of the Seven Kingdoms. Marriage was her duty, yet she treated it as though it were some unique part of the Seven Hells designed for her. For someone so committed to doing her duty by her family, Lyanna was proving to be a hypocrite.

She was merely a powerful pawn to be used in the game, but she insisted on stepping beyond the bounds of her sex.

The key concern was that at that moment, Walys knew he was not only losing the battles against her, but also the war in general.

Should he ever forget, all he had to do was look at the letter from the Citadel tucked beneath his bed. A letter indicating that the Citadel would be happy to arrange for a new Maester, with roots tying him back to the North, to move up to Winterfell.

Lord Rickard had given no indication of his disapproval. Only Lyanna could have been behind such a request.

Alas, in spite of his best efforts, the arrangements were going slower than he would like. He had been making subtle inquiries for moons, contacting several of his friends from the Citadel to learn of the status of affairs in the South. From this information, Walys had begun to plan his moves, identifying key prospects.
He had set his initial target high. Lord Tywin Lannister’s son, Jaime, represented the best option in his mind. The boy was of age with Lyanna, soon to be knighted, and the Heir to Casterly Rock. Not only were the Lannisters the wealthiest House in the Kingdoms, Lord Tywin wielded an enormous amount of power as the Hand of the King. Should the gossip from the South prove true, Lord Tywin might also succeed in marrying Jaime’s twin sister to the Crown Prince.

Were the girl he was pawning off anyone else, Walys might have attempted to garner the favor of the Crown Prince as well - the marriage to Cersei Lannister was by no means settled. Lyanna Stark, though, was no court lady. Walys shuddered to imagine the wolf-girl running around the Red Keep. Such a match would certainly prove more harmful than helpful for the Starks. No, better to send the girl to a place like Casterly Rock, far enough away from King’s Landing.

He had hoped to hear back from Lord Tywin, but no response had come as of yet. A shame, for certainly the Lord Hand would have found much more of interest in the North...

But the Maester was willing to be patient. The boy was yet young, and should the match fail to materialize, perhaps a man like Robert Baratheon would suit. The second Stark boy, Eddard, was fostered with him in the Vale after all.

Yes, Walys had waited this long for power. Lyanna Stark’s marriage was the key.

Lyanna

Like Brandon, Lyanna’s anger was like a firecracker, waiting to be lit. And the sparks were flying through the early afternoon as she handled petitions in Father’s solar while Brandon dealt with some sort of business in town. Benjen joined her for a time before running off for his weapons training.
Three people had already asked where Lord Brandon was, despite them all knowing she remained the acting Lady of Winterfell in Father’s place.

Brandon was right. Whatever I do, Winterfell and the North will always be his. It doesn’t matter that I’ve been running Winterfell and the North for three moons. They do not care that Father named me instead of Brandon or Benjen for a reason.

With each inquiry, Lyanna became more frustrated. Didn’t they realize that it was her who was preventing them from starving? That she had been the Stark child behind the trade deal with the Manderlys and the favorable terms of Brandon’s betrothal? It was to Lyanna they had directed their concerns regarding defenses against wildling attacks and keeping order in town, not Brandon. Why then, did they suddenly feel disappointed to see her handling matters instead of him?

Nothing I do will ever erase the fact that I’m a woman.

By the last petitioner, Lyanna was exhausted. The petitions could be tedious and she was finding it harder and harder to tamp down her rising frustration. She just wanted to go pray in the Godswood and then soak in the hot springs for hours, alone with Nymeria and Torrhen. She thought the steaming waters might wash away the anger, preventing any rash actions.

Alas, such was not to be the case.

The final strike came in the form of a young common girl carrying a small bundle. Her dowdy roughspun clothes didn’t mask the fresh and youthful glow, light brown hair and hazel eyes set into a pretty face.

The girl was alone, and as the door closed and she approached, Lyanna had a sinking feeling this was not going to be good.

Brief introductions were made and the small bundle found its way into Lyanna’s arms.

Two beautiful blue-grey eyes stared up at her under a tuft of dark curls. The tiny babe, no older than a few weeks, cooed, and Lyanna couldn’t help the smile from spreading across her face.

But that did not stop her thoughts from roaring into a furious tumble. Those eyes were as familiar as Father’s or Benjen’s.
The Others take you, Brandon Stark!

“I had hoped Milord Brandon would be here, to see to her care...”

Lyanna kept her face calm as the firecracker exploded within her mind.

Brandon wouldn’t give two shits about your baby! He cares not one whit for you or your child, just like he cares not for his honor or the honor of our House. Yet he will still inherit everything while I will be no better than you, tentatively reminding my husband of his duty to his children. Entirely beholden to the whims of a man.

Instead of voicing the raging thoughts, she smiled tightly at the woman, “I know not Brandon’s thoughts on the matter, but I will see that you and your child are adequately cared for as befitting your station. Beyond that, I cannot guarantee anything, but you may approach me should you have any concerns. I pray you not to mention this affair to anyone - I hope you have been discrete thus far?”

“Aye milady, I haven’t told a soul. My pa has been away at Moat Cailin for Milord Stark the last five moons, so he knows not.”

Fantastic, her father works on Father’s pet project. Just bloody perfect.

“Good. I will arrange for a suitable match. You are how old, my dear?”

“Seven and ten, milady.”

It felt odd to speak to a girl roughly her own age in such a manner, planning for this commoner’s future like the many men in Lyanna’s life planned hers. She hoped she could ease the girl’s worries better than her Father or Brandon might have done.

“I am sorry this has occurred, but I will do my best to ease the situation.”
“Oh thank you milady, that is very kind. But it was an honor to bear milord’s child.”

Was it? Will it be when your bastard grows up in the shadow of Brandon’s true-born children? Nay, I think this burden will weigh heavy with each passing year, for all involved.

Lyanna looked down again at the sweet little girl she still held in her arms. At least it was a girl. Gods only knew what additional complications a boy would cause.

“Does she have a name?” she asked, as she handed the small baby back to her mother.

The girl shook her head, “I wasn’t sure if milord would want to name her.”

Lyanna tried to soften her tone as she spoke the next words, “Lord Brandon is not one for such things. Is there a family name which you might call her?”

The girl smiled shyly, “I have always loved your name, milady. Milord spoke of you so sweetly that night...”

Lyanna was certain she should find the comment endearing, but at that moment she was struck by the utter ridiculousness of Brandon’s indiscretion, a testament of his dishonor and carelessness, sharing her name. The fact that Brandon had spoken of her while in the process of shaming their family would have set her ire off were she not already bubbling with fury. Frankly, she thought she could kill her eldest brother in that instant should he enter the room.

“Perhaps an iteration,” trying to keep her voice steady, despite the raging fire burning in her, “Anna, maybe?”

She had always disliked the nickname Anna after all, much preferring Lya.

The girl’s face lit up as if Lyanna had given her a wonderful gift, “Anna,” she cooed affectionately to the small bundle in her arms, “my dearest Anna. Thank you milady. Will you tell Milord Brandon?”

The irony of the situation was not lost on Lyanna.
“I will speak with him.”

And give him a piece of my mind. Others take him, I should cut his cock off myself.

“So, Rodrick here will escort you home and I will arrange for the rest in the coming days. Rod, please have Sella give her sufficient supplies for a few days.”

“Thank you milady,” the girl sunk into a wobbly curtsy, as she exited the room.

Lyanna followed them without, though she turned in the opposite direction to walk towards the Godswood.

“I’m not to be disturbed,” she snarled to the guard, unable to control her temper after reining it in for so long.

That idiot, I could string him up by his ears. How could he be so careless? Gods, a bastard when Father has only just formalized the betrothal with Catelyn Tully.

She entered the Godswood, hoping the Old Gods wouldn’t mind as she ranted and screamed her frustration at her idiot brother.

She paced along the banks of the warm pool which occupied the grove with the heart tree, waving a thick stick like a sword, occasionally venturing into the snowy space on the edge of the clearing to whack the lower branches of surrounding trees.

The more she paced, the more she felt her anger shift directions. Her brother was merely a testament to the world in which she found herself living. The dawning reality that her sex would always limit her hit like a stone wall. While she may be a noblewoman, she would ultimately be subject to a man, no matter the circumstances.

She couldn’t escape. She was trapped.
And a caged wolf was a dangerous thing.

Richard

Word spread quickly through Wintertown, so by mid-morning, Myles and Richard knew that the Stark siblings had ridden out at dawn to execute a man. While not unusual for Lords to exact the King’s Justice, two facts struck them, and they knew they would need to get confirmation from Brandon when they saw him: the presence of his sister, Lyanna, at the execution, and the appearance of direwolves, in the flesh, accompanying the party.

It had been almost two moons since the Crown Prince had left them in Wintertown, and it was proving difficult to gather much information on the Lords of the North.

While word traveled quickly, it was rather simple facts or speculation as opposed to the gossip of plots and scandals typical in the South. In fact, it wasn’t easy to learn much of anything about the Starks outside of the general approval of the Lords of Winterfell. In truth, Richard and Myles had largely remained inside the Inn for the first few days as the temperature had dropped and a storm had passed through, but it didn’t help that the Northerners living within Wintertown were generally closed off, considering Richard and Myles as outsiders.

The most intriguing information had been what Brandon had confirmed at the tavern the night before - that Lord Rickard had left his daughter Lyanna as the acting Lady of Winterfell in his stead while he conducted business around the North and in the Riverlands.

Moving to Winterfell, Richard was confident they would gain valuable information for the Prince, and they wanted to do a good job for the Prince, given his trust in them. It was more than the fact that he was the Heir to the Iron Throne. After several years serving as Rhaegar’s squires, Richard
Richard and Myles were some of the few who were granted access to a version of Rhaegar Targaryen that few had ever seen - the bookish, idealistic Prince, the melancholy musician, the hardworking and diligent knight. They’d seen him reading to his six-year old brother Viserys. They had seen him attempt to temper King Aerys. They had accompanied him down into King’s Landing when he failed, to bring a few gold pieces to the widows of men burned by the King for lesser crimes. They heard him when he was furious about the King hurting the Queen.

He was a doting brother, a caring son, an empathetic prince. Rhaegar had taught Richard and Myles many lessons; a demanding knight to squire for, he had trained them into the ground, but only because it was how the Prince himself lived his own life.

Richard and Myles hoped to prove themselves worthy of his trust and his friendship - the Crown Prince had after all knighted them himself directly before leaving King’s Landing.

Outside of their devotion to the Prince, Richard was content with the Prince’s agreement to leave him and Myles in Wintertown, for Richard quite appreciated Brandon Stark’s company.

Richard was a joyous man, and while Myles wasn’t nearly as boisterous, he too enjoyed a good time and a few drinks. The Crown Prince on the other hand, was a serious sort, rarely partaking in revelry - thus, often inhibiting the ability of his squires the opportunity as well. Brandon, on the other hand, was the type of man who seemed to celebrate life each and every day.

Richard and Myles had just become knights. They deserved to celebrate a little.

Good to his word, Brandon arrived in the early afternoon, though his manner was noticeably more sombre than the night before.

Over a tankard of ale, the Heir to Winterfell gave them a quick overview of the morning activities.

“You should have seen my sister,” pride laced Brandon’s voice as he spoke, “she’s a force.”
“Your sister, Lyanna? So she was at the execution?”

Brandon nodded, “Aye, she was there. I had it easy. I just served as the executioner, it was my sister who sentenced him. She’s the one Father left in charge of Winterfell, in any case.”

Myles failed to keep the shock out of his voice, “Even with you in residence?”

Brandon chuckled, “Yes, even with me in residence. She’s good at the whole,” he waved his hand in the direction of the castle, “running Winterfell thing. Father trusts her and the North loves her.”

Richard saw Myles stare at Brandon, his eyebrows raised as his surprise registered across his face. Richard was certain his face was not much different. It was incredibly rare to see a daughter left in charge of a Great House when the Heir was present. Even more rare for a young woman of noble birth to sentence a man to death.

Though perhaps it shouldn’t surprise them - the North was proving to be quite a different place from the South.

Brandon shrugged, noting their surprise, “She almost did the whole thing herself. No Northerner would have questioned it. Lyanna is as Northern as we get up here,” he started laughing, clearly remembering some memory of his sister, “In fact, Father used to call her a wildling when we were younger.”

Brandon proceeded to launch into a series of tales describing the many antics of the Stark siblings growing up in Winterfell. Most stories were from Brandon’s visits home during his years at Barrowtown, and it was clear Brandon had managed to maintain a strong connection to his family despite the time away.

Not every squire was so lucky. Richard’s privileged spot as the Crown Prince’s squire had meant more than four years of absence from his own home in the southern Stormlands, adding to the years spent at Blackhaven as a page. He had barely even gotten a chance to write to his family after receiving his knighthood.

Some of Brandon’s stories spanned the years before fostering though, when Lyanna and the youngest Stark, Benjen, were toddlers.
“Father used to jokingly ask Mother if she had been stolen the night of Lyanna’s conception by a wildling, for even as a little girl she was a terror. I swear she must have scars all over from the mischief she used to get into.” Brandon’s laugh boomed out again, “How Father was ever surprised that she wanted to train with a sword is beyond me - she pestered me for lessons for years before she ever formally asked!”

Brandon moved on to stories about Barrowtown and other parts of the North before Richard or Myles could ask more about Lyanna, though he intermixed questions about their time squiring and the adventures they had with the Prince. After finishing their drinks, they made their way up to Winterfell on horseback, entering the castle through the main gate.

Winterfell was a huge complex, spanning several acres and protected by massive walls. Just from the main space the entrance opened into, Richard could sense the immensity of the place. He and Myles took in the sight of the Stark stronghold as Brandon chatted with a guardsman, inquiring about his sister’s whereabouts.

And then Richard saw two wolves the size of small horses prowling at the other end of the yard.

No wolf is that size in real life.

He hit Myles to get his attention and they both gaped for a moment as a man, who looked to be the kennel master, approached the wolves with a massive haunch of raw meat in each hand.

“Ah, the direwolves,” Brandon’s voice sounded to Richard’s left, “the symbol of our House, in the flesh. Lyanna found them a few years ago when all of us were off fostering, and she’s raised them herself. Nymeria’s the black one, Torrhen the grey.”

The direwolves were in the process of tearing the raw meat apart, their sharp teeth and strong jaws making quick work.

“They are incredibly smart - they can be vicious, of course, but they’re relatively harmless if they know you are a friend.”

Both Richard and Myles turned to stare at Brandon, the implicit suggestion of what the direwolves would do if they thought one was a foe hanging in the air. But the Northman wasn’t paying attention to them, as he yelled in the direction of the kitchens.
A young woman standing by the entrance to the kitchens turned around as Brandon dismounted his
horse. Richard and Myles followed suit as Brandon waved her over. The Heir to Winterfell was
momentarily occupied as he instructed the stableboy to tend to their horses, which gave Richard and
Myles time to fully appreciate the only daughter of Lord Rickard Stark as she crossed the distance
towards them.

Though he and Myles had seen the girl from a distance a few times, riding in and out of Wintertown,
they’d never been close enough to get a true sense of her looks beyond the fact that she shared her
brothers’ dark brown curls.

But as she walked across the courtyard, they could see clearly that Lyanna Stark was beautiful, with
snow-white skin, delicate features, and lively grey eyes, framed by long dark hair curling into natural
waves. She was dressed practically in a pale grey wool dress, similar to those worn by all the
women of the North, and a black fur-lined cloak. Petite, she moved languidly with a natural grace,
stalking towards them.

Simple, pure, wild beauty.

So this is what Lord Stark has been hiding at Winterfell. No wonder Brandon was so protective.

Lyanna was still a few yards away when Brandon spoke.

“Do we have any available rooms prepared for guests?”

“Available rooms?” Lyanna frowned, turning to examine Richard and Myles as she
approached, “For whom?”

Richard stepped forward to bow, motioning for Myles to do so as well, “I am Ser Richard Lonmouth
and this is Ser Myles Mooton, my Lady.”

She raised her eyebrows questioningly, “I was unaware we were to receive noble guests.”
Richard was about to apologize for the lack of notice when Brandon chuckled, “I found them staying in Wintertown, said they’re on some business for the Crown Prince.”

Lyanna frowned at Brandon’s words, but Brandon continued before she could ask for clarification.

“I told them they should have stayed at Winterfell from the beginning, but I suppose they were scared of the she-wolf running the castle. Now that I’m in residence, they feel safe enough - you can be frightening at times, Lya.”

While Brandon’s voice remained light and joking, his words seemed to have the opposite effect on his sister. Her face twisted, her voice lowered in anger, “Bran, you should have told me you had invited them up here. You are more than capable of arranging such things, and I don’t have time to deal with last minute arrivals.”

"Lya,” Brandon’s voice grew plaintive, “you know you're better at this than I am. That's why Father leaves you as the Stark in Winterfell. It really is a shame you aren't the heir.”

Apparently, this was enough to set her anger off.

"Yes, it is. It must be nice gallivanting around,” the sarcasm was practically dripping from her mouth as she spoke, “while I hear petitions from bannermen asking where dear Lord Brandon is.”

She stepped closer to Brandon, dropping her voice to a near whisper. Richard had to strain to hear her words as she continued, her eyes blazing, “Do you know how lucky you are that I was the one taking petitions today, not Father? Or perhaps you’d like him to meet the adorable baby girl that was presented to me in his solar this morning, fine dark brown curls and blue-grey Stark eyes gazing at me? Perfect timing, ten moons after your last visit, with a pretty peasant girl wanting to name her daughter after Milord Brandon’s little wolf sister.”

Brandon blanched but she pressed on, her voice low and dangerous, "Fret not, dearest brother, I’ve arranged to patch up your little indiscretion, though in the future, please do not speak to your conquests about me while you dishonor our family. And don’t worry, I'll see to some rooms for your friends and I'll be silent about you shirking your duty, but I expect something in return."

"I didn't doubt you would for one moment, sweet sister."
Lya scoffed, her voice still low, "I'm the furthest thing from sweet, Bran. I expect you to support my wish for a fortnight at Queensgate." She paused, glancing around as if to check for any unwanted ears. "Alone. No guards. Just Nymeria and I."

At that, all the blood drained from Brandon's face.

"Father will never agree."

"Only if he finds out. We will write to him together, explaining my desire to go on a hunting trip for my nameday in a few days, leaving Winterfell in your capable hands. As you so aptly put it yesterday," she practically spit the next words in his face, "it's your birthright. Everyone already expects you to take on the role and you're the only one Walys will allow, the bloody idiot. In any case, I shall be there and back before Father returns, if he maintains the schedule he describes in his letters."

Brandon looked to be contemplating the situation before him.

Richard, too, tried to process what he and Myles had just witnessed. Clearly, Brandon had managed to get a bastard on some common girl, and Lyanna had dealt with the issue. But now it seemed she was using the incident to her advantage. While Richard didn’t know where exactly Queensgate was, a noblewoman running around the North in the middle of winter with only a direwolf seemed highly unusual. That she would blackmail her older brother into allowing such an arrangement seemed downright preposterous. Nonetheless, the confrontation was both unpredictable and amusing, a window into the relationship between the two spirited Stark siblings.

_This girl is a fierce one, as wild as Brandon, but not in the uncouth way court gossip made it seem._

Somewhat surprisingly, the situation also sent a pang of guilt and sadness through Richard. He barely knew his younger sister, who had been born during his time with Lord Dondarrion at Blackhaven. Richard had gone home only three times since her birth eight years ago. He realized in that moment that Myles was more of a sibling than his birth sister, and that he would never have the same close family relationship the Starks had.

Brandon seemed to have come to a conclusion, as he found his voice again, "Fine, but you'll obviously run the keep until you depart and once you return. It's that or guards of my choosing to Mole's Town."
All Lyanna did in response was shrug, "I always planned to – Father did leave me in charge after all. But you're a greater fool than I thought if you believe this will get any easier for you in time."

Then she turned to Richard and Myles, who Brandon seemed to have forgotten were there to witness the scene. Dropping into a shallow curtsy, her voice adopted a sweet tone that hinted at sarcasm. "My apologies good sers for the scene. I will be sure to have rooms arranged as soon as possible and have your belongings brought up from the Smoking Log. In the meantime, please make yourselves comfortable in the Great Hall - I'm sure Brandon will be more than capable in entertaining you."

With that, she turned away, her wool skirts flouncing.

Brandon flashed a cheeky smile to Myles and Richard, “And that, good sers, is my sweet little sister, Lyanna.”

Waving them in a different direction, Brandon led them to the Great Hall, depositing them at a large table. He promptly disappeared, telling them he’d be back shortly with some ale and food.

Myles turned to him as soon as Brandon was out of earshot, “Well, she certainly is something else.”

“Aye, she is,” Richard whispered as a smile crept across his face, “I think Rhaegar will like her.”

_The Prince does love a challenge._

Chapter End Notes

Also, I subscribe to the theory that Richard could be Lem Lemoncloak (remember, nobody is dead in ASOIAF unless GRRM says they are dead dead dead). For kicks, I added a little detail so that on a close reading of Richard's POV, you can catch the ref to another BwoB member that would connect them :)

Rhaegar

The sun was setting to the West, a golden glow shining off of the Wall. After moons of gradients of grey and white, surrounded by men in all black, this was a revelation. The North already buzzed with a natural energy – one could even go so far as to say an organic magic thrummed through the vast landscapes. With sunlight bathing the endless swells of snow to the south and the magnificent ice of the Wall to the north, everything seemed ethereal. The sight of the ruins of Queensgate only added to the mystique, as the long dark shadows contrasted sharply with the final rays of gleaming light feathering the edges of the ruins.

Pulling on the reins, Rhaegar paused. He felt as though he were on the edge of a dream, about to wake up and find it wasn’t real. Light and heavy, he was standing on the precipice. It reminded him of the first time, roughly two moons ago, when he’d first stood at the edge of the Wall looking out into the Land Beyond the Wall - an awe-inspiring experience, powerful and beautiful, but laden with something akin to fate. His thoughts started wandering back to the reason for this excursion, tales of a long-forgotten enemy and images of a war for humanity swirling around his head.

This journey to Queensgate had been suggested by Maester Aemon after a particularly grueling week of study, during which they had found several incomplete texts pertaining to a tale from Asshai with a shocking number of parallels to the prophecy that had haunted him since childhood. Queensgate was the closest abandoned castle along the Wall to the west of Castle Black; it carried Targaryen history as the castle named in honor of Queen Alysanne’s visit years ago. Aemon had thought a few days of quiet, removed from the temptation of books and scrolls, would do Rhaegar some good.

The sun finally dipped below a mountain peak and light began to fade, shadows chasing away the golden beams. Taking a deep breath to refocus his clouded mind, Rhaegar gently nudged his horse, knowing Arthur and Oswell would follow.

They fell into silence following the brief pause, navigating the heavier snowdrifts in peace. It had been a quick but tiring ride from Castle Black, without a road to follow between the outposts. As they approached the ruins of the once occupied keep, he took in the state of disrepair with a touch of sadness. Not only because the keep renamed in honor his Targaryen ancestor had been abandoned and neglected, but also for the uncomfortable fact it revealed – the Wall was severely undermanned.
They couldn’t possibly be prepared to repel wildlings for much longer in this state.

So lost in thought was he that the touch of Arthur’s gloved hand to his shoulder startled him. Before he could voice his question, he saw Arthur’s concerned face, following his outstretched hand that pointed to one of the remaining towers. From the window of the third floor, one could just barely make out steady puff of smoke, the light of the fire almost too dim in the fading daylight.

*Uncle Aemon said the castle has been abandoned for years. How could there be anyone there?*

Signs of life in what was supposed to be an abandoned fortress warranted care.

Dusk had fallen as they cautiously moved through the ruins. Entering the snow-covered courtyard silently while keeping to the shadows, Rhaegar signaled to Oswell to stay with the horses in the remains of what must have been the stables. He quickly noted the grey charger nestled into one corner, a smaller dark palfrey tucked behind her. Though covered in shadows and heavy blankets, the horses were well-bred and well taken care of.

He felt rather than saw Arthur draw a small dagger as they approached the small tower – they had known each other for years, training side-by-side till the point of exhaustion. Trusting the man came naturally.

The gods must have been feeling merciful, as the outer door to the tower opened with nary a creak. Rhaegar glanced at Arthur, unsheathing his own dagger as his friend nodded to the stairs across the small entry. The lower chamber was empty but for a large pile of wood to one side and a few straw bed pallets.

Making their way across the room, they began ascending the stairs blanketed in darkness, with only slivers of emerging moonlight illuminating the tight space. They had just passed the first floor, leaving another empty chamber bathed in flickering moonlight, when he saw the familiar golden glow of a fire lighting the steps ahead.

So caught up in the silence, he flinched and almost missed a step when a growl followed by an exasperated sigh sounded out from the room above. He felt Arthur tense at his back as he gripped the knife tighter in his hand.

He took another step only to pause again as a husky, but decidedly female, voice rang clear through the silence.
"Nymeria, will you stop fidgeting, I'm trying to clean it!"

There was a yelp followed by a deep growl, akin to a hound’s but with an edge like iron. Something in the sound sent a small shiver through him. Then the girl's voice spoke again.

"That should do. You should have waited for me to reach the clearing before attacking." The voice chuckled again, a simple but relaxed sound as there was another growl. "I suppose I understand Father's lectures on patience a tad better now. You can stop growling now, I'm all done."

Rhaegar shot a quick glance back at Arthur - another two steps would put them in the room with its mystery inhabitants. He turned back, tensing as he took another step. He could see into half of the room now, noting saddlebags and a straw pallet piled with furs. Slabs of meat sat to the side, blood staining the straw and floor. He could just barely see the small fire in the middle of the room, with shadows skirting the edge of his vision. Taking a deep breath in, he took another silent step into the room.

The floorboard creaked.

A flurry of movement followed, as his body took over. A loud growl, the scrape of claws on stone, the sound of a bowstring pulling taut. Arthur's comfortable presence sliding just slightly in front of him as they both tensed, ready.

Just as suddenly, everything stilled, allowing his mind to catch up and take in the situation.

Danger emanated from the pair on the other side of the room: an enormous black wolf still seated but baring its sharp teeth, body ready for attack, next to a woman-child with an arrow drawn on her raised bow. Two sets of dark eyes greeted them, the light of the fire reflecting off their steely gaze. And while the gaze of the giant wolf spoke of aggression and hunger, it was the harsh calm he saw in the girl that was disconcerting. Despite the surprise of their entrance, he saw no fear.

Shockingly, or perhaps not, the woman-child was the one to break the silence.

"Who are you?" She ground out, the icy words slicing through the air.
Rhaegar paused, thinking about the best approach to the simple question. Under normal circumstances, he would simply tell the truth, knowing that his title and Arthur's reputation would bring the average person to heel. Given the present situation, he found himself doubting the efficacy of such an approach.

Choosing to remain silent and test the waters, he glanced at Arthur briefly before turning back to the woman-child, lowering his weapon slightly while bringing his empty hand up in a peaceful gesture. He felt Arthur relax a touch, though he knew his friend was still poised for an attack.

Clearly the girl wanted a real answer, as she pulled the arrow back another inch, aiming straight for his unarmored chest. Her face remained emotionless, her body relaxed.

*That arrow could punch straight through my chest. And she knows it.*

As if reading his mind, the girl's mouth twisted into a smirk.

"You really shouldn't test me. It'd be a shame to ruin such a fine body over such a simple question."

Arthur tensed at the threat, prompting Rhaegar to reach out a hand to encourage the knight to stand down. He hoped the shadows aided him in the lies he was about to tell.

"We are landless knights from the South. We heard rumors of increased wildling attacks along the Wall and figured we'd take it upon ourselves to help protect the greatest part of the Seven Kingdoms. What knight doesn't wish for wild adventures in the snow?"

The girl scoffed, but lowered her bow.

"If you're landless knights, then I'm the Maiden herself. That flowery court speech will get you nothing but trouble here."

For a second, Rhaegar thought she knew who they were as she stared at him, as if measuring whether to press him further on what was clearly a lie. And then in one graceful movement, she sat down and removed the arrow from her bow, replacing it in a quiver to her left. The bow she rested next to her. She then turned to the giant wolf at her side, and spoke in a soothing whisper that still carried across the room. "Nym, settle down. We have more than enough to share with these poor Southrons who seem to have lost their way."
Watching the girl talk to her companion, it quickly dawned on Rhaegar that no wolf could possibly be that large – but this was the North, and suddenly Uncle Aemon’s musings about the rumored return of direwolves came roaring back.

*A direwolf, in the flesh. If only I could bring dragons back too...*

The direwolf seemed to accept its companion’s explanation, curling up next to the girl with its head resting on its paws. However, its eyes never left them.

"Since you clearly deem it necessary to remain vague, I’m sure you will be amenable to the same on my part. You're lucky that Nymeria took down an elk on our way here, we don't normally entertain such proper guests."

As the girl paused, closing her eyes as her face scrunched up in concentration, Rhaegar chanced another glance at Arthur, reading confusion at the rapid change in demeanor, and almost charming language, exhibited by their host. He was certain his own face reflected a similar sentiment.

After a brief moment, the girl’s face relaxed completely, prompting a low growl from the wolf. She looked as if she’d gone to sleep in an instant.

But then the girl's eyes snapped open and she looked back at them, her eyes roaming over their figures. She gazed at Arthur as she spoke again.

"You can inform your friend below that the feed is in the second barrel behind him. Though he should be careful around Silver, she can be a tad temperamental." Rhaegar heard Arthur’s quick inhale, the only sign of his shock at her knowledge of Oswell. "The palfrey is mine as well, so you don’t have to worry about anybody else - I had quite hoped to be rid of men, but I suppose dreams are designed to be dashed.” She smiled cheekily at that, before continuing, “As I'm sure you saw, there are pallets downstairs that you can bring up, though you shall have to use your own furs. There should be more than enough space around the fire."

She then turned to Rhaegar, and he could have sworn that he saw a flash of that smirk cross her face again. "I'm sure you're all hungry from your tremendously long journey from the South. Bring one of those big pieces over, might as well make some tonight."

At that, she turned away from them, moving to stroke the fine fur of her companion as she grabbed
supplies from a pack, murmuring a few unintelligible words.

Though not familiar with the feeling, Rhaegar understood an order when he heard one. Shrugging to Arthur, he moved towards the pile of straw where the slabs of elk were stacked, grabbing one of the larger pieces. It was already dark, so they didn’t really have the option of not trusting the girl. He didn’t think she had recognized them, so the only real threat was her killing them as they slept, and one of them would surely be on watch.

When he straightened, he saw that Arthur had left, presumably to speak with Oswell. Pausing to listen, he heard his fading footsteps down the stairs.

He approached the fire, noticing the direwolf watching him warily. The girl seemed indifferent, her face a mask. He paused for a second, trying to determine where he should leave the slab of raw meat. The wolf growled and his eyes shifted back to the animal.

"Here, I'll take it," offered the girl as she raised a small hand. She took the meat from him, gesturing for him to sit as she pulled out a small knife and began examining the meat. He couldn't help but watch in fascination as she efficiently carved pieces of elk, placing them in a shallow tin pan that was balanced over top of the fire. Her efficient movements with a knife brought to mind the image of her standing with her bow in hand, arrow poised for release.

Who is this girl? And what is she doing in an abandoned castle on the Wall?

With light limited to the glow of the fire, it was hard to tell much by looking at her. Dark hair falling out of a long braid, a heavy cloak covering much of her figure, only revealing dark breeches and sturdy black boots. Dirt dusted her face and hands, a testimony to her own recent arrival. Despite her smaller frame suggesting a child, she looked older when sitting, perhaps just past her majority.

Her mention of the Maiden betrayed knowledge of the Seven, which weren’t even the Gods worshiped in the North, indicating she had at least a basic formal education – maybe a lesser noble house? Yet no Lord, even of a lower rank, would permit his daughter to venture alone to the Wall in the middle of winter, no matter how proficient she was with a bow. Her actions and blunt manner of speech certainly didn’t match with any noblewoman he’d ever met.

Nay, this girl seemed more than half wild.

Suddenly, she looked up and he was staring into her eyes, getting lost in pools of grey. For a second,
he forgot to breathe.

Then the moment was over, as she raised her arm and threw the small knife she had been using across the room, where it landed in the wooden frame of the doorway, less than a hand from Oswell's head. A crash sounded as Oswell dropped the wood he had been carrying, going to pull his own knife before a wave of unrestrained joyful laughter burst into the air. Rhaegar whipped his head back to the girl as she continued in her mirth, her head tilted back as she laughed.

Rising quickly to help Oswell, he noticed the man letting out a strained chuckle as he stooped to pick up the wood. The girl had quieted by the time they moved the wood to the small pile in one of the corners, and Arthur had returned with their saddlebags. He bore a neutral mask on his face though his eyes betrayed his curiosity.

"Don't worry Ser," the girl began, addressing Oswell. "If I had wanted to hit you, the knife wouldn't have lodged in the doorway. It's good to see your reflexes are quick." At that, she flashed Oswell a pretty grin, her eyes crinkling with amusement. If his heart hadn’t still been residing in his throat, Rhaegar was sure he would find the smile endearing.

Oswell, bless the man's dark humor, found the situation amusing, as he chuckled again and dropped to sit down an arms length from the direwolf.

"Should have known it would be a wild Northern girl to fall in love with me at first sight."

Arthur scoffed, speaking for the first time. "If only every girl showed their affection so overtly."

The tension eased, as the girl returned to adjusting the tin pan over the flames of the fire, the smell of fresh elk filling the room.

Rhaegar raised a questioning eyebrow as the three men exchanged a look. Arthur shrugged and set about pulling out some of the provisions they had brought from Castle Black, while Oswell gave a devilish grin before turning to watch the direwolf and the cooking girl. Rhaegar sighed, wondering how he managed to befriend men with such strange senses of humor. He rolled back his shoulders before stalking to the window to look over the remains of the Queensgate castle. Dark clouds were rolling in across an already dark sky, signifying more snow was on its way.

He could hear Oswell questioning the girl on the direwolf, her answers short but sufficient. The conversation only peaked Arthur’s interest when she mentioned the pet’s name was Nymeria, after
the warrior queen of Dorne, Arthur’s home country.

His mind followed bits and pieces of the conversation as he watched the clouds move towards them, his mood darkening with the sky. Somehow, the girl managed to get both men telling stories of Dorne. While he trusted Oswell and Arthur not to not provide too many hints as to their identities, he was modestly impressed that the girl had guided them to topics outside of herself.

*Clever. She doesn’t want us to know much about her either.*

Lightning flashed in the distance as the girl muttered something about brooding being poor for one’s health, causing both of his friends to laugh.

Thunder sounded in the distance and the direwolf let out a howl.

*So much for seeking peace and quiet.*

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**Lyanna**

*Bran would die if he knew about this.*

The thought made her smile.

*I ought to tell him. Nothing like the sleep of the dead to stop the bloody fool from dishonoring the family. No more bastard children would show up if he were dead.*
Alas, Bran was the one who understood her best. Yes, Benjen was her partner in crime - only a year apart, with both older brothers sent away to foster for so many years, how could they not be. But it was Bran who knew her on a fundamental level.

He was also the one who had introduced her to Queensgate, back on her ninth nameday when they had snuck out of Castle Black during one of Father’s visits. They’d been found after three days and Father had been furious, ranting about how they would get themselves killed and punishing them with no riding for a fortnight. Nevertheless, still giddy from their adventure and quite pleased with their ability to survive for three days alone, the two of them had whispered and giggled the whole ride back to Winterfell. They vowed to come back, though only Lyanna was ever able to fulfill this vow. The place always reminded her of Bran, especially the first few times she returned – it helped ease the edge of his absence and took her mind off of her ever-expanding responsibilities at home.

It had taken much cajoling, but Father had finally allowed it, as long as she brought a sufficient number of guards. Since the Night’s Watch had long abandoned the castle, Father had cleared her ability to make small restorations with the Lord Commander, and in this regard, the guards were incredibly useful.

During the last summer, Lyanna had made the journey thrice, spending more than two moons restoring the main tower and other parts of the broken down keep.

Since winter had returned, she had managed to convince the guards, all four of whom were comfortable with the harsh riding pace she set, to remain in Mole’s Town for the duration of her stays. They were far easier to convince than Father – what man wouldn’t prefer an inn bed with a whore to a straw pallet in a half-destroyed castle.

Seven years later, this was the first time she’d escaped with no guards at all. It felt fitting to celebrate reaching her majority here, alone. A little rebellion, a taste of freedom before the life of duty she was about to live, dominated by men.

So, of course, this also happened to be the first time she had ever encountered anyone else in the keep besides herself or her guards.

_The Gods must be getting a laugh out of this – I finally escape alone as if there is no danger, and strange and dangerous men just happen to arrive my first night._

These men weren’t too bad, to be fair. Obviously they had given fake names, though she had expected nothing less. The big one with the plain face, going by Walt, seemed like a good fellow and Nymeria liked him – he had a dark sense of humor and was much quicker to laugh than his
companions.

The other two were more difficult to read. Both were objectively attractive with serious faces, though the one with the short blonde hair was easier to engage. Maron, as he’d named himself, was clearly trying to hide the beautiful greatsword Lyanna had noticed strapped across his back. Lyanna would take a well-crafted weapon over a thousand pieces of jewelry any day, and since she’d snuck into the blacksmith’s more times than she could count – she knew a rare weapon when she saw one.

The third man was the most difficult. Unlike Maron, who was traditionally handsome, Jay could be called beautiful, with his striking features and black hair. In the light of the fire, she could see thin strands of grey in his hair and his eyes were almost black – if they had any color to them, she couldn’t see in the darkness. His demeanor added to his mystique, a sadness shining in his eyes, his stiff posture weighed down by a heaviness she couldn’t understand.

He seemed to be the leader of their little group, and largely remained removed from their conversation. Lyanna didn’t mind, the other two were amusing enough. If he wanted to be aloof, it was no concern of hers.

Overall, she wasn’t displeased the men had shown up. Lyanna had always preferred the company of men, though she had never really had many female companions to begin with. Other than her two handmaidens, her old nurse Old Nan and Sella, Lyanna spent most of her time with men. After the disastrous experience with that awful Southron widow, Father had given up on the idea of crafting her into the perfect Court Lady. Lyanna knew dancing and ladies’ arts well enough - her high energy was just much better suited to riding and weapons training. Moreover, there was something simpler about male companionship, their minds generally focused singularly on weapons and war, and the occasional woman.

Her new companions were veritable proof of this, at least Walt and Maron - Jay had barely spoken since their initial interaction. The evening passed easily as she pressed the two knights for stories of the South, particularly about Dorne. Lyanna had always enjoyed hearing about the Dornish, where women were considered equals to men. She had even named Nymeria after the great Dornish queen who had conquered Dorne and founded the Martell line. There had been times Lyanna had even dreamed of running off to Dorne.

She thought Maron, with his slightly tanned skin, might be part Dornish, but since she’d never seen a Dornish man, she had no point of reference.

Eventually, fatigue began pulling her towards her furs. Brandon had only given her a fortnight away; she couldn’t afford to spend a full week on the road, so she’d ridden hard for four days to get to Queensgate from Winterfell, sleeping only a few hours each night with periodic breaks during the day. She had even brought her palfrey along in addition to Silverwing, in order to alternate horses,
both giving Silverwing longer rests and making better time.

The ride today had taken longer than expected after Nymeria had killed the elk. While Lyanna was grateful for the fresh meat, it had meant taking the time to at least partially break down the beast, to salvage as much as she could carry. Nymeria had also sustained a long but shallow cut on her front leg, likely from the elk’s antler, slowing their progress.

It had also been the first time she’d purposefully moved into Silverwing’s mind, an impulsive attempt in the frenzy of the men’s surprise appearance to determine if there were more of them. Slipping into her animals’ minds had been happening for some time without her control, primarily with Nymeria in her dreams, but Lyanna hadn’t heard anything else from Maester Aemon on the dreams. She refused to be scared of the ability anymore, though despite lasting no more than a second, the action had sucked away any remaining energy she had.

At the soonest break in conversation, she stoked the fire before sliding back to her furs, removing her boots and pulling out an extra pair of socks.

Understanding the implicit suggestion that she was planning to retire, Walt moved to set up their pallets while Maron looked to be preparing for a watch. Jay remained at the window, where he had spent much of the evening, watching the snow as it started to fall. He was so still, had his eyes not been open, Lyanna would have thought he was asleep.

*How can he just stand there for so long? Doesn’t he get tired or bored?*

Shrugging, she turned back to Maron, “You don’t have to stand watch, you know.”

At this, all three men turned to her curiously, though it was Maron who responded.

“What do you mean?”

She chuckled, “You do know there is an ice wall about seven hundred feet tall right next to us? Or are you worried about attacks from south?”

Walt was the one to follow up this time, “What about wildlings?”
She scoffed, “They’d be idiots to scale the Wall in the middle of this storm. It’s dangerous enough as it is without the howling wind and horrible visibility. In any case, they’re unlikely to scale it this close to Castle Black - there are plenty of other abandoned keeps between here and the Shadow Tower.”

The men looked at her curiously and she realized she’d revealed quite a bit of knowledge of the Wall’s defenses. More than the average person might know.

To throw them off, she smirked, “The free folk aren’t stupid, despite what kneelers say.”

Lyanna had once spent a few afternoons with a wildling woman who was being held at Winterfell after being captured south of the Wall, so she knew enough about their figures of speech and beliefs to fool the average man. These Southrons would likely not know what to think. The idea of being confused with a wildling was oddly pleasing.

Before they could question her further, she decided to put any ideas of standing watch to rest.

“Besides, Nymeria will stand watch. Her senses are not only better than yours, but she doesn’t have all those,” she waved at the heavy cloaks the men were wearing, “extra layers of fur to bog her down. You could be the best knights in the blood Seven Kingdoms and she’d beat you in a heartbeat.”

She smiled cheekily at Maron, who seemed to be about to about to protest, “Even with that pretty greatsword you’re trying to hide.”

The room was silent for a moment, though Lyanna didn’t understand the tension. She was giving them the chance to sleep. Were they that worried she would kill them in their sleep?

Maron decided to agree, either hoping to avoid a confrontation or accepting what she said. The tension eased somewhat as she smiled.

“Look at it this way, you have a few days of rest before you go to find, what was it, “wild adventures in the snow”?"

Walt chuckled at her reference while Maron just glanced at Jay. The silent man just looked at her with a neutral mask, his eyes boring into her. She shot him an innocent smile before she nestled into
her furs, allowing Nymeria to curl up around her back, the direwolf’s eyes focused on the door.

She heard the men speaking in low voices as they shifted around, but she trusted Nymeria. And for some reason, she felt at ease with the men - something else Bran would obviously find appalling.

*Sleeping in an abandoned castle with three unknown Southron men. My, what a scandal that would create.*

Smiling, with images of riding through the fresh snow at dawn flashing through her mind, Lyanna settled into sleep, her dreams mercifully harmless.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this was how it all started! This Rhaegar POV was the first chapter I ever wrote, and my goodness the story has expanded since then!

One note - Rhaegar views his fake name as "Jae" because it's short for Jaehaerys. Lyanna obviously doesn't know that, so she just thinks it's Jay. Not a typo :)

Hope ya'll enjoy it, as these are some of my favorite POVs that I've written. Looking forward to sharing the rest of the story this leads to!
Reflections and Swordplay

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Sorry for the delay, but thank you so much again for all the supportive comments! Really love seeing people engaged in the story!

As a note, I'm planning on keeping to an update a week (likely the weekend) going forward - I just started studying for the GMAT and got staffed on a huge deal at work, so I will have to be a bit selective in my writing time. But fear not, I have a LOT outlined/written, and I might get lucky and be able to post more than that :)  

Arthur POV here, but plenty of RxL (even if they don't know it!) still coming up.

Arthur

Arthur woke up to grey post-dawn light streaming into the room, illuminating the smouldering fire and the two sleeping figures to his left.

The pallet on his right was empty, the girl’s furs piled haphazardly.

She was gone.

He sat up, glancing around the room for signs of their mysterious host or her large direwolf.

The girl’s packs remained, the only indication that she was, in fact, real and hadn’t left completely.

The fact that she had left that morning without waking any of them was disconcerting. Arthur was not used to having potential threats slide past him unnoticed, and he wasn’t sure whether the girl wasn’t in fact a threat.

She’d certainly seemed dangerous enough the night before, with an arrow aimed straight at the
Crown Prince’s chest.

Wouldn’t that be ironic - if, despite the presence of two Kingsguard, Rhaegar Targaryen, the Silver Prince, died by an arrow to the chest from some unknown Northern girl, in an abandoned castle on the Wall.

That thought ensured he wouldn’t find sleep again, so he stood to grab a few more pieces of wood for the fire, slowly stoking it back to life. As he was working, he glanced over at his best friend.

Arthur had known Rhaegar for more than ten years, since they were boys, and the Prince had never been a good sleeper. Initially it was books that kept him up, reading late into the night. Then it had been his responsibilities as Crown Prince.

Since Duskendale, those duties had multiplied as Rhaegar took on those issues Aerys deemed beneath the King. Rhaegar was one of the only people capable of walking Aerys back from his moments of madness, though even he failed more often than not.

Arthur saw the way those moments of failure weighed upon Rhaegar’s soul, with every ‘criminal’ that burned on King Aerys’ pyre of wildfire.

All of that meant that Rhaegar hardly slept more than a few hours each night. Even the trip north hadn’t provided the Prince with an escape.

Finally seeing Rhaegar sleeping peacefully on the floor of the abandoned Queensgate tower, Arthur was silently thankful to Maester Aemon for forcing Rhaegar to take a break from the scrolls which lay in the crypts of Castle Black. The Prince needed the rest.

All of them knew this sojourn in the North wouldn’t last much longer, and while no one was looking forward to returning to the hellhole that was King’s Landing, Rhaegar carried the greatest burden.

Aerys’ whispers about his treasonous son planning to unseat him were no longer far from the truth.

We’ve only delayed the inevitable with this trip. The guilt will consume Rhaegar if we don’t make a move soon.
The fire quietly burning once more, Arthur moved to the window, not wishing to disturb either of his friends.

It had snowed during the night and the ruins of the inner castle were cloaked in a fresh layer of pristine white powder. He could faintly make out the tracks the girl must have left when she rode out.

If Arthur made only the slightest adjustment in his imagination, the snow could very well be the endless sand of Dorne, dunes spanning the distance to the Red Mountains. Instead of the cold shimmer of icy moisture, Arthur could see the roiling heat glimmer off of the earth. It had been a long time since he’d seen the sloping deserts of Dorne, even longer since he’d visited Starfall, the ancestral home of the Dayne family.

As he stared out into the snowy expanse, dreaming of his childhood home at the mouth of the Torentine, his mind drifted to his sister Ashara, who he had left in King’s Landing.

Having his sister in King’s Landing had been a mixed blessing - he loved Ashara and enjoyed having her close, but Court was not a safe place for a young maiden. Not that Ashara was some innocent. Quite the opposite, to Arthur’s chagrin. In fact, Ashara had taken to Court like a fish to water, swimming easily through the various courtiers and quickly establishing herself as a quick learner and perceptive player in the game that was Court life.

In spite of his assurance that Ashara could take care of herself, it still made Arthur uncomfortable to see the way men stared at her, lusted after her body and sought to use her for their pleasure. And she was wilful, laughing at his stress and worry.

Between her and Rhaegar, he swore those closest to him were determined to send him to an early grave.

Perhaps they were in on it together. After all, both of them could be devious - Ashara more overtly so, but it was one of Rhaegar’s hidden talents, a wily mind which could play politics with a calm cruelty. Though an infrequent occurrence, it was one of the more unsettling sides of Rhaegar, a trait developed due to a life at Court with a man like Aerys Targaryen as a father.

The declining mental stability of the King had an effect on all around him, none more than his closest family. Though Arthur knew Rhaella was stronger than she let on, she nonetheless withered in Aerys’ presence, and Rhaegar was either wracked by guilt and responsibility or descending into his own personal madness. The damn prophecy was as much an escape from reality for the Prince as anything else.
Aerys Targaryen even made Arthur question his morals and duty.

Aerys’ sanity had an impact on many of the Kingsguard. They were sworn to protect him, to stand by his decisions and to do as he bid without question. But how does one reconcile one’s commitment as a knight to honor and protection of the weak when one’s duty requires passive, or even active, participation in atrocities?

Arthur had never questioned his commitment to the Kingsguard. As the second son of House Dayne who had taken to the sword as soon as he could walk, Arthur had found purpose serving the royal family. With his best friend set to be King one day, accepting a spot in the revered Kingsguard had been a natural fit. That he was virtually regarded as Rhaegar’s personal Kingsguard granted him the gift of spending his days guarding the man he considered his brother.

He had been granted the legendary title carried by exceptional swordsmen of House Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, with whispers saying he was the greatest swordsman of the time. They spoke of his purity, of his integrity, of his greatness.

Yet he could not protect the Queen from her husband, nor save the innocents from the pyre.

He could train everyday and still fail to protect Rhaegar one day. He was only a man.


The floorboard outside of the door creaked, just as it had last night upon their arrival, fracturing his thoughts. He tensed, aware of the fact that it would take a few steps to move to protect the Prince. He glanced over, expecting the Northern girl to waltz in.

Instead, it was her black direwolf that made its way within.

Nymeria, he recalled, for the Dornish warrior queen.

Not surprising for a wild girl who wields bow and arrow like she knows how to kill. The girl clearly drew inspiration from the legendary Dornish woman.
The direwolf padded into the room to settle onto the girl’s pallet, her eyes never leaving Arthur’s figure.

Something in the direwolf’s eyes seemed human, too knowledgeable for his comfort.

They reminded him of the girl’s sharp eyes which seemed to notice far too much. She’d noticed Dawn, the Dayne ancestral sword granted to those deemed worthy of the Sword of the Morning title, though she had thankfully yet to recognize it by name. She’d also clearly realized he and Oswell served Rhaegar in some capacity.

*She catches quite a lot, that damn girl.*

She had asked for their "fake names," knowing they wouldn’t give their real ones. And she had been delighted by the prospect of simply going by “girl,” though she didn’t explain why. It was easy enough, ambiguous, so they had accepted it.

Oswell seemed to have warmed up to her quickly, sharing veiled japes with dueling morbid senses of humor. Rhaegar had been neutral, sinking into melancholy shortly upon arrival and barely speaking at all after their initial interaction with the girl.

Arthur was torn. He didn't trust her - her eyes shone with too much mischief for him to trust her - but her quick wit did make for entertaining company. One couldn't deny that she was rather intelligent and knew an awful lot about the North, the Wall, and what lay beyond.

Her education spoke of noble birth, but her actions and appearance spoke to the contrary - Dorne had plenty of strong-willed women, but he couldn’t imagine them running off completely alone, particularly not true-born nobility. In any case, the only noble house less than a week’s easy ride away was Last Hearth, and last Arthur heard, the only daughter of House Umber had been stolen away by wildlings ten years prior. Of course the girl’s horses were far too well-bred for a commoner, but if wildlings could steal the daughter of a noble house, they could steal horses. Her being a wildling would explain her presence in an abandoned castle along the Wall, taking shelter in an area rarely patrolled by the Night’s Watch in the middle of winter. But something told him that wasn’t the case.

She was a study of contradictions, which ultimately, made her impossible to read.
Rhaegar stirred awake behind him, stretching before sitting up. Arthur briefly wondered when his friend had last gotten a full night sleep.

The Prince frowned when he noticed that only the direwolf occupied the furs opposite him.

“Where is she?”

Arthur shrugged, turning to glance outside before making his way back to sit next to his friend, “She’s gone - must have ridden out at dawn.”

Rhaegar frowned deeper, “I didn’t hear her at all.”

“None of us did.”

The thought clearly didn’t sit well with the Prince either. Both Rhaegar and Arthur were remarkably light sleepers when on the road - one by nature and one by trade. That the girl had left without either of them noticing was highly unusual.

Oswell slept like a rock, though he rarely showed his fatigue when awake. Perhaps it was a gift, to be able to commit so fully to each activity.

“Well, she must be returning if the direwolf is still here.”

“Aye, and her other horse is still in the stables.”

Rhaegar glanced at the direwolf, which continued to watch them lazily. She seemed docile enough at the moment. Arthur wasn’t sure he wanted to find out what she might do should she decide they were not friends.

“Do you think she is here to protect us or to keep an eye on us?” asked Arthur curiously.

The Prince shrugged, “It could be both. We know next to nothing about the girl. The wolf does seem quite perceptive. Likely the girl commanded her to remain behind.”
Arthur nodded, having noted the same thing earlier. The bond between direwolf and girl seemed remarkably strong. At times last night, it had almost seemed like they moved in sync, a continuation of one another.

As they watched, the direwolf got up gracefully and then moved to lick Oswell’s forehead, waking the man with a start. Shocked out of sleep, Oswell flailed and grabbed a knife from under his furs, moving into a low crouch, ready for an attack.

But the direwolf was already well out of range. Arthur could tell he wasn’t the only one to note the impossibly quick movement of the direwolf, despite her size.

Arthur smirked at Oswell, as the direwolf watched them, “Apparently, Nymeria has decided it is time for you to wake up, lazy bones.”

Oswell just laughed as he returned the knife into its sheath. With the knife away, Nymeria approached him again, sitting next to Oswell and allowing him to pet her.

Rhaegar raised his eyebrows, as he watched, “Looks like you’ve made a friend.”

Oswell smiled while looking at the wolf, “Better to befriend her than make an enemy of her. Beautiful but dangerous creature…”

“Do you speak of the direwolf or the mistress?” Arthur asked dryly.

Oswell chuckled, “Both frankly. You both have eyes, I’m sure you could see the girl isn’t plain. In truth, it’s almost like they are the same person, just in human and wolf form.”

Rhaegar and Arthur both stared at their companion. Of their friends, Oswell tended to be the least perceptive. Not for lack of intelligence, he just usually found such things boring. He was a man of action, not of subtlety.

That he had noted the subtle similarities between girl and direwolf was surprising.
Oswell continued, having pulled on his boots, “You don’t think she knows who we are, do you?”

“No, though I’m not sure how she knew you were with us last night,” Arthur shook his head, turning to Rhaegar, “do you think she knows?”

“No, but sometimes I wish your blasted sword wasn’t so recognizable.”

Oswell chuckled as Arthur smirked, “My apologies, it’s sometimes difficult being so legendary.”

As they broke their fast on oatcakes brought from Castle Black, Arthur decided to broach the key question of the morning, “So, what should we do? Stay?”

Oswell laughed, “Are you scared of a little girl and her pet wolf?”

“Not at all, I just know the point of this was to find peace and quiet.”

“The girl seems perfectly peaceful to me.”

“My my, Os, have you taken a liking to the little wildling?” Arthur teased back dryly.

“Enough,” came the Prince’s voice, prompting both Kingsguard to turn to him, “seeing as we’ve made it through the night, I see no harm in staying for a few more days. The keep is in better condition than expected, and the girl will clearly not be a burden seeing as she’s already providing more for us than we are for her.”

“As she said last night,” Oswell recalled, “if she wanted us dead, I think we would be.”

“Apologies,” Arthur drawled, “but I’m not sure that fact comforts me in the slightest.”

“You worry too much, Dayne. In any case, we’ve spent almost three moons exclusively in the company of men, it could be good to differentiate.”
“Not that this girl acts one bit like a lady…”

Rhaegar sighed at their bickering and moved to stand, grabbing his sword, “Come on you two, I’ve spent two moons in a library and was almost killed last night by a wild girl who can’t be older than sixteen. Let’s see if you picked up anything from the Night’s Watch while I drowned in scrolls.”

It took them some time to clear enough snow from the courtyard to spar, and they were all sweating slightly under their furs by the time they were ready. Arthur realized why Northerners were such fierce warriors - working out made the conditions much more bearable.

Nymeria must have initially mistaken their movements to be playing in the snow, as she jumped through the snow banks around the courtyard. It was amusing watching the direwolf, which could look so fearsome, prance around playfully.

Eventually, she understood they meant business when Arthur and Rhaegar drew their swords, and the direwolf promptly padded over to the side of the courtyard where she lay down, intelligent eyes watching them.

They took turns alternating, each used to the moves and defenses of the other two. Arthur and Oswell had spent the last moons training in the snowy courtyard of Castle Black, so they were used to the varying conditions. Rhaegar, on the other hand, was having to adapt his movement to the unfamiliar surface, accumulating a few more bruises than usual.

Oswell and Rhaegar were in the middle of a spar when Nymeria suddenly stood and bounded towards the entrance of the courtyard to let out a ferocious growl, hackles raised, staring out towards the snowy banks.

Recognizing a defensive stance when he saw one, Arthur moved effortlessly into the space between the entrance and the Prince, unsheathing Dawn in a single motion. Instinct told him Oswell would cover Rhaegar from any attacks from behind.

In an instant, a flash of gray shot out of the mound of snow at the entrance to the courtyard, flying at the black direwolf. All three men tensed watching the ensuing battle, slightly taken aback by the appearance of yet another direwolf.

*So much for the girl’s promise of safety last night...*
Growls and yelps filtered into the air as the two beasts rolled in the snow, nipping at each other with paws lashing out.

Temporarily distracted by the seemingly vicious fight between the two huge mythical creatures, Arthur almost missed as another gray shape materialized at full speed.

The girl started laughing as she swung down gracefully, the horse yet to come to a complete halt, her wild hair framing a pale face and steel gray eyes flashing with joy. She cast a quick nod at the three knights, barely acknowledging their battle-ready stances before striding towards the two direwolves, who continued to roll in the snow - though with significantly less passion than before.

Her laughter died down to a mere chuckle and the girl addressed the combative creatures, "Tor, stop that at once." Her grin grew, as she questioned the gray direwolf sarcastically, "What kind of gentleman are you, to take a lady by surprise?"

In response, the newcomer presumably named Tor, disengaged from Nymeria, letting out a huff of breath that almost seemed a snort.

Seemingly satisfied, the girl walked to pet both animals, proceeding to tell them to rest during the day. When the two wolves turned to pad away towards the tower, the girl walked back to her horse, taking in the defensive stance Arthur and his companions continued to exhibit as she efficiently removed the horse's saddle.

Arthur felt Oswell relax at his side, though one glance at his friends revealed only one was wearing a smile. Rhaegar had adopted that unreadable mask he used when he didn't know how exactly to respond to a situation.

Laughing again, the girl explained loudly as she switched the horse’s saddle with a large blanket, “Tor is Nymeria’s brother – I found them as pups not far from here and have raised them since. He must not have enjoyed being left behind. They’re both harmless as long as they don’t feel threatened.”

Arthur didn’t like the implication of that last sentence.

Two bloody direwolves, which haven’t been seen this far south in centuries. There’s no way this woman could be nobility - the direwolf is the sigil of House Stark, they certainly would be the ones to have them, and there hasn’t been a single word about them even being aware of live direwolves.
The girl smiled having shooed the beautiful grey horse towards the stables, and then moved to plop down on an old crate and gesturing towards their weapons, “Please, don’t stop on my account – I’m quite curious to see the prowess of Southron knights on display.”

Quickly, Arthur sheathed Dawn, conscious of her eyes watching him. Though he had settled somewhat on the idea of her being a wildling who chose to stay on this side of the Wall, he didn’t want to risk her recognizing the rare sword. He’d have to switch over to the plain sword he’d taken to using at Castle Black.

As Oswell and Rhaegar took their places to resume their earlier match, Arthur went back into the tower to grab the other sword. Upon returning to the courtyard, he took a seat on another overturned crate next to the girl. She seemed completely enraptured by the movements of his friends, caught in the intricate dance of swordplay.

Now in the grey light of day, with her attention drawn elsewhere, Arthur was able to get a real look at her.

Oswell was right when he said she wasn’t plain. Her beauty wasn’t like that of the Southern court, where women wore gowns of embroidered silk, with plunging necklines and tiny corseted waists. There, women like Rhaella Targaryen reigned supreme through subtle courtly manners, their traditional beauty paraded and lauded with gems and jewels.

No, that was not this girl. With her long face and high cheekbones framed by strands of wavy dark hair that had escaped her long braid, she was quite beautiful, in an icy and wild way. Harsher lines, starker contrasts. Like the rest of the North.

He’d never met a wildling, but this girl certainly seemed close enough to his mind’s image of one, with her dirty furs and well-worn winter clothes. Arthur wasn’t sure he could even imagine her wearing a dress - she seemed exceptionally beholden to practicality.

Then again, they had yet to meet many Northern women at all. Perhaps they were all this savage.

The sound of steel on steel paused as Rhaegar finally found an opening, forcing Oswell to yield. As the spar ended, the girl turned to Arthur, and spoke loud enough for all of them to hear.
“Are you up next, or do you intend to stare at me for a bit longer?”

Oswell full on laughed at the comment, which even brought a smile to Rhaegar’s face.

Having more than a little bit of experience with verbal sparring courtesy of Ashara, Arthur knew his only advantage was to advance the subject - retreating would only spur her on.

“Perhaps I saw something I liked, and couldn’t help myself,” he responded, keeping his voice flat.

She raised her eyebrow mockingly, but he saw the blush color her cheeks, so he knew he had taken her by surprise. Pressing his advantage, he stood and grabbed his sword, glancing at her as he continued.

“Or do you just wish for me to spar next, so that you have a reason to stare yourself?”

Now the girl definitely blushed; to her credit, though, her recovery was swift.

“Oh, please, do, I have been waiting my whole lonely life for the opportunity to blatantly stare at men such as you. Though if you were true Northerners, this would be much more entertaining.”

“And why is that?” he asked, as he moved to trade places with Oswell - the man had gone three rounds in a row and was due for a break.

The girl shrugged before leaning back, her arms braced on the back edge of the crate. Her voice had returned to nonchalance as she responded, “In this weather, most Northerners would already be shirtless after such exertion.”

Arthur couldn’t help but chuckle at that. Rhaegar rolled his eyes at the comment as they took their places to begin.

“Sorry to disappoint you, my Lady,” he teased, though the comment was partially to see her response to the title.
As expected, she scoffed and rolled her eyes, “I’m no Lady.”

Content with that, Arthur flashed his best friend a grin, just as Oswell called out for them to begin.
Brandon

Brandon already missed Lya.

Or more precisely, he was silently cursing Lya for leaving him in charge.

It had only been a few days and Brandon desperately wanted to escape, to run off into town where ale and whores awaited. But every time he had tried to run off, Benjen had been there informing him of matters they needed to handle.

Eventually Brandon had asked why he needed to do all of this, or more specifically, weren’t there other people who could do it.

“Aren’t some of these things managed by Walys?”

Benjen scoffed, “The Maester is a Southron fool, you should see the way he tries to belittle Lya. Not even Father trusts him with most things.”

“But Father knows how to do all of this.”

“You should know how to do it too. And you will. I’ll help you until Lya gets back, but after that, you really should have her teach you.”

Brandon rolled his eyes, despite his recognition that the idea was a sound one. If he had gained anything in the last few days, it was a profound new appreciation for his sister - Lya clearly knew what she was doing, given Winterfell hadn’t fallen into disarray over the past moons.
Just five days with Brandon, and things already seemed to be bumpy.

“You can’t run away forever, Bran,” his youngest brother continued, “Lya’s been saying it for years but you never listen. Don’t ruin everything Father and Lya have spent years accomplishing.”

“When did you get so wise little brother?”

“When I realized one of us brothers needed to understand Winterfell for when Lya leaves. Honestly, I would not begrudge Father if he decided to skip us all and give it to her so that she doesn’t have to marry.”

Brandon rolled his eyes, knowing that scenario would never actually happen, “She’ll certainly drive a Southron man to an early grave if Father sends her South. But even if she got Winterfell, she’d have to marry, and then some non-Stark man would be running Winterfell. She’d hate that even more.”

“Aye,” Benjen shrugged, “I suppose you are the lesser of two evils.”

Brandon glowered at his younger brother, who had walked out to go speak with the housekeeper. Thankfully, Ben had offered to work with Sella directly - Brandon couldn’t handle all of Lya’s normal duties around the keep as the Lady of Winterfell on top of acting as Lord of Winterfell for Father.

In truth, he understood his siblings dislike of Maester Walys. The man had a dishonest quality to him, though it was quite possible that Brandon automatically viewed him as untrustworthy given his Southron origin. Despite spending time down in the South, Brandon remained a Northerner in his views on the rest of the Seven Kingdoms, seeing Southrons as power-hungry fools who preferred lies and plots to honor and honesty.

Frankly, the only things Brandon enjoyed about Southrons were their wine and whores - most Northerners were too stuck on duty and honor to look fondly on bastardy, so whoring was not nearly as prevalent. That was what made Lya’s actions regarding Brandon’s supposed bastard fortunate. Not only would Father be furious - Brandon wasn’t stupid enough to think his father would never find out, it was merely a matter of managing that ire once it appeared - it would also certainly lead to several Northern lords questioning Brandon’s honor.
In any case, Walys had attempted to speak with Brandon the moment Lya was outside of Winterfell’s walls. The siblings had not informed Walys of Lya’s true plan to go to Queensgate, but Walys seemed aware that she was not simply going on an extended hunt. Not that the Maester would be any happier had it truly been a hunt - the man had made his views on Lya’s more male-dominated interests quite clear over the years. The Maester made his displeasure at her willful journey blatant, going so far as to say that she was taking advantage of Father’s trust in her and that Lord Rickard would be incredibly disappointed in her for shirking her duty when he had granted her so much.

It was clear Walys thought Brandon should be serving in Father’s stead instead of Lya, even going so far as to suggest he remain the acting Lord of Winterfell upon her return. Of course, Walys was also keenly aware of Brandon’s deficiencies; the unspoken message was that Brandon would run Winterfell with Walys’ guidance.

If the first few days of Lya’s absence were any indication, that guidance would have to be significant.

Frankly, Brandon had zero interest in involving himself in Maester Walys’ power struggle with his sister - Lya was clearly winning, having gained Father’s respect and trust. It was making Walys sloppy in his maneuvering. Brandon had little interest in running Winterfell when he needn’t, and even less interest in taking the Maester’s side against his little sister. Brandon couldn’t imagine why Walys would even try to use him, as they had barely interacted in the years since the Maester arrived at Winterfell.

*Walys is an idiot to try to beat Lya. The girl is as stubborn as an ox and equally ruthless. I’m surprised she hasn’t kicked him out of Winterfell by now.*

Benjen was a great help though, and kept reminding Brandon it was only a fortnight.

*Aye, who would have thought a fortnight would seem so painfully long.*

Fortunately, the issues arising the first few days had been relatively minor.

It wasn’t until the fifth day after Lya’s departure that the cracks in Brandon’s capabilities started to show, when Beron Glover, the old Lord of Deepwood Motte, arrived with a small contingency of men, all exhausted from the journey through the Wolfswood in a storm that’d hit Winterfell’s surroundings over the last few days.
Benjen had greeted them at the gate since Brandon was taking petitions in the Great Hall. Apparently in no mood to delay, Lord Glover had immediately come to the hall and had demanded precedence be given to his case due to his nobility. The man then stood there demanding supplies from Winterfell, requiring them with haste, mentioning something about getting his due after providing so much timber for Lord Stark’s trading request, though Brandon had no idea to which trading request he referred. Brandon had asked a few probing questions, trying to determine exactly why the lord thought he could be so demanding, eventually asking outright.

“And why should we provide such a quantity of supplies on such short notice?”

Lord Glover’s face had slowly grown redder and redder with each question, and it was clear the man was pissed off with this final question.

“Because, my Lord, it is the Warden of the North’s duty to care for his bannermen.”

“Aye, but it is your responsibility as a Lord to ensure you have sufficient resources for the winter, is it not Lord Glover?”

“As I explained earlier, Lord Brandon,” the drop into familiarity by using Brandon’s first name was not lost on anyone in the room, “the extended nature of this winter has led to the depleted stores.”

“And as I just asked, is this not your responsibility to handle?” Brandon was getting impatient with this request - what exactly did Glover expect? That Winterfell would hand out supplies in the middle of winter? The man had probably miscalculated how much to store for the winter. This was not Brandon’s fault.

“Where is your sister? I’d speak with her.”

“Lyanna is not available, Lord Glover,” he ground out, feeling his fury start to surge. “If you would like to speak to the Stark serving in my father’s stead, you will speak with me.”

“You know nothing about running the North, boy. I told Rickard sending you boys off to foster was a bad idea. You’ve been spending too much time in the South.”

Brandon interrupted the man before he could continue, anger dripping from his words, “I fostered in Barrowtown, my Lord, which I can assure you is still in the North. If you’d like, my Lord,” he
sneered, “I can show you on the map?  Or perhaps Lord Dustin can provide you with his thoughts on the matter.”

Brandon could feel Benjen cringe next to him before finally interceding, “Lord Glover, perhaps I could make some suggestions?  I believe Lyanna had set aside some reserves for such concerns, and she documented the various figures from the trade deal with the Manderlys.  If you would be so kind, we can repair to Lord Stark’s solar to inspect the figures and any instructions she set aside in order to determine an appropriate amount.”

“Aye, that’ll suffice,” Lord Glover conceded while glaring at Brandon.

Benjen turned to Brandon, speaking quietly, “I believe that will be enough petitions for today, Bran.  We can handle the others on the morrow.”

“Fine, you tell them,” he growled and then he stormed out of the chamber, hearing the muted announcement Benjen made to the waiting petitioners.

He stalked back to his chambers, seething.

How could Lord Glover say such things?  He was the true Stark heir.  Brandon would be his liege lord.  And how could Lya set him up for this?  It was all her fault, if she hadn’t demanded being allowed to go to Queensgate, it would be her dealing with this mess.

Once in his room, he fumed several minutes more, pacing and swearing as his anger’s target fluctuated between the insolent Lord Glover and his selfish sister.

Finally, a knock came on the door, breaking through the silence.

“Who is it?” he snarled.

The door opened to reveal his youngest brother, whose face showed a mix of disappointment and frustration.

“Lord Glover has been dealt with.  He will stay a few nights to rest his men and wait out the storm,
before returning to Deepwood Motte with the supplies he requested. I ensured he received bread and salt in granting them guest right.”

“The ungrateful bastard, he had no right to speak to me that way,” he yelled.

“Brandon,” Benjen spoke to him as if he was a child, soft and quiet, “Lord Glover’s request was fairly standard.”

“Standard? How was I supposed to know that a request of this nature was standard?”

Brandon realized as soon as the words were out of his mouth the ridiculousness of the statement. His fourteen year old brother knew Lord Glover’s request was standard, and he wasn’t even going to inherit Winterfell.

Benjen must have seen the realization dawn on Brandon’s face, because he just sighed.

“He is a bannerman of House Stark. It is our responsibility to ensure he is able to feed his people through the harshest of winters. He wasn’t happy about the welcome he received, given he provided a good deal of the timber that was part of the first shipment to Essos through the trade deal Father and Lya arranged with the Manderlys. We will undoubtedly have to discuss ways of patching things up when either Father or Lya gets home. Perhaps you can offer to take his son as a squire - I think Lya said his name is Ethan and he’s around the right age, of course she would know better since she’s very knowledgeable about all the Northern “risks” within ten years of her...”

Brandon just looked at Benjen incredulously, “How do you know all of that?”

Benjen sighed again, “Brandon, do you know anything about the way Winterfell operates?”

“Of course I do!”

But Brandon knew the statement was false. Benjen certainly didn’t look like he believed it.

“So how do we manage stores of food?” questioned Benjen, “How do we determine the supplies that are distributed to Wintertown? When does a crime warrant your counsel and when can you
outsource justice to the constable of town? How do you know when -”

“Okay, okay, I get it Benjen!” Brandon yelled, throwing his hands up exasperatedly and resuming his pacing, “I don’t know any of those things.”

“No,” Benjen’s voice was flat as he spoke, “you don’t. Because you’ve been content to let Lya take over everything while you run off playing at being some great knight of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Brandon turned to his brother and growled, “If I do recall, Benjen, you too wish to be a great knight one day.”

Benjen furrowed his brows and shook his head, “Aye, but I’ll never forget my duty to my House. I hope to never put my personal pleasure over my responsibility to House Stark.”

“You’re young yet, Ben. Just give it a year or two. Or a woman or two.”

Benjen looked at him for a moment as if he were about to say something more, but chose instead to just sigh again.

“I’m tired Bran, I think it’s best we retire. I’ll have something brought up to you for dinner, as I imagine you’ll want to avoid the Glover party in the main hall this evening.”

“Fine, yes, that works. You may go. Anything else can be handled in the morning.”

Though Benjen merely shook his head at the dismissal, Brandon could see the disappointment in the little Stark’s eyes.

Brandon knew he wasn’t living up to his brother’s expectations. Benjen and Lya had practically hero worshipped him for years when they were children. Of course, Lya had learned all about Brandon’s true nature over the last few years as he let her take on the responsibilities that should have been his. It had all come to a head two years ago when she caught him sneaking back from Wintertown, reeking of alcohol and sex.

But his little brother hadn’t seen that side of Brandon - Benjen had seen Brandon as the warrior
brother who would take him hunting and beat him up with a sword.

As he sat in front of the fire of his chambers, Brandon considered what it would take to live up to the expectations his family had for him. The prodigal son for his father, the dedicated brother for his sister, the honorable knight for his brother. Maybe there was still hope for him - his family still seemed to have some.

Well, probably not Lya, who just thought he was a whoring fool.

In any case, he was definitely escaping Winterfell tomorrow, Benjen and duty be damned. He could get back on track as the Heir of Winterfell the following day. One day of drinking with friends wouldn’t be the end of the world.

Reassured that tomorrow would be better, Brandon collapsed into his bed, not even bothering to change his clothes.

He slept soundly, dreaming he was a wolf running through the snowy woods.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of a short chapter today, but figured we could check in on the Stark boys in Winterfell, sans Lya. There's some hope for Brandon yet (kind of)!

Next two POVs are already written - just doing final edits, so shouldn't be too long till posting :)

Thank you as always to everyone following this story, especially those commenting! Love hearing everyone's thoughts, as they sometimes help me think through any gaps in the story.
Rhaegar

He felt as if he were choking as he pushed open the door to the tower, unsure whether the flames at the edge of his vision were real or nightmare.

*Summerhall burning.*

Cold air slammed into his lungs as he stepped out of the tower into the dark night, numbing his mind.

The icy air put out the fires that burned behind his eyelids, the lingering images of his nightmare squashed by the chill. The taste of ash in his mouth was slowly replaced by the biting frost, the howl of the wind drowning the screams of men.

As he paused outside the door, feeling the frigid air flood his raw lungs, he glanced around the abandoned castle, blanketed in shadows. Grey clouds hid the glimmering stars, though the light of the moon was not completely extinguished.

His breathing calm once more, Rhaegar’s eyes fell on the wooden staircase winding its way up the Wall.

Unlike Castle Black, Queensgate had no winch elevator to carry one up to the top of the Wall. Instead, a smaller version of Castle Black’s switchback staircase was built into the ice, twining up the 700 foot monstrosity.

Deciding the exercise could help him return to sleep, his feet led him to begin the long climb up the
Wall.

His hand reached out to touch the ice as his long strides made quick work of the stairs. Even through the thick leather of his glove, he could feel the cold, a cold that seeped into his bones and caused a shiver to run down his spine.

His other hand reflexively tightened on the small satchel he’d grabbed in his exit from the tower. The bag contained a small traveling harp that he’d barely used during their time in the North, due to both lack of time and lack of inspiration. But tonight, his fingers itched to pluck the strings, to hear the sweet notes that brought him more joy than a sword ever would, even if the instrument might suffer due to the cold.

Oddly enough, the stairs seemed better maintained than the rest of the castle, though he supposed patrols along the Wall might restore these even if the castle was abandoned. The dulled moonlight provided enough illumination to see the steps clearly.

Yet, it was slow work, Rhaegar remaining cautious as he knew Arthur and Oswell would never forgive him for dying from a slip during an ill-advised climb up icy stairs in the middle of the night. Fortunately, the concentration required for the task kept his mind from wandering to the dark images that had haunted him on and off since that fateful day, ten years ago, when he’d first read the prophecy of the Prince that was Promised.

Instead, he allowed his thoughts to drift to lighter memories.

He thought of the first time he heard about the Wall and the North, sitting on his mother’s lap while his father weaved a tale of a far off land of ice and snow, where giants used to roam. He couldn’t have been much older than his little brother Viserys was now, five maybe. He had been enraptured by the idea of a world so different from the Red Keep and King’s Landing.

It sounded so… free.

At that time, his father had been no more than an overambitious, prideful young King. Rhaegar would sit, wide-eyed, as Aerys described the wondrous plans he had for the realm: a new city to replace the stinky King’s Landing, an underwater canal to allow the deserts to bloom in Dorne, and even a new Wall, hundreds of miles north of the one Rhaegar was ascending now.

It wasn’t until Rhaegar was older that he realized the real driving force behind any realistic
improvements around the realm was Tywin Lannister. But that was a different line of thinking all together.

Those moments of familial affection remained seared into his memory, a reminder of a time long gone when he had only wanted his father’s love. Rhaegar was not as instantly charismatic or gregarious as Aerys, a fact his father deeply resented during Rhaegar’s childhood. The King claimed Rhaegar was too bookish, and that he ought to focus on making friends and becoming a knight. The rare moments when Aerys had spent time with him were precious, something to hold onto when the King’s present madness became too much.

And while his parents’ marriage had never been a love match, they’d still held some degree of respect and affection back then. This was Rhaegar’s hope when it came to his marriage - a partnership of respect and maybe eventually some degree of affection.

Even the Crown Prince deserved some measure of hope.

So absorbed in his thoughts, watching his step and retaining his balance, he stumbled a little when the last step turned to give way to the wide walkway atop the Wall.

There were no torches here to light the walkway. He saw that there was still a warming shed a few paces down, built into the Wall years ago to protect the men of the Night’s Watch from the chill. The space was lost in shadows, the benches likely frozen with the braziers unlit.

He crossed the width of the walkway to the far side, gazing out into the grey expanse that was the Land Beyond the Wall. He wondered briefly about life there, among the freefolk, as the wildlings called themselves. His thoughts floated to the image of their mysterious hostess, who at times seemed like she herself could be one of the freefolk.

What did Arthur say again? That the girl could be a wildling, who just chose to not climb back over?

The image of her this morning filled his mind, brown hair curling around her delicate features as she fluidly dismounted from her gray charger, her bow hung casually over her shoulder. Arthur, who took his Kingsguard vows to an extreme, hardly noticing the many pretty faces of fair maidens of Court who glanced his way, had even remarked upon the wild beauty of the girl.

It was her eyes - a clear gray that lit up with life, a perfect reflection of the dynamic region she
embodied. They were eyes a man could lose himself in, the stormy gray rolling to engulf one’s soul.

Maybe that’s why wildling men steal Northern maidens. Those eyes...

Rhaegar flinched at the sound of something, or someone, moving behind him. All he had on him was a dagger tucked into his boot, his sword left in the tower. Tales of wildlings climbing the Wall and surprising unaware Night’s Watchmen came roaring back as he crouched to grab the knife.

A chuckle shattered the silence of the night, only just preceding the husky voice of the girl.

“And here I thought we were finally starting to become friends.”

He relaxed slightly at the tone in her voice, though he remained crouched, the dagger partially unsheathed.

The girl approached from the warming shed, where she must have been hidden by the shadows. Though much of her figure remained shadowed beneath her cloak, she had her empty hands raised in a peacemaking sign, an imitation of his gesture from the night before.

Frankly, he hadn’t even noticed she’d been gone from the tower - it seemed she was remarkably good at sneaking away without notice. Then again, he had been all but blinded by the remnants of his nightmare as he left the room they all shared.

She stopped an arm’s length away when he spoke.

“Are you alone?”

The girl raised an eyebrow, “Who would I be with?”

He sheathed the dagger, but tucked it into his breeches instead of back in his boot, standing to his full height. This close, he had to look down to see into her eyes; her head came to just under his chin.

He shrugged slightly, though his voice continued to be serious, “Other wildlings, perhaps.”
She smirked before turning to look out at the expanse he had been previously watching.

“No, I’m a lone wolf on this one.”

He knew there was more meaning behind that answer, but after a few seconds of thinking, he realized the words were too vague given his limited information on the girl. Silence descended as they both turned to look out over the Haunted Forest, the edge of the Frost Fang Mountains just barely visible in the low light.

Rhaegar felt her shift to look at him.

“What insane reason brought you up to the top of the Wall in the middle of the night? And with no light?”

He continued to look out, noting the subtle way the clouds rolled over the distant mountain peaks.

“I could ask you the same questions.”

“Only the first. I actually brought a light.”

He turned to her then, “You did?”

The girl just rolled her eyes, gesturing back towards the warming hut, “Obviously. I brought a torch up, just in case. What would happen if the moonlight disappeared and I was stuck up here?”

He hadn’t even thought about that.

“Did you not even think about that?”

Rhaegar shook his head sheepishly, “I was a bit distracted when I woke up and left the tower…”
She raised an eyebrow questioningly, “Bad dreams?”

Surprised again by her ability to read him, he nodded, “Not much of a sleeper, to be honest.”

The girl turned back to the expanse beyond the Wall, “That’s not good, sleep is important.”

He looked at her inquisitively. No one had ever responded to him that bluntly. Usually they wanted to soothe him, to relieve him of his worries, to scold him for not sleeping more. This girl simply told him it was unfortunate.

“Yes, it is...” he ventured, not really sure how to respond to such straightforward statements.

“I have crazy dreams too,” she continued nonchalantly, “though mine don’t really prevent me from sleeping. What did you dream about?”

Suddenly, he found himself telling her about his dreams while staring out into the darkness. Not only the one from tonight, but also those from the rest of their time in the North. With the images, he described his frustrations at feeling like there was something he was supposed to understand.

The girl just listened, nodding every once in a while to indicate she was still listening.

When he paused, having come to the end of his rant about vague interpretations, she began to speak.

She spoke of the North, not just the area south of the Wall but the whole region north of the Neck, including the Land Beyond the Wall, and how it was alive. She described the sense of mystical energy that pervaded everything. She told him of stories that were long thought to be old wives’ tales and how in the North, it was believed they still held a measure of truth. She explained how no one had seen a direwolf in centuries, yet she had found two pups in the snow not far from this spot. She said that not everything is what it seems.

He realized she spoke sometimes of the land as if there was no Wall, just the North, and then sometimes of the Wall, as if it was a wonderful land itself.
“In the North, we pray to the Old Gods, who are one with the land and nature. We cannot see what the Gods intend, and things often seem out of our control, but we have to trust ourselves to make the best decisions we can. We have to trust that the Gods will guide us and give us the tools to do what we must,” she shrugged, “Perhaps dreams are one way in which they choose to guide us.”

Rhaegar watched her as she spoke, transfixed by her passion and attachment to the land. He admittedly had not paid as close attention to her conversations with Arthur and Oswell, being so lost in his own head. But listening to her now, the thought dawned on him that this girl was much more than expected. That she herself was not necessarily what she had seemed.

She turned to him then, her smile reflecting a sense of understanding, as she murmured quietly, "Like I said, I also have wild dreams. It's why I love this place," she gestured towards Queensgate behind them, “I can't explain it, but it always feels like it all makes sense here. Like I've found a piece of a puzzle I didn't know I was solving.”

That's how Summerhall is for me. This place holds a mystical energy like Summerhall...

Uncle Aemon’s words about the mysterious dreams he was researching and the connection to the North suddenly came into his mind.

Are these the dreams of the North that Uncle Aemon spoke about? Does Aemon know about this girl?

He wanted to ask her about her dreams, about the tales that haunted her, about the things she didn't understand and the things she was running from, but something had suddenly changed in her stance, like she was closing him out.

It told him she had shared as much as she would. At least for tonight.
Lyanna

She took a deep breath, the bite of the air filling her lungs as she gazed out over the icy land north of the Wall, her mind thundering ahead at full speed.

She’d never told anyone other than Benjen about the strange dreams she had. Well, she’d written to Maester Aemon at Castle Black a few moons ago, but she had yet to receive any word beyond a basic acknowledgement. Granted, her description to the Maester had been incredibly vague, not wanting to sound like she was going crazy.

The dreams had started right around the time she had found Nymeria and Torrhen, and personally, she wondered if most of them might be linked to the ability to move into the minds of her animals. She had only ever run with Nymeria until earlier this year when she had bounced into Silverwing’s mind. The ability seemed to be associated with a strong bond between her and an animal, but it still was immensely confusing.

But then, the dreams had gotten stronger recently, which had been the reasoning behind reaching out to Maester Aemon - obviously, she would have never asked Maester Walys. And while she was being honest when she told Jay the dreams didn’t prevent her from sleeping, they bothered her in other ways.

The morning she had written to Maester Aemon, she had woken up with her heart racing, the taste of fresh blood on her tongue.

The part she hadn’t told anyone was that even back in her human body, some part of her mind had craved the hunt, the kill, the blood.

She didn’t know what led her to speak in such an honest way to a complete stranger, particularly one who was clearly hiding a lot more than just his identity. Not to mention the fact that, of the three men, she’d spoken to him the least.

Frankly, Jay had seemed largely disinterested in her.
Lyanna had watched them today, as she knew they were watching her. The interactions around the fire at night were much like the night before, wry jokes and exaggerated tales of adventure. The three men were clearly very close, sharing looks that indicated unspoken understanding. To some extent they reminded her of her three brothers, three contrasting personalities that still managed to complement each other.

Brothers by choice instead of by blood.

Maron and Walt certainly bantered like siblings, with Jay acting like the resigned older brother, shaking his head at them. In her family, it was usually her and Brandon bickering, with Benjen just rolling his eyes at their foolishness. Since Ned was never home, Benjen had taken on the role of calming force between her and Bran, a thankless job.

But the most insightful part of the day had been upon her return from her morning ride, when she found them sparring in the courtyard.

She had learned a long time ago from her father that you can learn a lot about a man in the way he carries himself with a weapon. In the North, as a rule, men were warriors, gruff and hard, wild and strong. Even so, Lyanna had seen the way in which a man’s personality was reflected in the way he moved when sparring. One could read a man’s focus and patience by the way he held his defense, whereas his skill and confidence shone through in his attacks. Even the way a man gripped his sword, lazy or forceful, timid or casual, spoke to unconscious characteristics.

Lyanna had been impressed by this morning’s display from a technical perspective, though she had assumed they were highly skilled, for them to be wandering the North with no guards. She hadn’t met many Southron knights, but she begrudgingly admitted that if these men were any indication of the average skill, the South clearly generated talented swordsmen.

Maron embodied calm confidence, amusement shining through his eyes. His grip was firm but casual, the sword moving as if an extension of his body. Though he seemed to lack Brandon’s childish arrogance, he had the same look she had seen in Brandon’s eyes, that spoke of a deep love for something, a smirk never far from his face. In truth, Maron was brilliant to watch.

He certainly gave her a reason to stare.

Walt, on the other hand, was competent, steady, effective. He was in battle as he seemed to be in conversations around the fire — open and blunt. He was a perfect balance to his two friends.
But for this man standing next to her, Jay, swordplay looked like a dance. A calm, cold, dangerous dance. He was leaner than either Maron or Walt, graceful in an inexplicable way. His movements were fluid, yet solemn, with none of the raw enthusiasm of Maron. His attacks were cunning and calculated. Thoughtful, in a sense. Somehow, the melancholy that chased him like a storm cloud managed to seep into every parry and cut, adding an edge to the mirthless maneuvers.

Where Maron was brilliant, Jay was bewitching. When the two fought, it was captivating. Even Walt seemed impressed, and he’d clearly seen them both fight many times.

Now standing on the Wall, Lyanna glanced at Jay in the silence that had descended, observing the structured lines of his jaw, his dark eyes staring into the distance.

She had never been one of those girls to swoon at the sight of a man - growing up in an all-male household had generally made her immune to those flights of fancy. She wasn’t oblivious to the timid admiring glances young women sent Brandon’s way or her handmaidens giggling while watching the men sparring, especially when shirts were discarded and sweat shone on bare chests. To her, such situations had usually warranted an eye roll, not a swoon.

Lyanna could imagine Maron drew a fair amount of swooning maidens, with those flashing violet eyes and that golden blonde hair. Her mind flashed back to that morning, when Maron had teased her about staring at him, making her blush. It wasn’t often that such a handsome man flirted with her, and she had been a bit taken off guard - usually she was the one with the biting comebacks. He was engaging and witty, not nearly as open as Walt, but with less mystery and darkness than Jay.

Yet, she had to admit to herself, as much as she enjoyed Maron and Walt, something was drawing her to Jay. Perhaps it was the mystery and the darkness.

Or maybe his initial disinterest in her was increasing her interest in him.

Another challenge to overcome.

A sudden gust of wind buffeted them, causing the hood of his cloak to slip off. She watched as he unconsciously ran his fingers through his long black hair, smoothing it back from his face. Something about the way the black strands caught the moonlight, the thin grey streaks shimmering in contrast, made her wonder if his hair would feel silky running through her fingers.

Stunned by the direction of her thoughts, she flinched and shook her head, feeling the gaze of the
strange man move to her before returning to look out at the view. It unsettled her more than she liked to admit.

Trying to focus on anything else, she remembered noticing the bag he was carrying. Pushing away any distracting thoughts, she turned to face him fully, taking in the way he gently held the small bag with a large gloved hand.

She imagined he had come up here seeking refuge - not that he hadn't kept a distance from the rest of them most of the afternoon. Perhaps she should leave him alone.

Then again, she had come up here first. She needn’t run away like a scared girl.

Curiosity won, as she couldn’t help but inquire as to the contents of the small bag.

“It’s a small traveling harp,” he explained as he held up the bag and pulled back the top cover, revealing the small instrument, “I play sometimes when I can’t sleep. It helps clear my head.”

“Oh,” she nodded thoughtfully, “Isn’t it a little cold to play?”

Jay shrugged, “Probably. The cold isn’t good for the strings or the wood, I suppose.”

“Or your fingers...” she mumbled under her breath.

He still caught the words and chuckled, a melodious sound that carried an edge, as if he wasn’t used to producing the noise.

Jay had yet to laugh once since arriving, so she couldn’t help but smile brightly at achieving the feat.

As she sometimes did, she allowed her mouth to move before her mind caught up, “You should laugh more often.”

As soon as she said the words, he looked at her strangely and she felt herself blush.
“You have a nice laugh,” she tried to clarify, before turning away to look back north, hoping the hood of her cloak hid her embarrassment.

*Pull yourself together! What, one chuckle and you’re reduced to a blushing idiot?*

Determined to regain her composure, she returned the train of her thoughts to the instrument the man had brought along with him.

She didn’t know many men who fancied themselves musicians, certainly not among the Northern nobles. Northerners enjoyed upbeat and boisterous songs and dances, often with limited or simple musical accompaniment. On occasion, musicians had come through Winterfell, but again, the music tended to fit the Northern audience.

Though she remembered that Roose enjoyed the harp. He said he could appreciate the fine skill required in such small movements.

Roose Bolton. If she hadn’t been concerned about the rumors of flaying still taking place in the dungeons of the Dreadfort, she’d consider him a semi-decent match.

Though she refused to admit he might be a better rider than her.

It had been one race, and he had most certainly cheated.

Shaking her head again to clear her mind - gods, what was wrong with her tonight - Lyanna yawned as she looked back up at the man next to her.

She did not want to think about losing to Roose at the moment, or at any moment for that matter.

*Perhaps I just need some sleep.*

Deciding she should leave Jay to his thoughts and harp, she went to grab the torch from the shadowed darkness of the warming shed. The moon was still bright enough for her to descend
without the additional light, so she would leave it with him.

She felt his eyes on her as she walked across the walkway and back.

Leaning the torch up against the inner part of the northern wall, she glanced back up at him, “You may need this later - I should be fine with my wildling senses.” She shot him a smirk before moving to pass behind him.

As she often did with her brothers or father, she reached out her hand to touch his shoulder, a silent farewell. It was a comfortable gesture, and perhaps unusual given she and this man were barely acquainted.

Pins and needles shot through her gloved hand and the man flinched, eyes flashing to hers. Fearing a rebuke for taking such liberties, she withdrew her hand and nodded before quickly moving to descend the steps.

Too occupied by the unfamiliar emotions rushing through her, Lyanna kept her eyes trained on the icy steps. Had she chanced a glance back, she might have noticed the confused look on the man’s face as he watched her leave, staring after her figure as she made her descent, not moving until she disappeared into the tower below.

And as she lay down under her furs, with Tor curled around her feet and Nymeria lying against her back, she thought she could just hear the faint notes of a sad song wafting through the cold night air.

Chapter End Notes

I know it's burning slow, but it is burning!

Ya'll are the best, thank you as always for reading and commenting :)
Walys

Maester Walys looked out over Winterfell from his spot in the Rookery, allowing the importance of this moment to sink in and banish the cold that he couldn’t quite escape since moving to the North. He held the scroll in his hand gently, as if a sudden movement might rip it from his hands.

This was a gift from the Seven, transported by raven.

*Dark wings, dark words, they say, but certainly not in this case.*

No, today a raven had arrived with two scrolls, warning of the return of Rickard Stark’s second son, Eddard.

A spur of the moment, last minute trip it appeared, given even Lord Stark had not been forewarned of their impending arrival, but that made no matter to the Maester.

Because Eddard wasn’t coming alone. Nor was this a simple visit.

Robert Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End, was coming to request the hand of Lyanna Stark.

And frankly, Walys couldn’t have planned it better. While Jaime Lannister may present a stronger case at face value, it was clear to Maester Walys that Tywin Lannister was not particularly intrigued by the prospect of Lyanna Stark.

Walys, knowing the she-wolf better, could not blame the Hand of the King one bit.
Nay, though the Lannisters may seem a better option due to their wealth and current power, what Robert Baratheon lacked in those areas, he made up for in vigor and motivation. He was said to be a strong young man, handsome and virile, and he was already a Lord Paramount at the young age of 18.

He wanted Lyanna. He was willing to trek up to Winterfell in the middle of winter to push his suit.

But most importantly, he was willing to pay.

The fact that the man had already indicated not only his interest in drafting a contract during his stay at Winterfell, but also his willingness to pay a hefty bride price in a three line scroll sent by raven only pleased Walys more. Clearly, young Lord Baratheon was rash and reckless, very much lacking in sense and tact. But that would make it all the easier for Maester Walys and Lord Stark to draft a most favorable contract for Winterfell and the North.

Maester Walys was certain Lord Stark would see the advantages of the match for Winterfell, particularly with Eddard willing to testify to Robert’s character. Promises of wealth and power would surely smooth over any concerns about the man’s less savory characteristics.

Even Lyanna would see the merit of a marriage that would be so beneficial politically and financially. If there was one endearing quality about her, it was that Lyanna Stark cared only about the North. She would do her duty.

To Walys, it was all the better to send her off to a strong, young warrior Lord - he would put a stop to her wildness. And if he was truly as horrible of a Lord as rumors said, Lyanna Stark would be a godsend to him. At least running a castle like Storm’s End would keep her occupied and out of the way of politics.

Plus, Lord Baratheon seemed to make a fool of himself at Court, so it was unlikely Lyanna would be there to make a mess of the Stark name. The South did not appreciate ill-bred women who fought convention.

Ned had mentioned they were about to depart from the Twins, and thus were likely to arrive within the next moon.

But with Lady Lyanna absent, Walys envisioned little would be done to prepare for the visit in
advance. In fact, perhaps, he thought, these letters would also find themselves lost in the storms, a punishment to Lyanna for running off and shirking her duty.

After all, that was to be his excuse for not having seen a response from the Citadel, should the question be raised. While he dared not outright lie to Lord Rickard, surely with the winter they had had, this one small detail would pass by unnoticed.

He knew the siblings had lied as to Lyanna’s current whereabouts - she was likely at that bloody abandoned castle Lord Rickard had allowed her to partially restore. Think of the scandal, a girl of sixteen namedays, sleeping on the floor of a castle on the Wall with six guards. Like many of Lyanna’s actions, the Maester wasn’t sure how they would explain away her willful behavior. Walys was ever grateful for Lord Rickard’s insistence on restricting all news from the North.

It would be far better to withhold this information for himself.

_Likely, the she-wolf would put up a fuss and excoriate me for plotting to sell her off._

She was right, of course, but Walys looked forward to seeing her struggle with the arrival of last minute guests. After all, she had wanted responsibility.

_Ah, what a nice surprise that will be for Lady Lyanna..._

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**Benjen**

Benjen should have known Brandon would run off in an attempt to escape responsibility.
He had hoped that Brandon would at least take responsibility today of all days - the only matter that had to be handled directly by a Stark was the final closure of Brandon’s incident with the peasant girl that resulted in a bastard daughter.

Yet his hopes were to be dashed when, in the early afternoon, after searching the better part of Winterfell, Brandon’s valet informed Benjen that Brandon had gone into town.

It didn’t take much to figure out where he’d run off to. Benjen found his brother drinking in one of the Wintertown taverns. He could hear Bran’s laughter even before he tugged open the heavy wooden door, the boisterous noise mingling with the sound of the developing storm.

Benjen had brought only a few guards and Jory Cassel, the son of Father’s captain of the guards. Jory was a few years older than Bran, and was already a Stark loyalist. Only Jory accompanied him as they slipped inside, the heat instantly seeping beneath their furs. Benjen shook off the light dusting of snow that had accumulated on his cloak from the ride into town, adjusting his hold on the awkward sack of food and odd supplies he was carrying. He imagined he may have to guilt Brandon into doing his duty by his bastard and the poor mother, but the bag was not that easy to carry.

Benjen shouldered the bag, remembering Lya’s advice that the only way to get Brandon’s attention was to shock or threaten him into action.

The tavern was surprisingly full for the early afternoon hour. Then again, given the impending storm, Benjen supposed it was only natural for men to flock to the warmth and promise of drink. While these long winters were hard on most, the taverns of Wintertown were primary beneficiaries - at no other time did they turn such strong profits as they did in the midst of a long winter.

All of the tables were occupied, but it was easy to spot the errant Heir of Winterfell and his gaggle of friends at the largest table in the tavern.

There was Benjen’s older brother, sitting with the two visiting Southron knights and a few of the younger men serving House Stark, wild gestures with a half full tankard of ale suggesting he was knee deep into the retelling of one of his elaborate tales of adventure.

It didn’t take long for one of the Stark men to notice Benjen’s entrance and slow approach, Jory in his shadow. Once alerted to his presence, Brandon paused his story and beckoned Benjen closer, chuckling all the while.
“Ah Ben! Have you come to join us, brother?”

Benjen approached the table cautiously, hoping to convince Brandon that they should speak in a more private location. Benjen had no intention of leaving without his oldest brother - it was time he take responsibility for his actions. Benjen wanted to make Lya proud, he and Brandon owed her to at least complete the task after she spent such care cleaning up the mess.

“Bran, perhaps we can speak somewhere more privately. We have affairs to see to-” Benjen began, but was promptly interrupted by Brandon’s laugh.

“I thought you said this morning that there was not much to deal with! What, wasn’t it only one item in town you said that I was required to help with?”

“Yes, and I thought you would be willing to at least take on that responsibility.”

Brandon just shrugged, “Ah, but Maester Walys said he was happy to handle whatever it was with you.”

Benjen was fairly certain that having Maester Walys handle the bastard was the last thing Brandon would actually wish, but Brandon had proved himself relatively blind to Walys’ attempts at gathering power in Lya’s absence. Deciding that threatening Walys’ knowledge of the matter - they both knew at this point that Father would inevitably find out about the affair in any case - Benjen adjusted tactics, hoping to play off of Brandon’s anger at Lord Glover the day before.

“Fine. Allow all of your bannermen to see you shirk your duties.”

Brandon waved off the criticism, “It’s Lya who is shirking her duty. She’s the one who ran off to the Wall when she’s supposed to be running Winterfell.”

Benjen wasn’t like Lya or Brandon to become angry at any slight. But like all of the Stark men, any insult to his sister was grounds for a fight, regardless of whether that comment came from another member of their family.

While Lya’s trip was willful and rash, it was somewhat reasonable. She had run Winterfell for months with little assistance and no break. It was only fair that she be granted some peace and quiet, especially given it had been her nameday. She wasn’t one to celebrate, but Benjen imagined riding
all day before collapsing with Nymeria and Tor at her side in the ruins of Queensgate was as close to a picture perfect nameday she could manage.

In any case, Brandon had lasted all of a few days attempting to run Winterfell before he had run away from his responsibilities. If anyone was shirking his duty, it was Brandon. Not just today, but everyday for the last several years when it should have been him taking on the affairs and responsibilities associated with Winterfell. Lya had stepped up when Brandon had failed. She should be praised, not rebuked.

“No. Lya’s running Winterfell because you’re incompetent and can’t do it. Father would have never trusted you to do it. And he was clearly right to not. You see one hard decision, that wasn’t even that hard, and you run away to drink. Are you planning on dishonoring our family again tonight with a whore? Should I warn Lya that she should watch out for another bastard in nine moons?”

Brandon stood, stepping close to his brother, snarling “Watch yourself, little pup.”

“At least deal with the one you already have,” Benjen threw down the sack of supplies at his feet and pulled out the rolled parchment from the pocket of his cloak, throwing it on the table next to Brandon’s now empty tankard, “Lya already did everything for you, arranged a good marriage for your conquest and granted the couple enough to make a living. At least do Lya the favor of facing your indiscretion yourself.”

Brandon paused, clearly surprised Lya had already arranged everything - it had only been a little over a week since she’d found out herself, and she had been gone for much of that time. But Benjen knew that Lya had little desire for the affair to remain unresolved - she made sure to deal with it before she left for Queensgate, knowing that neither Benjen nor Brandon would know how to manage the situation. It was also the only way to keep the affair away from Maester Walys’ eyes, though given this little outburst, Benjen imagined most of Wintertown would know of Brandon’s indiscretion by the end of the day.

Benjen continued, disappointment shining in his eyes, “I don’t know why Lya insists on keeping it a secret. Everyone in the North should know what type of man you are. And while she may not tell Father, I certainly will. He deserves to know who he’s passing Winterfell to.”

Brandon snapped, grabbing Benjen’s collar and pulling him up so that his toes barely skimmed the ground. Benjen had gotten taller in the last few years, shooting up past Lya, but he was still fourteen and no match for Brandon’s hulking warrior’s body.
“You will do no such thing, Benjen.”

“What, plan on striking your baby brother?” Benjen taunted, “You can add hitting your kin in public to your list of accomplishments.”

Fortunately for Benjen’s face, Ser Richard interceded before Brandon could respond with either words or fists, “Brandon, maybe you should let your brother down. We don’t want to make a scene...”

Brandon took a deep breath, anger simmering off of his skin while staring into those Stark eyes that mirrored his father’s, before finally letting his brother down. Benjen saw him glance around the room to see every eye trained on them.

It appeared they’d already made a scene.

“Fine,” Brandon ground out gruffly, “let’s deal with it.”

Then his brother stalked past him, shoulder ramming into Benjen’s. Benjen nearly lost his balance, only to be steadied by the hand of Ser Richard.

Mumbling a thank you to the Southron knight, Benjen grabbed the parchment from the table - Lya would kill them if they lost the contract she drafted after hours of drafts - and hustled to catch up with Brandon’s long strides. Blessedly, Jory had grabbed the bag of supplies off of the floor, relieving Benjen’s arm from further strain.

He caught Brandon just outside the entrance of the tavern, the cold instantly chilling the sweat that had started to form under his wool clothes.

“My lords,” Jory spoke up for the first time as Brandon went to walk towards the stables, “it may be better to just walk as there may be no place at the house to keep the horses in the impending chill.”

Brandon grimaced but nodded, mockingly gesturing for Benjen to lead the way. Fortunately, Jory took it upon himself to lead them, and both Stark boys fell in step behind him. Jory had likely spoken to the guards in advance, expecting some similar outcome, as only two followed behind them while the rest remained with the horses.
The snow continued to fall in light flurries, the sky a pale grey still, but darker clouds skimmed the hills in the distance, foretelling of a stronger storm to come. Benjen hoped they would complete this business with haste - he had no desire to be caught in a blizzard, even just in Wintertown. Winter in the North was unpredictable, and it was better to avoid the weather’s temperamental changes if possible.

Benjen briefly thought of Lya, hoping the Queensgate ruins provided sufficient cover should the storm turn for the worst. She was all alone, with only a few weeks worth of provisions. Should the storm trap her in the ruins…

No, he thought, Lya would be fine. She was more than capable of taking care of herself, and she was crafty - if anyone could get themselves out of a tricky situation, it was his sister.

Their walk to whatever small abode Lya had arranged for the young couple was eerily quiet, the occasional howl of the wind and the quiet chatter of the guards the only sounds. The Stark brothers both remained quiet.

But after a few moments, Benjen broke the silence, unable to stop the reproach from passing his lips.

“You know what the northern Lords say about bastards. You know how important honor is to our family, to father.”

Brandon didn’t even look at him as he responded, his eyes firmly focused on securing his steps on the snowy dirt of the road, but Benjen could still hear the anger lacing Brandon’s words.

“I know, Benjen, Father drilled it into my head too.”

Benjen shook his head, his own eyes falling to watch his feet as they followed Jory, “Lya won’t always be here to save you.”

“It’s one bastard, Benjen, Lords make mistakes.”

“Aye, Lords do, but you aren’t a Lord yet. You have a bastard already, Brandon. Do you want a reputation like Robert Baratheon?” Brandon bristled at his side, his steps lengthening, but Benjen
continued, “Even up here in the North we’ve heard about him - he’s gotten a bastard on some woman in the Vale. Apparently, he made a fool of himself at Court as well by drunkenly challenging Ser Arthur Dayne to a sword fight. You know Walys is trying to marry Lya off to some Southron, what if it’s him or someone like him?”

“I would never let father marry her off to an oaf like him!”

While that was reassuring, it wasn’t enough.

Benjen stopped, yanking on Brandon’s arm so that he was facing him, “Yet here you are, acting just like Robert! I used to look up to you, Brandon, I used to want to be like you. But you just run away from responsibility and let Lya protect you.”

Brandon had no response to that - he seemed to content himself with a scowl and then trudged on ahead through the snow in silence. That was perfectly fine with Benjen - he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear any more of Brandon’s excuses.

In truth, Benjen felt betrayed. Brandon was his older brother, the Wild Wolf, and Benjen had grown up looking up to him as a hero. Brandon was naturally skilled with a blade, but his true strength fell in his ability to get people to like him. A smooth talker and a boisterous presence, Brandon made friends with anyone, his narcissistic stories delivered with such passion and wildness that raucous laughter and slapping congratulations grossly outweighed any disapproving looks. Brandon was the handsome Stark brother, his lively light grey eyes and quick smirk garnering stares whenever he was home. That was something Brandon and Lya shared - a charm that earned them the admiration of others. Benjen thought it might be the Wolf’s Blood, for no matter how rash and willful it made his siblings, everyone still seemed to love those who were full of life and quick to action.

Benjen had always been the Wolf Pup, the youngest of the siblings. He was never as charming as Brandon or Lya, though he’d never been as quiet and dour as Ned. Then again, anyone was quiet and calm compared to his wild siblings. Father had been smart to grant Lya so much responsibility, for it gave her an outlet for her energy - while she still rode more than any of them combined and trained with her bow daily, she was too busy to look out for trouble or demand sword lessons.

Sometimes Benjen missed those days when he and Lya would sneak into the Godswood to play at swords, using sticks instead of blades. Benjen thought that now he might finally be able to beat her - though he had the obvious advantage of a few years of training.

Only recently had Benjen realized Brandon was not the man he had always thought he was, particularly once Benjen had returned from fostering. That was when Benjen saw how many of
Brandon’s responsibilities Lya had taken over. He saw how hard she worked to gain the respect of Father and his bannermen, having to work even harder purely because of her sex. That respect was granted to Brandon due to his birthright. Certainly, Brandon earned some of his respect in the training yard, but he did little for Winterfell.

In spite of it all, Benjen had been so excited to know Brandon was coming home this year - he had missed his brother’s visit last year - so that he could show his brother how much he had learned. He had pictured days spent sparring, knowing he’d end up bruised and battered, but still looking forward to the joyful, laughing face of Brandon as he beat Benjen into the floor of the courtyard. He had hoped for long rides with both of his siblings, an escape for all of them from the duties they shared at home.

Then he realized that Brandon was squandering the respect granted to him as Heir of Winterfell. Benjen saw the boisterous tales and late night wanderings for what they were now - signs of how Brandon’s real interests lay with wine and women. His older brother was happy to let Lya do the work, though he gave her no credit for it.

As stressful as it had been given Benjen himself knew little about all of the various tasks Father and Lya completed daily, Lya’s trip to Queensgate was also a blessing in disguise - it was forcing them all to realize how utterly incompetent Lord Stark’s real heir was. It was proving Father’s point that Lya had become indispensable to Winterfell. Benjen thought it also demonstrated an even more important but unrecognized fact: that Lya was the de facto second in command of the North. A woman, who had just achieved her majority, not Lord Stark’s eldest son, a man grown and knighted.

When Jory halted in front of a nondescript door, Benjen roused himself from his thoughts. He chanced a glance at Brandon, but was dismayed by the grimace plain as day on his older brother’s face.

“Don’t look at me, pup. Like you said, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Shaking his head and taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, Benjen approached the door of the house. For a brief moment, a flash of panic passed through him, but then he thought of Father’s Lord of Winterfell voice and Lya’s developing Lady of Winterfell voice, the mix of compassion and sternness, and tried to envision how they would deal with the situation. The image of the two of them firm in his mind, he knocked on the door.

After a moment, a young man’s visage appeared behind the opened door.

The greeting went surprisingly well - even Brandon pulled himself together to be presentable.
Though if the girl was hoping for some affection, or even a glimpse of recognition from Lord Stark’s son, she was quickly disappointed. Fortunately, the girl, Tasy, seemed genuinely happy with the young man Lya had found for her - going by the name of Erac, he was some second son of an old guard at Winterfell, and his family had been in service of the Starks for generations. The man was only a few years older than the girl, and completely taken by her. Even during their short interaction, it was clear to Benjen that Erac was doting on his new wife.

Perhaps due to Brandon’s lack of noticeable affection or purely due to her experience at Winterfell, Tasy quickly started gushing about Lya. The sentiment was shared by Erac, particularly after Benjen handed over the supplies and job contract, granting Erac a position within the lower ranks of Stark guards. It was not a notable position, far too low to allow for any potential threat in the future, but still enough to provide a steady income.

“Milady saved me. My pa wrote that he’s comin’ home and I don’t know what I’d ‘ave done, I woulda been ruined…”

“We are glad we could help, and Lyanna sends her regards. We appreciate your discretion in this matter.”

“Of course, Milord, we are grateful for your generosity. ‘Tis more than most coulda expected.” responded the young man.

A small cry from the bedroom prompted the departure of Tasy, a bundle tucked into her arms upon her quick return. The girl turned to Brandon, who was looking exceedingly uncomfortable. While Benjen grimaced externally, he derived a modest amount of pleasure in his brother’s discomfort.

*Good. He deserves to feel discomfort when faced with his dishonor. At least he recognizes it for dishonor.*

Tasy held out the baby to Brandon at that moment, her face earnest as she silently encouraged him to hold his daughter.

At first, Benjen thought his brother would refuse.

But then Brandon hesitantly held out his arms. As he accepted the small human, Tasy’s face was lit with hope as she spoke, “Her name’s Anna, after milady. Milord, will you visit her? I know ‘tis a lot to ask, but it would mean so much to have your support…”
Brandon looked ready to flee.

Another responsibility he wants to run from.

But as Brandon looked down on the bundle resting awkwardly in his arms, his face softened. All eyes were on the future Lord of Winterfell as a little hand reached up towards his face, causing a bright smile to appear on Brandon’s face.

And then Brandon started speaking in a soft voice to the little girl, his voice rising an octave. Benjen felt himself flinch from the shock of the sound. Who would have imagined Brandon Stark, the Wild Wolf, murmuring in a baby voice?

“Well aren’t you a pretty little thing? Little Anna… how could anyone call you a mistake? Don’t worry though, your aunt took care of you - she’s your namesake, and the strongest woman I’ve ever met.”

Little Anna cooed, and Brandon chuckled before turning to hand the baby back to her mother who stood beaming next to him.

Brandon straightened, looking between the girl and her new husband. The next words out of his mouth shocked Benjen even more than the scene that had just unfolded.

“I will do what I can. I am grateful for you both. She is a beautiful baby, and does not deserve to be punished for the mistakes of her birth father or the circumstances in which she was born. As I told her, she’s named for the strongest woman I know, and I will do my best to do right by her in honor of my sister.”

Goodbyes quickly followed, seeing as not much else could be offered and the Starks wished to return to Winterfell before the storm worsened.

The walk back to the tavern was still silent, though this silence was different, less angry and more balanced. Both brothers remained deep in thought, Benjen replaying the scene in his head and trying to figure out what it meant. Lya had told him she had long given up on expecting Brandon to change - that each time she had hoped that some action was a sign of a new maturity, she only set herself up to be disappointed again. Benjen didn’t know if this was just another one of those moments.
Eventually, as they neared the tavern where their horses and the rest of the Stark guard remained, Brandon heaved a deep sigh before breaking the silence, “You’re right, it should be Lya to inherit Winterfell, if the only thing that mattered was capability. But you know as well as I do that that will never happen.”

Benjen examined his brother - it was the first time Brandon had admitted something like that without it being a sneered taunt directed at Lya. His older brother’s voice sounded resigned.

“Even she realizes that, Bran.”

His older brother nodded, his eyes continuing to stare straight ahead, “I know I’m no good at this Benjen. In fact, I’m downright horrible. And no matter what I do, I won’t ever be as good at it as Father or Lya, or probably even you. Seven hells, Ned would probably be a better Lord of Winterfell and he hasn’t been home in almost five years. But I’ll try.”

Benjen felt his eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“What changed? Just yesterday you were yelling about how it was all going to be yours anyways…”

Brandon shrugged as they paused in the street. Light grey eyes met light blue.

“I don’t know, I guess I never really thought about the consequences. This isn’t natural to me, but I couldn’t stop thinking about how that little girl is named after Lya, and she’ll be looked down on as a low-born bastard in the North.”

Benjen nodded, silently thanking Lya for allowing the woman to name the baby Anna - he knew it bothered her immensely, as Lya held tight to her pride - for it had clearly broken through Brandon’s thick skull. Gods, Lya was helping Winterfell even when she didn’t want to be.

“It will be a lot of work, Bran,” Benjen told him evenly, “you have a lot to learn. Even I don’t know half of what is required.”

Brandon shot him a snarky smile then, “Oh but brother, that’s what I have you and Lya for.”
Benjen snorted as his brother went on, waving his hands as the tension eased, “I make no promises that I'll be able to avoid drink and women, especially at first, but I will try.”

Of course he won’t, how could he avoid the basic pleasures of life….

“Speaking of, dearest brother, I think this has been quite a lot for one day, no? Why don’t we have a drink to celebrate? A week without Lya and Winterfell still stands!”

Benjen rolled his eyes but realized this was likely as much as he would get from Brandon today. Perhaps it was naive of him, perhaps Lya was right to no longer hold out hope, but the promise of Brandon attempting to be better was enough of a success for Benjen.

He waved Brandon off to the tavern where they had left Ser Richard and Ser Myles. Benjen had a few more things to arrange and he had missed training with the Master-at-Arms, so he proceeded back up to the looming castle walls of Winterfell.

Gods, he couldn’t wait for Lya to come home.

Chapter End Notes

The North is about to get a lot more crowded before it gets less crowded. Nothing says drama like a bunch of big personalities all in the same place in the middle of winter :) Anyways, back to Queensgate next chapter, looking like a long one. And then we'll get a peak at KL after that.

Thanks all for continuing to comment! Ya'll are the best!
Chapter Notes

Hopefully a small reward for some of the patience :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arthur

Days at the abandoned keep seemed to take on an easy sort of routine.

The girl would rise before the sun, returning from her morning ride midway through their sparring practice, the two direwolves in tow. Then, she would watch them, joking with him and Oswell while they rested.

Rhaegar spent the majority of the first day in deep melancholic silence - he was even silent during their training, lost in passive concentration. Arthur and Oswell were used to his moods by now; they knew to leave him be until he chose to re-emerge from the darkness.

But on the second full day, something cracked the barrier of Rhaegar's mind, as the girl managed to get a few sarcastic comments from him.

It was the first time since they arrived at the Wall that Rhaegar seemed to be sleeping through the night, a fact that surprised them all - Arthur had gotten used to his friend's late night wandering. Perhaps they had all reached a breaking point; living at Court had been exhausting for all of them. Clearly Oswell was enjoying the chance at sleeping through the night with the direwolves keeping watch, and Arthur couldn't lie that it wasn't a welcome relief.

In fact, their hostess seemed to sleep the least, given her early morning routine. For someone who seemed to always be on the edge of laughing, she was remarkably quiet when she chose to be. In the morning, it was as if she just slipped off into the snow without a trace, a tiny dark figure on a sleek gray horse that blended into the surroundings naturally.
By the third day, they had settled into a comfortable rapport and Arthur started to relax. Beyond the cold exterior, the girl was joyous and playful, with a certain dose of youthful innocence that was endearing.

And while he still didn’t trust her, he had to admit she was having a positive impact on them all. In fact, Arthur’s view of her softened when he saw how she could make Rhaegar smile - not his nice, altogether fake Court smile, but his genuine smile, an expression usually reserved for only a select number of close confidants. No matter how distrusting Arthur was, he could not dismiss the significance of this accomplishment.

Indeed, Arthur couldn’t help but notice that it seemed Rhaegar had taken a liking to the wildling. Nothing serious, but the Prince’s indigo eyes, surrounded by his identity-hiding dyed hair, followed the girl more than necessary. Arthur had even caught him staring at her once while she was chatting with Oswell, her laughter echoing around the courtyard.

The Prince’s only response to Arthur’s raised eyebrow had been a shrug, but he thought he could see the barest hint of a sly smirk on Rhaegar’s face.

Nevertheless, while the girl did not seem interested in harming them, she was by no means harmless.

That had become clear that afternoon, when Oswell challenged the girl to an archery contest.

“Shall we see you use that bow, or do you carry it around just for show?”

The girl scoffed, responding imperiously, “Please, only you Southrons would think to parade around with a weapon you can’t use.”

After some lively debate that Arthur and Rhaegar watched with muted amusement, the girl and Oswell agreed to break down some of the extra unused floorboards that were in the stables to use as targets.

Oswell’s primary concern had seemed to be the wood’s practicality as a target after sitting in the cold, worried that the arrows might bounce off.
Hearing this, the girl had only chuckled, “The wood is practically rotting, it’s so soft. I’d be more worried about the arrows going straight through.”

They had moved about setting up the targets a variety of distances at one end of the courtyard, with the girl forcing both Arthur and Rhaegar to help or as she affectionately put it, “make themselves useful.”

Arthur knew that of the three of them, Oswell was the worst with a bow, having always preferred the crossbow since it played better to his brute strength. Admittedly, none of them trained much in archery. Rhaegar had learned for the sole purpose of maintaining some level of competence on the hunt so he was passable, though Arthur couldn’t quite remember the last time he’d seen the Crown Prince practice with the weapon.

Certainly none of them held a bow with the same calm confidence the girl displayed. Arthur had no doubt they were unlikely to match her skill, but he had to praise Oswell for his strategy with the girl. While she had watched them for two days at sparring, allowing her a decent glimpse of each of their skill with a blade, they had yet to see her use her weapon. This competition, while bound to be entertaining, would also allow them to gauge just how dangerous this girl really was.

With everything in place, Arthur and Rhaegar sat together on a crate a few paces from Oswell and the girl, the grey direwolf Tor lay nearby. Arthur wasn’t sure where Nymeria was, though it was possible she was sleeping in the tower. Though the direwolves were on a completely different sleeping schedule from the men, they appeared to coordinate with their mistress’ needs.

The girl picked up her bow, holding it out to offer it to Oswell. Her face was a neutral mask; however, as they had all learned over the three days, amusement was never far from those bright eyes.

“Well, would you like to begin?”

Oswell’s eyes twinkled and he smiled as he sketched a purposefully sloppy bow, “After you, milady.”

The girl rolled her eyes, but accepted as she brought her free hand up, catching a finger of her glove in her teeth to pull it off. She carelessly let the glove drop into the snow at her feet. With her gloveless hand, she plucked one of the arrows from the quiver she had rested against the crate next to
them, holding it between her thumb and middle finger. Fitting the arrow to the string of the bow, still held casually in front of her, she turned and glanced at the targets they’d set up. Her expression remained playful, as it had been the whole day, but Arthur noticed her grey eyes sharpen. Like the steel of a blade, those eyes were a flashback to the dangerous gaze of the unknown girl they’d met three nights ago.

“Shall I choose or would you like to do the honors?”

Oswell chuckled, “Your choice.”

She nodded as if expecting that response. Her eyes shot quickly between the few targets and then she paused, as if debating the best strategy, the bow still held lightly with the nocked arrow.

In one fluid motion, she moved the bow up in front of her, pulling back and releasing the arrow right as the bow came into position. A muted thump resounded through the courtyard and Arthur didn’t have to look to know the arrow had struck true.

She had chosen a closer target, the arrow burrowed into the center of the piece of wood. A good shot, but by no means impossible to match. Might be they had a chance.

The smile on her face was the picture of innocence, but her eyes seemed a little too gleeful given the shot. As the bow changed hands and Oswell prepared to shoot, Rhaegar leaned over to whisper in Arthur’s ear.

“She’s playing with us.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows at his friend, but only got a shake of the head in response. They watched as Oswell managed to hit the same target, though his shot was far from centered.

“Respectable,” was the only comment the girl made, as she took the bow back.

She shot a glance at Arthur and Rhaegar as she moved to pluck another arrow from the quiver. Arthur could see the smirk plain as day on her face and he realized that Rhaegar was right.
It appeared the girl was not patient enough to tease them with any more simple shots, as the next arrow was drawn and released before they even looked, the arrow deep in the center of the furthest target. She must have caught the look that passed between the three men for she instantly began laughing. It was an unusual sight, the image of this petite girl giggling like a child, having just proven herself quite the dangerous archer.

Once she had quieted, she smiled and shrugged in explanation, “Patience is not one of my great virtues.”

After that first round, the girl's smile transformed steadily into a smirk as it became apparent Oswell was better off sticking with his sword, and it only took a few rounds for her to force both Arthur and Rhaegar to partake in the fun.

“Oh come now, I’ve spent three days watching you best each other with swords. I’ll not allow you to sit and mope over there on a crate.”

“So that’s what you are doing while we practice, moping?” Rhaegar questioned casually as he gracefully stood, stalking towards her to take the proffered bow.

The girl scoffed, “Please, only one of us is known for brooding, and it is certainly not me.”

Oswell, who had moved to take Rhaegar’s spot next to Arthur on the crate, laughed as he stretched out his shoulder.

“She’s got a point.”

Rhaegar sent Oswell a glare, but Arthur could see the amusement behind the glower. The Prince’s mood was noticeably lighter today, but it continued to bother Arthur to see his best friend with dark hair, his indigo eyes almost black. The darkness matched Rhaegar’s melancholic moods too much for Arthur’s liking.

In the end, the girl trounced them. While the three men rotated every shot or two, she claimed she was “feeling indulgent,” and then proceeded to show off by creating artificial challenges for herself in an attempt to "even the playing field."
The girl had them all smiling by the time the daylight began to fade with her witty critiques masquerading as helpful tips. As Arthur had expected, none of them were even close to competent with the weapon, particularly compared to the girl. Even Rhaegar, with his more practiced shot, was no match for her and did not escape her teasing. Arthur certainly realized his “legendary” status did not transfer to skill with a bow - despite constant training with a heavy sword, his shoulders were aching something fierce by the end of the day.

The girl's skill was undeniable, shooting with an ease and confidence that spoke to years of practice. But while her skill, particularly when coupled with her efficient survival skills, suggested knowledge borne out of necessity, her weapon contradicted the story. Simple and well-used, the craftsmanship was still remarkable, and the fact that the bow seemed to match the girl's strength and stature perfectly meant it was unlikely she'd stolen it.

Perhaps more disconcerting than the deepening mystery of the girl’s background was how Arthur caught Rhaegar's eyes on the girl, his expression a mix of interest and wariness. Something about his friend’s gaze made Arthur uncomfortable - Rhaegar rarely paid any mind to anyone outside of his immediate circle.

That night, a light dusting of snow started to fall, the sign of a coming storm.

Rhaegar and he chatted around the fire of mindless things such as the need to exercise the horses and care for the gear. The girl had mentioned that the storm brewing looked like it could be a bad one - she had brought some hares back from her morning ride just in case, explaining that storms could bring several feet of snow in the middle of winter. They had cleared much of the courtyard as a precaution, so that they would be able to reach the horses and bring them into the lower level of the tower, should conditions worsen. Arthur dearly hoped that was not the case, but was reminded again of their good fortune in finding the wild girl during their stay.

Across the fire, the girl taught Oswell some Northern game that she claimed she learned from a wildling. When she had explained the root of her knowledge, Arthur had been surprised and perplexed - he had still been of the belief that she was a wildling, but it was unlikely she would distinguish herself from a wildling had she been one.

His best friend had also been noticeably intrigued, as Rhaegar had dryly commented that he was surprised the girl wasn't a wildling herself. This had elicited a bright smile from the girl as though it were a compliment.

"You and my father both."
The first mention of her father and her background, Oswell took the opportunity to prod for more during their game to no avail. She must have sensed danger in allowing the opening, as she promptly withdrew, shutting down almost completely. The only piece of additional information she revealed was that she had brothers, though even that was vague, with no mention of how many. Recognizing her withdrawal, the subject was changed but the girl remained quieter than usual for the rest of the night, even retiring early.

Later, he woke to her quiet footsteps and was immediately wary until he heard her descend the steps of the tower.

Glancing around, he noticed he was not the only one woken by her departure.

Rhaegar rose from his pallet and approached the window that looked into the courtyard. While his friend stood at the window, Arthur checked the rest of the room - the direwolves too were gone, though that was not unusual as Arthur understood they did not lay in the room the whole night while the humans slept. All of the girl’s belongings were still there.

After a few moments, the Prince turned and picked up his cloak before languidly moving towards the stairs. Catching Arthur's move to rise and follow, Rhaegar paused then shrugged as if there was nothing unusual about following a strange and potentially dangerous girl in the middle of the night. With a simple word, Rhaegar made Arthur's decision as to whether to follow.

"Stay."

An order was an order.

With a whisper of cloth and silent boots, the Prince was gone.
Lyanna

"Stupid girl, you should have never mentioned Father. Gods, speaking of Father, if he ever finds out about this, he will kill me. Or sell me to the first Lord who would still be willing to take me as a wife. We don’t know who these men are, they’re clearly Southern knights of noble birth. They must be here for a reason, no one comes to the North, let alone the Wall, in the middle of winter unless there is a reason. Why do they have no guards? What if they are spies? Or some Lords looking for glory? What if they find out who I am? Maybe they were exiled from Court and sent to the Wall – Father said that the Wall is often used as a punishment for nobles who commit serious crimes. They could be criminals, rapists and murderers...

The image of the last Night’s Watchman she’d encountered flashed behind her closed eyes. Those dead eyes on a body-less head had found their way into her dreams on several occasions, the resigned and haunted look searing into her soul. Gods, she had taken a man’s life. Did every man dream of the foes he had felled, the fear or anger forever sketched into the victim’s visage as the lifeblood drained from his body? She couldn’t imagine how a man could ever sleep with such a burden on his soul.

Now plagued by the unpleasant image of a dead man and the vague uncertainties associated with her guests, Lyanna tossed and turned on her pallet before giving up. Sleep was all but impossible in her present state.

Maybe spending time with Silverwing will help.

She hadn’t rode the charger that morning as her palfrey had needed the exercise. Silver always seemed to understand her mood. Tor and Nymeria would be around as well, though she thought they might be out on a hunt. Somehow she knew that with her mind already unstable, allowing herself to run in Nymeria’s mind on a hunt was probably not the best idea.

Pushing back her furs silently, she slid her boots on and wrapped herself in her cloak before padding downstairs, leaving the three slumbering men in the tower.

Gods, she had wanted so badly for this trip to be an escape. She knew it was stupid of her to be here, that this was another action added to the long list of wilful things she had done. But with the responsibility of serving in Father’s stead, with Brandon’s bastard, with her inevitable betrothal on the horizon, and then with the guilt of killing a man, the burden had become too heavy.
She had simply cracked.

All she had ever wanted was freedom. The chance to be who she wanted to be. To not be judged for her hatred of embroidery or her choice to ride astride. She liked people well enough, but if she could live alone with her animals she would - if it meant she was free.

More than once she’d dreamed of running off to the Land Beyond the Wall or to Essos. Those dreams, particularly the farfetched one of joining the Golden Company in Essos, had died when Father had forbidden her from carrying a sword and she had unofficially taken on the position of Lady of Winterfell.

In truth, serving in her mother’s stead was a way to be close to her, to the woman Lyanna had barely known. When she was younger, she had often found herself daydreaming when Sella or the Maester was teaching her something new, imagining it was her mother’s soft but husky voice repeating the instructions. Now, she wasn’t even sure the voice in her head was actually the right tone. Besides the jewels and embroidered dresses, the duty of Lady of Winterfell was all she had left of Mother, and soon enough that would be taken from her.

For a few days, Lyanna had enjoyed the company of these Southron men and things had been good. They didn’t treat her like a Lady or pile expectations upon her. They laughed at her jokes and went along with calling her “the girl.” Even today, during their farce of an archery competition, it had been admiration and amusement reflected in their faces at her skill instead of disappointment or disapproval. For a brief moment, she was just a girl, with no titles or responsibilities, just her. The real her. It was empowering.

And then she had gone and ruined it by mentioning her father.

She had been so careful the first two days not to make any statements regarding who she was, but she had let her guard down tonight. It had felt so comfortable, like being with her brothers, that the comment just slipped out.

She was lost in her thoughts as she brushed Silver down at the edge of the open stable, murmuring meaningless compliments, when she heard the soft crunch of boots in the snow. The sound was jarring in the silence of the freezing night. It took all of her energy to remain calm, continuing to stroke Silverwing’s muzzle.

Somehow she knew it was Jay, his steps graceful where Maron’s were sure and Walt’s were heavy.
Though she had noticed him engaging more today, his melancholy lifted and his mood brighter, sorrow still seemed to emanate from his person. And while Lyanna had managed to draw a few smiles and laughs from him, this accomplishment seemed to pale into insignificance in the present situation.

It bothered her how much his presence put her in a tizzy, and the flashing images of noble criminals sent to the Wall for rape and murder wasn’t calming her down much.

Her mind was so muddled that her brain chose to fixate on the impropriety and danger of the situation: an unknown man approaching her from behind, trapping her alone in a nearly enclosed space in the middle of a stormy night with only his two guards near enough to hear her scream.

No honorable man would put a lady in this position. Nay, he couldn't be honorable, he must want something, all men wanted something, she was so stupid to trust them.

But she wouldn't go down so easily.

*You’re a direwolf.*

*Breathe. Think. He's bigger and stronger than you, but you're quick, you have to take him by surprise. When he's close. Give him a false sense of security, so he thinks he has you.*

She dropped the brush she was holding, bending over as if to pick up, but instead sliding the small knife she kept in her boot into her right hand. It was sharp but small, and while it couldn't do much damage, it would hopefully give her time to move fully into the courtyard and mount her horse. She’d have to leave her belongings and return later. She tensed as he entered the space, partially blocking the entry.

*Just a another step...*

As quick as she could, she sidestepped, lashing out with her right hand with the knife, aiming for a quick slash to the thigh - it was a move she had practiced with Bran, one that injured and would slow a man down.

But Jay was faster than Bran, even when taken by surprise.
Grabbing her elbow, he pulled her across his chest, locking her arm in place before forcing the knife from her hand. She found her back pressed firmly to his front, her arm twisted behind her and the knife against her throat.

She felt the sting of cold metal as the blade touched the base of her throat. His scent assaulted her, a mix of sweat, leather, straw and something exotic that she couldn't place, and she felt his breath, warm on the back of her neck in the night air. Pins and needles spread through her body wherever it was flush against his and her heart was beating so loud she was certain he could hear it in the dead silence.

Time stopped....

... until he let out a quiet chuckle, his whole frame shaking gently. Something in the sound was genuine, like he found the situation legitimately amusing. While the sound was pleasant as it floated past her ear, she did not share in his amusement - particularly not when the knife, still held at the base of her throat, nicked the skin, eliciting a gasp from her. She instantly cursed herself for keeping the blade so sharp, but then again, she had never expected it to be her own skin bearing the attack. The wound wasn’t deep, barely drawing blood, but for some reason, despite the situation, she hadn’t thought he would actually harm her.

Sensing her flinch, Jay carefully removed the knife from her neck, tossing it away. For a second, she thought she might be able to wiggle free but then his free hand wrapped across her body to grip her left wrist. The move pinned her even closer to him, and something in the pressure of his fingers told her she wouldn't be escaping easily. He was still much taller and stronger than her, and very much in the advantageous position.

Dipping his head, his warm breath fanning her ear, he finally broke the silence with a whisper.

"And here I thought we were finally starting to become friends."

Had it been one of her brother throwing her words from the other night back at her with that amount of insolence, she was certain she would have been incited to fight even harder.

As it was, the lilt of his deep voice, the words rolling off of his tongue, sent a shiver down her spine and left her breathless. As if understanding her discomfort, she felt him smile as his lips moved to brush the shell of her ear. For an instant, something foreign burned through her body, her eyes fluttering as her head fell back against his chest, inhaling sharply.
His grip tightened on her wrists, sending a bolt of pain through each arm, but she hardly noticed - her senses were suddenly so overwhelmed by **him**. Her brain was foggy, bereft of coherent thought.

And then his lips ghosted down her neck as he breathed in, leaving a trail of burning skin. For a moment, she thought she might collapse from the sensation when he paused at the juncture of her shoulder, wisps of his dark hair brushing her skin. The feather touches of his hair and the warmth of his lips on her cold skin was leaving her in a state of confusion, scared of her physical reaction but longing for more.

So caught up with the feelings roiling through her body, she failed to notice him release her left arm, allowing it to fall limply to her side. His hand slid up her body, making her breath catch, his fingers moving to trace the line of her jaw.

She felt him nibbling the skin of her neck and her body seemed to betray her as a low moan escaped her lips. These were all new sensations, and she felt like she was drowning as he gently turned her face towards him.

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**Rhaegar**

He didn't know what had led him to follow her. He certainly didn't know what drove him as he disarmed her, pinning her small frame to him. In that instant, he was overcome by a need to be close to her, to trail his hands down her body. He attempted to make light of the situation, taunting her as they had all done over the past days. He had meant to say more, to challenge her as he moved his lips to the shell of her ear.

But then she had leaned into him, either consciously or unconsciously, her head tilting back and leaving her pretty, pale neck on display.
Rhaegar was not a man of passion. It was near impossible to find him in the company of whores and he had never been interested in maintaining a mistress. In truth, he had rarely been driven by sexual desires like so many men. He was no maid, but no woman had aroused within him such lust or desire that might warrant conducting himself in the manner of most men.

None of that mattered in this moment as something snapped - his mind went blank and his body took over.

Rhaegar couldn't help himself, and his lips started to trail slowly down the girl's neck. Something about her made his blood boil, made him bolder, perhaps even reckless as his lips stopped their path down her neck at the juncture of her shoulder. He felt her shiver as he skimmed his hand up her body, his fingers moving to caress her jawline.

He wanted to kiss her - no, it was more than that. He wanted to consume her.

As if driven by the thoughts crossing his mind, he gently nibbled her neck and was rewarded with a whisper of a moan. His fingers coaxed her face to turn to the side, moving to place a feather of a kiss to her jaw. She was relaxed in his arms and her eyes were fluttering as he went to kiss her lips.

There was no warning of an impending attack other than a flash of black fur when suddenly a massive weight crashed into them, toppling them into a snowbank off to the side of the stable’s entry. The girl fell partially on top of him, her arm flaring out in an attempt to soften her landing but catching in her dark cloak, keeping her secured against him as they landed on the ground.

A cloud of white engulfed them, the snow cushioning the fall as the girl’s slight figure pressed into his left side, her head resting against his shoulder. As the girl struggled to release her arm from the bind of her cloak, the massive weight returned to clamber on top of them. He couldn’t help but grunt when a large paw landed on his thigh, bruised from one of Arthur’s practice strikes. When his mind finally caught up to the unfolding situation, he found himself face to face with the girl’s enormous black direwolf, who stood with a paw on each of them.

“Nymeria! What are you-" the girl’s cry was quickly transformed into giggles as the wolf dipped its large snout to lick the girl’s face. He could feel her giggles through his chest, the sweet sound piercing the cold air. He felt his face shift from confused grimace to amused smile as the girl pressed further into him as Nymeria thoroughly cleaned her mistress’s face.

He felt the direwolf shift, the paws digging into him again, and then he was staring into intense blue eyes. The direwolf’s muzzle hovered above him, fangs bared and he held his breath. The girl’s giggles faded as she recovered from her laughing fit, tilting her face to observe the interaction.
The direwolf held his gaze for an unbelievably long moment, refusing to move.

“Nymeria, be gentle. You’re scaring the poor boy.”

He could hear the laughter lingering in her voice, and he would have quipped back with a witty remark in response to being called a “poor boy” had he not been in such a precarious situation.

*This is it. The Silver Prince, slain by the pet direwolf of some girl with whom he had become infatuated.*

The direwolf shifted again and Rhaegar flinched, but instead of fangs tearing at his skin, he felt the wet caress of Nymeria’s rough tongue.

The girl let out another peel of laughter as he allowed the tension to ease from his body, grateful the direwolf was slobbering all over him instead of tearing his limbs off. He had no doubt that the beast could dismember him before Arthur and Oswell reached them.

“I don’t think she likes being excluded,” the girl said between giggles, “she’s only ever had to share me with Silver and Tor.”

Nymeria had decided she was satisfied with the cleanliness of Rhaegar’s face, and jumped off of him into the courtyard.

As soon as Nymeria’s weight was gone, the girl slid off of him to sit cross-legged in the snow, her legs lightly pressed against his side.

For the second time in a span of minutes, Rhaegar’s breath was taken away - though this occurrence was not due to the impending danger of a snarling direwolf.

No, this was a different type of danger altogether.

The girl’s pale face was flushed from laughter and the cold, her cheeks rosy and her gray eyes
flashing with unrestrained joy. She had flecks of snow caught in her long braid laying across her shoulder, curls of dark hair flying loose around her face. Her pink lips were pulled up into a smile that sent happiness through his soul.

*Seven hells, she is stunning.*

They were completely silent as he slowly followed her to sit up, his eyes never leaving her - he thought that perhaps he could look at her like this for the rest of his life, stuck in this moment forever.

Once he was sitting up, he reached his hand out to brush the snow from the crown of her head, allowing his hand to follow the fall of her braid. She blushed prettily as his fingers grazed her jaw and he couldn’t help himself from speaking.

“Gods, you are beautiful,” he murmured, as he dragged the tips of his fingers over her cheek.

Her smile faded slightly as her mouth dropped open in a surprised “oh.”

He continued to stare at her, oblivious to anything else around them as he tried to memorize every detail about her. Part of him appreciated the futility of falling for this wild girl, but it was quickly becoming hard to be rational around her.

“Are you going to kiss me?” She asked quietly, and he noticed that her smile was gone, her face shifting from amusement to innocent curiosity.

For an instant, he was struck by how young she was. It was easy to forget that she barely looked fifteen when she was here staying at a deserted castle on the Wall alone, more than capable of surviving the brutal climate and defending herself.

He paused the movement of his hand, his fingertips resting at the edge of her jaw.

“Only if you’d like me to.”

She looked thoughtful for a moment, staring at him with those wide, stormy eyes, before she smiled shyly, gazing up at him through her long lashes, “I think I’d like that.”
He felt his lips tug up into a smile as he leaned forward. Tilting her chin with the pads of his fingers, he gently pressed his lips to hers. Merely a brush of a kiss, he still felt a bolt of wonder shoot down his spine at the feeling of her soft lips beneath his.

It took all of his control to remember that she didn’t seem very experienced in this area. Not wanting to spook her, he withdrew just enough to be able to gaze at her. Her eyes opened slowly, her lips parting with her exhale.

“Oh,” The thoughtful expression returned to her face, as she touched her lips with her fingers, a blush still coloring her cheeks, “I didn’t know it could be like that.”

He allowed his fingers to trail down her jaw one more time before pulling back. He wanted to kiss her again, to feel her giggling in his arms once more, to show her what else it could be like. But he didn’t want to push his luck.

He’d never felt like this before. It was as if he had stumbled upon a hidden pool in a clearing, not wanting his presence to disturb the perfection of nature yet yearning to explore the depths. He didn’t want to spoil it.

Deep in his mind, the voice of the Crown Prince was yelling at him to get a hold of himself - now was not the time to be falling for some unknown Northerner of questionable origin.

But she was here, whoever she was, wild and beautiful, sitting with him in the snowy courtyard of a deserted castle on the Wall.

And duty was far off in the distant South.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, we'll get an update from our favorite golden lioness and the real Warden of the North.

A quick reminder: when using POV chapters, what is stated by a character is generally
his or her belief/interpretation - not the definitive rule. Broader topics like duty, honor, ruling, etc. will get more nuanced as multiple characters opine on the themes. Also, I have updated the tags very modestly - additional ones will be added as the story progresses with some of the later relationships (don't want to either spoil or tag before it's actually written in to the story).

Thank you all for the comments, cannot express how awesome it is to see people engaged (I know I say this every week, but it's true!).

As a note, I'm traveling on and off for the next three weeks for work, so the next few chapters may be delayed - apologies in advance!
A Father's Plans

Chapter Notes

AND finally! In honor of the extended delay, I give you... a beast of a chapter! It's a long one (almost double my usual length), but I hope you enjoy :) 

Not as much action, but there is a lot of background information - plus, we finally get some adults in the room (aka the actual power players at the moment).

Please note, this chapter contains wording taken directly from AFFC for Cersei’s dream (with a few modifications to fit the context) - as a reminder, the ASOIAF world belongs to George RR Martin.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cersei

The old woman’s eyes were yellow, and crusted all about with something vile. In Lannisport it was said that she had been young and beautiful when her husband had brought her back from the east with a load of spices, but age and evil had left their marks on her.

She was short, squat, and warty, with pebbly greenish jowls. Her teeth were gone and her dugs hung down to her knees. You could smell sickness on her if you stood too close, and when she spoke her breath was strange and strong and foul.

“Begone,” she told the girls, in a croaking whisper.

“We came for a foretelling,” Cersei told her.

“Begone,” croaked the old woman, a second time.

“We heard that you can see into the morrow,” said Melara. “We just want to know what men we’re going to marry.”
“Begone,” croaked Maggy, a third time.

The girl with the golden curls put her hands upon her hips.

“Give us our foretelling, or I’ll go to my lord father and have you whipped for insolence.”

“Please,” begged Melara. “Just tell us our futures, then we’ll go.”

“Some are here who have no futures,” Maggy muttered in her terrible deep voice.

She pulled her robe about her shoulders and beckoned the girls closer.

“Come, if you will not go. Fools. Come, yes. I must taste your blood.”

Melara paled, but not Cersei. A lioness does not fear a frog, no matter how old and ugly she might be. She took the dagger Maggy offered her, and ran the twisted iron blade across the ball of her thumb. Then she did Melara too.

In the dim green tent, the blood seemed more black than red. Maggy’s toothless mouth trembled at the sight of it.

“Here,” she whispered, “give it here.” When Cersei offered her hand, she sucked away the blood with gums as soft as a newborn babe’s. Her mouth was cold.

“Three questions may you ask,” the crone said, once she’d had her drink. “You will not like my answers. Ask, or begone with you.”

“When will I wed the prince?” Cersei asked.

“Never. You will wed the king.”
“I will be queen, though?”

“Aye.” Malice gleamed in Maggy’s yellow eyes. “Queen you shall be… until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all that you hold dear.”

Anger flashed through the child.

“If she tries I will have my brother kill her.” Even then she would not stop. She still had one more question due her, one more glimpse into her life to come.

“Will the king and I have children?” she asked.

“Oh, aye. Six-and-ten for him, and three for you.”

That made no sense to Cersei. Her thumb was throbbing where she’d cut it, and her blood was dripping on the carpet. How could that be? she wanted to ask, but she was done with her questions.

The old woman was not done with her, however.

“Gold shall be their crowns and gold their shrouds,” she said. “And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar shall wrap his hands about your pale white throat and choke the life from you.”

Cersei jerked awake, gasping for air. Her hand came up immediately to her neck, feeling her rushing pulse and the straining of her throat as she pulled air into her lungs.

It had been months since she had a nightmare revisiting that fateful day, before the tournament when her future had seemed to disappear in a cloud of dragonfire.

Father claimed that that future was still a reality. But she was weary of waiting, and Father refused to discuss his plans with her. Her Prince remained in the North and she remained in the dark.

It was only natural that Cersei’s mind floated to that foretelling. It gave her hope. It gave her assurance. Maggy the Frog had said she would be Queen.
Cersei rose from bed, changing into a new slip and a robe. After calling for her handmaidens to help her prepare for the day, she sat at her vanity to brush her golden locks. A classic Lannister trait, her blonde hair was one of her greatest sources of pride - she could sit and brush her hair in the looking glass for hours. The view was certainly far superior to staring at some of the ladies of Court.

Cersei remembered that day, when she and her childhood companion Melara Hetherspoon had gone to find Maggy the Frog. Tales in Lannisport spoke of the old woman’s ability to foretell the future. Cersei had known that her father intended to propose the marriage between her and the Crown Prince at the upcoming Tournament at Lannisport, but in spite of Aunt Genna’s guarantees that she should trust her father, Cersei had been determined to learn the specifics of her future herself, dragging Melara along.

A harmless trip, they thought, for the witch would surely give them what they wanted. Cersei was a Lannister of Casterly Rock, she always got what she wanted.

The trip had not been harmless.

Poor Melara, they said, to fall down a well to her death. Such a sweet girl, they said, a good match for the heir of Casterly Rock.

But Melara had wanted to take Jaime away from Cersei. The scheming girl had reached too high and had simply fallen from grace as punishment. That the fall happened to occur in reality, and down a well no less, was only a matter of bad luck. The Seven never rewarded those that attempted to raise above their level. And in the end, Melara had been weak.

Cersei hated weakness.

A knock on her chamber door stirred her from her thoughts. She bid the visitor enter, pausing the strokes of her brush long enough to take in the appearance of the Lannister guard bowing in the doorway.

“Lady Cersei, your Lord Father demands your presence.”

“Thank you, Ser. Please tell my father I will be along shortly.”
“Pardon me, my Lady, but the Lord Hand commanded I escort you directly.”

Cersei sighed exasperatedly - she was nowhere near presentable - but a summons from her father was not something to trifle with. She had largely escaped his notice over the last weeks, allowing her to hold court with her growing group of young noblewomen. The Queen was poor company for the younger generation, particularly compared to someone of Cersei’s beauty and wealth. Cersei was more than happy to fill the space - the girls were tittering fools for the most part, but they stroked Cersei’s vanity and proved quite useful in both the accumulation and dissemination of gossip. Naturally, such skills were valuable at a place like Court, where reputation and rumors were far stronger forces than honesty.

Cersei began dressing, fuming silently at the delay of her handmaidens. When they finally arrived, Cersei came close to slapping one of them when the stupid girl almost dropped her emerald necklace. As it was, she had a mind to dismiss the girl for her tardiness and lack of attention.

Alas, she could not tarry. Even she knew how tense things had become between the King and his Hand in the absence of the Crown Prince. Cersei didn’t understand the King’s dislike of her family, given all of the time and dedication her father had spent on the realm. Since Aerys seemed to have little interest in most of the responsibilities, Father practically ruled Westeros for him - he should be rewarding the Lannisters, not punishing them.

In any case, the King refused to be in the same room with any Lannister without at least three Kingsguard present. This in itself didn’t bother Cersei, for she found no joy in spending time with Aerys Targaryen. In fact, Cersei had found that she could hardly stand any of the Targaryens currently in residence. The only Targaryen she wished to spend time with remained far away in the savage North.

She prayed to the Seven everyday that her Prince would be returning to her soon.

Despite her haste, Cersei took a final glance in the looking glass, smiling at her reflection.

Even when hurried, Cersei knew she was still one of the most beautiful women at Court. The bodice of her gown cut low across her ample bosom, her small waist emphasized by the tight laces of the boned corset. A deep emerald with swirling golden embroidery covering the overskirt, Cersei’s gown complemented her bright green eyes and flowing golden mane. Cut in the current style of Court given the lingering winter, the long dagged sleeves draped generously, while the thick layers of silk filled out the full skirt to skim the floor. A flawless emerald necklace hung across her collarbone, the finishing touch to an immaculate image.
Head held high with a smile shining on her beautiful face, Cersei allowed the Lannister guard to escort her to her father’s solar. On the way in, she passed some petty Lord who, while looking quite frustrated, still managed to take in her appearance appreciatively.

Men just couldn’t help themselves.

Once alone, Cersei dipped into a quick curtsy in front of her father’s desk before taking a seat. She set about arranging her skirts, addressing her father, “You summoned me, my Lord Father?”

Tywin Lannister stood behind his desk, his hands folded behind his back. He was a tall man, over six feet, with the wide shoulders of a knight and the poise of a king. He was dressed in dark gold and crimson, deeper shades of their house colors. He was still a relatively young man with, his golden hair cropped close and his beard well maintained. He was also a formidable man - his face hardly ever showed emotion and his eyes were a cold and calculating green flecked with gold. Cersei was quite certain he hadn’t smiled since her mother Joanna passed away birthing her monster of a brother, Tyrion.

If Tywin Lannister’s hard gaze did not instill fear, then his powerful voice was certain to do so.

“I have spoken to the Small Council, and we have agreed that it is time for the Crown Prince to return - the King has been convinced of the merit of having his heir back at Court.”

Cersei’s heart skipped a beat at the news. “When will he return?”

“The King has just dispatched the summons this morning. King Aerys demanded that Prince Rhaegar return by the King’s nameday celebrations.”

The King’s nameday celebrations were in less than three moons. Cersei could barely contain her glee - her Prince was returning to her!

“It will be your job to entertain the Prince. It is time for him to marry, and we must ensure that House Lannister is best poised to be the only option.”
Cersei waved away the concern, smiling genuinely at her dear father, “Worry not, Father. I am certain that Prince Rhaegar will be happy to have the only daughter of House Lannister at his side.”

But Father was not so easily swayed, as he glared at her attempt at dismissing the matter. “Nothing is ever certain, Cersei. I need you to ensure he chooses you.”

Cersei scoffed, “Who could possibly present a better case?”

“The King has already declined the match in the past. You will need to draw the Prince’s eye in order to make him choose you in spite of the King’s previous disapproval.”

She frowned - Rhaegar was a good man, everyone said so. Even Father had commented on the Prince’s commitment to responsibility and duty. Would he willingly go against his father? “But what if King Aerys still says no?”

“Then perhaps it would be best for it to no longer be Aerys’ decision.”

“What do you mean?”

“That is not of your concern. You are to focus on garnering the Prince’s attention, by any means necessary. You will not let me down in this.”

“Of course not, Father.”

Finally, I will be a princess. And then, Queen.

Cersei smiled at the thought of her dreams finally coming true.

“Good. Your brother will be visiting King’s Landing in a few moons. I expect you to behave yourself while he is here.”

Jaime! I knew the Seven would compensate for all my heartbreak!
“We are not children, Father.”

“On the contrary, you are very much still children.”

Cersei bristled at her father’s tone, but it was Father’s next words which truly sparked her displeasure.

“We will be arranging your brother’s marriage as soon as possible. It is my intention to minimize the competition for the Prince’s affections.”

Cersei did not like any part of that statement. Did Father think her incapable of attracting the Prince’s interest? Who else could rival her? He need not sacrifice Jaime for an unworthy woman!

“Father, there is no cause for worrying, no other woman represents an attractive option. We need not force Jaime into something.”

“That is not for you to decide, Cersei. Your brother will do his duty as you will do yours. One can never be certain of anything, particularly not with Targaryens. I will not risk Aerys finding a suitable alternative for the Prince. Lysa Tully will tie the Riverlands to the West, and she is said to be a meek creature - sufficiently docile for even Jaime to tame.”

“Lysa Tully? The girl is said to be dull and plain, and she’s a second daughter!”

“And who, Cersei, would you propose, if you are so knowledgeable. The Stark girl?”

She gasped before responding. “Never! Jaime deserves more than a savage Northern girl or the second daughter of a mediocre Great House.”

Melara had wanted Jaime. No woman would take Jaime away from her.

“I do not hear an alternative option in that statement.”
Because there was no alternative option! She could not envision Jaime marrying anyone else. Jamie was the other half of her soul.

Her father took her silence as submission, but Cersei vowed that this was not over. She would find a way to keep Jaime as hers and only hers.

Father had continued following her lack of response. “That is what I thought. Your attention will be set exclusively upon the Crown Prince. The King is growing more impatient with his son’s bachelor status - the time to act is now, while the Prince still has a choice. Prince Rhaegar may be known more for his love of books and music, but he is a man nonetheless. Some maiden is bound to catch his eye at some point. You must make certain it is you. He is not like his father, he will see the advantages of having a Lannister Princess by his side.”

*A Lannister Princess. A Lannister Queen.*

Cersei may have fallen back on the witch’s foretelling in the early days of her sorrow over the failed betrothal with Rhaegar Targaryen. It had carried her through the deepest days of doubting - doubting her father, her aunt Genna, even her own mother, who had spoken to her daughter of her destiny to become a princess.

But Cersei knew that no prophecy was more reliable than Tywin Lannister.

Tywin Lannister wanted a Lannister on the throne, so Tywin Lannister would put a Lannister on the throne.

Father had a plan and Cersei would be Queen, just as the witch had said.

And once she was Queen, she would ensure no one took her children from her.

No *valonqar* would dare kill a Lannister Queen.
The ruins of Moat Cailin remained blanketed in the thick early morning fog, not even the outlines of the towers visible in the distance.

The weather had been mercifully good the past few days, though it was clear they were chasing the tail end of a large storm if the layer of half melted, refrozen snow covering the ground was any indication. They were still at the very edge of the North, having finally emerged from the bogs of the Neck and, after a week living among the crannogmen of Greywater Watch, Rickard Stark was keen to see the rising ruins that signified their true entrance to his lands.

With every step north, he felt a weight being lifted from his shoulders.

There was something strangely disconcerting about the South to the Warden of the North. Perhaps it was the Stark tendency towards isolation, or the ugly, dead green-browns that characterized the South in the winter. The power games played in the South could not be good for one’s health. The scenery resembled what Rickard imagined was the interior of most Southerners souls - something once beautiful, but slowly rotting due to external forces of nature.

Rickard, like most Northerners, held a certain disdain for the ways of the Southerners. ‘Twas only natural, being of the blood of the First Men, to view those of Andal descendence with some degree of hostility. The history of the North’s isolation from the rest of the Seven Kingdoms was a long one, even spanning before the Targaryen conquest. But it had been the moment that Torrhen Stark knelt to Aegon the Conqueror that remained seared into the minds of the Starks.

The North remembers.

Rickard understood King Torrhen’s decision - the Targaryens had arrived with fire and blood, their dragons an unmatchable power. Rather than subject his people to the flames of dragonfire, Torrhen had knelt and willingly become the Warden of the North.
But no Northern swords made up the Iron Throne. No Targaryen had conquered the North by force. And now, the dragons were gone, nothing but the frail bones of a majestic animal caged for too long.

Rickard Stark knew better than to cage something so stunningly wild.

Such knowledge was why when his young daughter had returned from her little retreat at Queensgate carrying two direwolf pups in her arms, Rickard had easily made the decision to allow her to raise them. Of course, he had forced her to defend her arguments for keeping the pups - as the only daughter in a doting family, Lyanna was at high risk of becoming spoiled - but the exercise was more for her education. Rickard Stark would have never allowed the physical representation of House Stark to be left to die.

Had Rickard Stark been a superstitious man, he might have viewed the direwolves’ arrival at Winterfell as a sign of approval, sent by the Old Gods. Signs of the re-emergence of a more powerful, more independent North. That an extended winter followed the reappearance only fed the flames.

Alas, he was not such a man, yet all the same he heard the gossip spreading around the North. On more than one occasion, he had heard the common folk mutter of the appearance of the direwolves riding alongside Rickard and Lyanna as a harbinger of things to come, with whispers of the Kings of Winter not far behind. Like all such tales, the Lord of Winterfell put a halt to the rumors. For now, it was better the direwolves remain as the North was, tamed in isolation.

Rickard had heard the news from King’s Landing, so he knew of the King’s declining mental state. Unlike Rickard’s careful curation of tales permitted outside the North - Northern bannermen were incredibly loyal, and proved most useful in such endeavors - the people of the capital passed along their stories readily.

The King’s madness warranted caution, but his lack of focus on smaller business matters around Westeros permitted some measure of opportunity, should one conduct matters with care; though this trip had further cemented Rickard’s beliefs, he was not certain of all of his decisions thus far met this standard of care.

His decision to send his second son, Eddard, to foster with Lord Arryn in the Vale, was one of those decisions.

After completing his business in Riverrun with Lord Tully, Rickard had made his way to the Inn at the Crossroads, where he was to meet Ned. The Inn was close to the entrance to the Vale, and thus
presented an appropriate meeting place for the two Stark men without seriously inconveniencing either.

His son had arrived a few days late with a boisterous Robert Baratheon in tow. Despite the Stormlord’s presence, the stay had been pleasant, an opportunity to learn about the man Rickard’s son was becoming.

Ned had done well under Lord Arryn’s tutelage. While Ned had perhaps taken on some of Jon Arryn’s characteristics, his temperament nonetheless resembled Rickard’s own far more than his other children. Lacking the easy charm of his siblings, Ned remained quiet and thoughtful, with a firm grasp on the concept of honor.

Jon Arryn was one of the few good men that Rickard had found in the South, a man committed to honor and duty. Rickard and Jon had met during the War of the Ninepenny Kings, when they were still young men, eager to prove themselves. The two of them, along with Steffon Baratheon, had arranged for their sons to foster together, eventually deciding on the Vale as a good intermediate location. Maester Norbert had facilitated the arrangement, as he had done with Brandon’s fostering in Barrowtown. Rickard had three other children and Steffon two, while Jon had not been blessed with any.

It had been five years since Ned had returned to the North. Rickard had not expected such a thing to be significant, but now he thought that perhaps that period of time was too long. For, while Rickard could see his son had grown into a thoughtful young man, he worried about whether Ned had lost sight of his Northern roots. Ned would one day be one of Brandon’s bannermen in the North - it would not do for him to forget the Northern strength and blunt way of living.

In any case, Ned was a testament to the Stark name, and Rickard was happy to see Jon Arryn’s positive influence.

Apparently, neither Jon Arryn nor Ned had rubbed off on Ned’s foster brother.

Robert Baratheon resembled his father Steffon in looks alone, with the typical black hair and piercing blue eyes of the Lords of Storm’s End. But Steffon’s intelligent gaze and burly kindness seemed to be lacking in his oldest son. While Robert had a way with other men, his gregarious stories attracting their attention and approval, Rickard did not see the respect for others that had been present in both Steffon and his wife, Cassana. Ned claimed that most of the Stormlands were happy with Robert, seeing as he was a warrior and a generous Lord, but it seemed, from their stories, that Robert was hardly ever in residence at Storm’s End.
Given that the Stormlord had requested the hand of his daughter in marriage, Rickard’s concerns were more focused upon the type of man Robert was and the value he placed on those he viewed as something less than equal, primarily his treatment of women.

In truth, the young man’s conduct towards the ladies at the inn was disgraceful. The fact that mere hours after pushing a suit for Lyanna, Robert deemed such actions appropriate in the presence of his potential future good-father made the situation even more troubling.

One night, Ned had tried to argue in favor of his friend’s whoring, mentioning that it was just a phase that all young men went through.

“Son,” Rickard had said, “it has not been so long since I too was a young man. While I am aware such actions occur, it is more the public and outrageous manner in which your friend conducts such relationships that is the disgrace. And I do not see you acting in such a manner? Are you not a young man like all young men?”

Ned had become noticeably uncomfortable, blushing at such language. Ned’s rebuttal, taking a few minutes to arrive during which Robert left the common room with a blushing barmaid on each arm, was apt though.

“There are rumors that Brandon is no better.”

As he did that night, Rickard sighed. It was true, news of Brandon’s behavior had become widespread. And perhaps it was the similarities between his own son and the Baratheon lord that were the key source of Rickard’s discomfort at the idea of giving his daughter’s hand to the man.

Rickard loved his son, and had largely turned a blind eye to his more unsavory habits, but seeing another Lord exhibiting such attributes had been a figurative slap to the face. If this was the type of man who might marry his precious daughter, what type of man was he agreeing to give Catelyn Tully to?

And while Lyanna and Brandon loved each other—the wolf’s-blood bonding them even more than the Stark blood that ran through their veins—they were also like flint and stone, fire always waiting to spark and burn out of control. In Rickard’s experience, such personalities had a high probability of leading to disaster.

Thus, Rickard was concerned about sending Lyanna to a man such as Robert. How would Robert
treat a wife if this was the manner in which he treated women? Lyanna respected men based on their actions, and she had a strong commitment to duty and responsibility. His daughter might love Brandon, but she hated his disregard for his duty - Rickard had seen the disappointment in her eyes whenever he conducted himself in a disgraceful manner. In her eyes, as the heir to Winterfell, Brandon was a representative of House Stark and the North. His conduct reflected on them, on Winterfell, on the North as a whole.

Rickard could only imagine how she would react to a husband behaving in a similar manner. Yes, she would do her duty, but she was too strong-willed to do anything but loathe a husband for dishonoring himself.

In addition, the fact that Robert claimed to love Lyanna when he had never met her was preposterous - Rickard was not prone to fits of laughter like his wolf-blooded children, but even he had to contain his chuckle at the idea.

Robert did not know Lyanna in the slightest, and she, like Rickard, would see straight through such sentimental falsities. That Robert thought such a statement would convince Rickard of the merits of his suit made the Lord of Winterfell take him all the less seriously. Robert may think he desired Ned’s sister, but he knew not what he was taking on.

The Stormlord had found something he wanted and had simply thought that to get it, he need just ask. His fury when Rickard had denied him until returning to Winterfell revealed Robert’s somewhat rash view of conducting business. Marriage arrangements were political agreements, often developed over many years before consolidating into a formal contract.

Even if the alliance were the thing Rickard Stark most desired, he would never accept the offer so quickly or thoughtlessly.

Yet, his concern was not exclusively about Lord Baratheon.

This trip had also revealed to Rickard something he had quite forgotten - the growing discrepancy between his daughter and the typical Westerosi high-born lady.

Catelyn Tully was roughly of age with Lyanna. The similarities between the women ended there. Catelyn was the picture of poise and grace, courteous and demure but well-spoken when questioned. She was, as Hoster described, the ideal Southern noblewoman; she would be a testament to any Lord as a wife.
Rickard had no reason to doubt Hoster’s word, though he worried that such a docile woman would do little to rein in Brandon’s behavior. Rickard himself had always viewed his wife Lyarra as a partner - he loved her for both her softness and her harsh edges, for she challenged him when necessary. His wife had made him a better man.

Nonetheless, Lyarra had still been a lady, even within Southern parameters. She may have ridden astride, but she still viewed her role as a mother and wife as her foremost duty. Lyarra had been caring and kind-hearted, with the Stark iron will emerging only if prompted.

Lyanna was nothing like what most Southerners considered a proper lady.

When watching the courteous manners of Catelyn Tully, Rickard had pondered whether he should have searched for another woman to help Lyanna along. He had no doubt a septa would have been dispatched promptly by his ruthless daughter, who held firm to the worship of the Old Gods. And after the disastrous incident with the Southern widow Maester Walys had sent for, Rickard had never thought to approach the topic again.

Though she may not act the proper lady, Lyanna was brave, smart, and caring - she had a kind heart like her mother and a deep love for life and laughter. The truth was, Lyanna was his little girl, his pride and joy. While there had been attempts to mould her into a woman acceptable to southern society, Rickard had usually found he had no desire to curb her wildness. Over the years, he had decided he was better off not coddling her. Not that she would have allowed it, willful child that she was, but her strength came in her independence.

Even before his wife had died, Lyanna had always been more inclined to chase after her older brothers, running around with a toy sword and muddying her dresses. He remembered the look on his daughter’s face at five when he tried to explain how she would not be learning how to become a knight like her brothers. His little girl was so confused, so angry at the world and at society for not granting her the life she wished for.

Things had gotten worse after his wife’s death. Lyanna had spurned all the women’s arts after her mother’s death, explaining to him that she couldn’t do it - it was too strong a reminder of Lyarra.

Grateful that his sons were fostering so that he needn’t worry about their education, Rickard had left his daughter largely in the care of Maester Norbert, a caring older man who had been at Winterfell for ages.

Both of them blinded by grief, Rickard had allowed Lyanna her freedom and had encouraged her when she sought to take over some of her mother’s duties. In the beginning, he had given Lyanna
responsibility because he didn’t know how else to temper her - he didn’t know how to raise a daughter, let alone one so wild. He had hoped she would learn to appreciate a wife’s position within the keep, for it was to be her duty and burden in life.

And she certainly did; in fact, Rickard couldn’t believe how well his young daughter took to the tasks.

Lyanna had boundless energy and enjoyed being in motion - in the early days of her taking over as the Lady of Winterfell, he would often find her in the kitchens, hands and face covered in flour, learning how the cooks made the basic fare of the day. She refused to stand by and watch people do jobs without her understanding what went into the process. Not only did she seek to understand, she sought to help, which earned her the admiration of all of the staff within a brief time.

It was these characteristics that made her the perfect choice to serve in Rickard’s stead - she threw herself into any task with such vigor that it was impossible to not respect it. When she made a mistake, it was quickly catalogued and never made again, a trait that also made her such a skilled archer and knives woman. Rickard had no doubt that had he permitted her to train with a sword, she would have been a fearsome swordswoman as well.

Now though, Rickard was growing concerned about how the South would take his daughter’s unconventional nature.

On one of her last days alive, Rickard had promised his sweet wife, Lyarra, he would wait to commit to any betrothal for Lyanna until she was sixteen. Now that Lyanna had achieved her majority, Rickard found it hard to discuss letting her go.

His reasons went well beyond the personal – he loved his daughter, but had always known she would be married off. Instead, he found himself loath to lose such a capable Lady of Winterfell. In many ways, Lyanna had compensated for Brandon’s poor grasp of his responsibilities, whether from incompetence or pure lack of will, and she’d made herself virtually irreplaceable. She had a hand in the running of every aspect of Winterfell, had assisted in handling matters with his bannermen, both nobility and common folk, and had earned the respect of much of the North with her wit and quick intelligence. While Southerners may not appreciate her more impulsive whims, all Northerners admired her wildness and deep love for the North.

To Rickard Stark, she was a true Northerner, a born leader, a daring and kind lady.

She would make an incredible lady wife to any man, if he were smart enough to grant her responsibility. Lyanna had learned her studies from the Maester, but more importantly, she had real
tangible experience running a castle. In fact, after six moons of his absence, she even had experience ruling the largest region of Westeros. A wise man would use that experience, would take advantage of her expertise to improve his own castle and land.

Yet, most men were not so wise. Most men viewed women as no more than pretty trophies to bear their heirs. Unconventional women were not appreciated in the South. Even in the North, such women were viewed as exceptions - noble lords still sought a subservient wife, not an equal.

Robert Baratheon, in the end, was not unique.

Ultimately, Lyanna’s marriage was a political arrangement, a piece in the puzzle that she herself had already helped build. Even she understood the role she was to play - after all, she had been integral in sealing the fate of her own brother when she drafted the contract for the Tully-Stark marriage. It was Rickard’s only hope that he would be able to find a decent man for her to accompany a favorable agreement.

Perhaps to Robert’s surprise, Rickard did not necessarily need the Stormlands. An alliance was already loosely in place between the Stormlands and the North given Ned’s close friendship with the Lord of Storm’s End - the benefit of the fostering plan. And while Maester Walys was seeking to develop the North’s influence at Court, Rickard was more focused on the consolidation of power in the North.

A more independent North.

To some extent, Rickard considered Roose Bolton a better strategic choice. It would allow Lyanna to remain in the North, while appeasing the second most powerful northern Lord. Roose seemed a decent man, a few years Lyanna’s senior, quiet intelligence though there was sometimes a gleam of cruelty in the young Lord’s gaze.

Rickard’s only fear was that a marriage would not be enough to appease Lord Bolton’s ambitions. It was no secret that the Bolton’s had long harbored an interest in Stark blood - they wanted to rule the North in truth. Allowing the Boltons to have a Stark daughter would embed Stark blood in the Bolton line, would grant the Bolton’s some degree of claim over Winterfell, should tragedy strike the main line of House Stark. That was something that did not sit well with Rickard.

Alas, he had spent the last few years pushing off any thoughts of Lyanna's marriage, and he found himself disliking the idea more with every passing moment. Surely a few more months of delay would not hurt. It would certainly please Lyanna and relieve Rickard of an endless headache.
A freezing wind blew across their party, clearing away both his thoughts and the heavy mist. Suddenly, the large ruins of Moat Cailin appeared in front of them, only a few minutes ride away. Had the fog not cleared, men unfamiliar with the terrain might have found themselves stumbling into the remains.

With soaring dark grey stones covered in moss and snow, Moat Cailin rose from the earth like a quiet sentinel, guarding the entrance to the North. While it might be a shadow of the mighty fortress it once was, the castle was a relic of the First Men, speaking to the ancient history of the North. It was a legacy the Starks held firm to as descendants of the First Men, the legacy of the Kings of the North.

History said that the old Kings of the North could stand at Moat Cailin and repel hosts ten times the size of their own. Every Southron army had been broken by the fortress for thousands of years.

Moat Cailin would once again become a symbol of the North.

A light dusting of snow remained upon the packed earth of the ruins. The workers had set up camp in one portion of the castle, building temporary workshops to aid them in the reconstruction efforts. It was a large scale project, but Rickard was being careful, keeping the number of workers at a minimum. He could not risk news of his reconstruction plans spreading too widely. The rebuilding of an ancient fortress of the Kings of the North might not send the right message.

As they rode into the small camp of workers, his party was met by Acolyte Brynden and the Master Builder that Rickard had recruited for the reconstruction of the castle. A brusque man who had left one of the Mountain tribes to pursue construction work, Harrin had assisted on a few other projects around the North. He was enormous, standing tall despite his advanced age, with a strong Northern accent that even Rickard struggled to understand on occasion. Nonetheless, the man was an effective taskmaster, driving his men efficiently and effectively, without veering towards cruelty.

Nature was cruel enough in the North.

“My Lord, it is good to see you.”

“You as well, Acolyte. Harrin,” Rickard clasped the burly man’s hand in greeting, “I am glad to see you both enduring the elements.”

It was Harrin who responded, his gruff voice and heavy Northern accent almost swallowing the
words, “As you well know, we are made of sterner stuff in the North, milord.”

“And don’t I thank the Old Gods everyday for it, Harrin. So long in the South has made me appreciate my Northern brethren all the more.”

“That is good to hear, milord.”

“So tell me, how goes our project?”

Acolyte Bryden gestured for Harrin to begin, so the older man turned to a rudimentary table, where a large map of the layout of Moat Cailin lay in the center, surrounded by more detailed drawings. Rickard had seen the plans over the many months Brynden had spent sketching them, but several looked far more developed than the initial sketches he had seen.

“As largely expected, work has been hampered by weather. We ‘ave been careful to avoid significant injury, and cleared a large part of the original foundation in the inner keep. Restoration of the leanin’ tower will be more difficult, so we started on tha’ tower,” Harrin pointed to the Gatehouse tower, “and shoulda been further along if the last storm hadn’t hit.”

Acolyte Brynden spoke up to provide additional context, “The ice can be dangerous for the men, and the chill has caused some frostbite, so we have been cautious given the small work crew.”

Rickard nodded, understanding - the cold could be more deadly than a sword in the North. Harrin continued when Brynden added no more.

“We need mo’ men to work on tha’ tower and keep at same time. Milady said we shoulda gotten more supplies.”

“Lyanna?” Rickard confirmed with the men, who both nodded though it was Brynden who elaborated.

“Lady Lyanna has been monitoring the progress steadily. She approved shifting focus to the Gatehouse tower. She mentioned in her last letter that more supplies should be arriving soon, but she recommended we work on additional clearing around the front entrance in the meantime.”
“I agree with the latter. The supplies has likely been delayed if the storm hit you as badly as you say - such a storm would only become a larger problem as it moved north. If the timber shipment did not make it to White Harbor, the supplies would not have been sent either.”

The men nodded their understanding, though Harrin seemed much more hesitant. The man was known for his efficiency and had never appreciated delays he deemed unnecessary. Unfortunately, there was nothing Rickard or Lyanna could do about the weather.

In any case, Harrin continued his progress report, “As milady ordered, we begun clearing around the front entrance. With clear weather, will be done in a fortnight. Cannot use more men there if we to finish the tower.”

It was a fine course of action - with supplies delayed, work would have halted on the inner keep. By working on the additional clearing, the men would still be fully occupied until the supplies arrived. It was a smart move by his daughter, and Rickard smiled to himself at the thought of Lyanna directing such a project. Perhaps he’d give her an even larger role in the project for a time.

Harrin finished his brief update and then excused himself to see to his men. Brynden remained to provide a more detailed commentary on the shifting plans, before discussing any other news Rickard might have missed while on the road.

Eventually, the conversation took an unexpected turn.

“To be honest, my Lord, we were surprised to not see you with your son’s party.”

Rickard frowned, “I told you I would remain in the South far beyond Brandon’s return.”

“How Brandon, my Lord. Lord Eddard. He passed through Moat Cailin not but a few days past.”

“Eddard? Why is he this far north? He was to return to the Eyrie.”

“I know not the details, my Lord, but he was traveling with Lord Baratheon. The Stormlord spoke of his desire to marry Lady Lyanna.” Rickard caught a hint of disapproval in the lilt of Acolyte Brynden’s voice in those final words, and he found he could not disagree.
“I was not aware they had turned North.”

“You did not meet them on the road, my Lord?”

“Nay. I left them at the Inn at the Crossroads and proceeded directly to Greywater Watch. I had no desire to tarry in the Riverlands. We remained with the young Lord Reed for a fortnight.”

“Ah,” observed Acolyte Brynden, likely calculating the timing in his head as Rickard was doing, “they must have passed your party during that time. They are moving substantially slower, given they were not prepared for such a journey.”

Such a conclusion made sense to Rickard, though it was no more reassuring. Rickard had not expected his rebuke of Robert to lead the young man to impulsively embark on a long and dangerous journey north. The fact that Ned had not discouraged such behavior was also concerning, for it either indicated Ned’s inefficacy in tempering such impulsivity, or Robert’s complete disregard for reason.

Unfortunately, Rickard imagined it was likely a mix of both.

The Stormlord was committed, though Rickard thought it might be more due to the challenge. He doubted Robert Baratheon had been told no in his lifetime - he certainly acted like it. It was a similar concern Rickard had with his own heir, Brandon.

In any case, he was not looking forward to returning home to Robert’s suit.

And return he must. Upon hearing the news of the unexpected guests about to arrive at Winterfell’s gates - Lyanna had not mentioned the arrival in her last letter, so it seemed she was unaware of the impending storm to arrive - Rickard informed his men they would stay only a few days, instead of the planned two weeks. Acolyte Brynden would return with them, but Rickard would leave half of the men behind at Moat Cailin in any case, shrinking their party more in order to travel even quicker.

Rickard knew his two wolf-blooded children. When faced with a man like Robert Baratheon, Winterfell might not last more than a few days.

And in truth, Rickard was also concerned about how Lyanna and Brandon would take to the changes in their brother - Ned was not the boy that had left Winterfell all those years ago. And if he
took the side of Robert in the marriage suit…

No, such thoughts were not worth pondering.

His children could be a pack of feral wolves if they so chose, but they were a pack nonetheless. Lyanna’s account of the execution of the Night’s Watch deserter was a perfect example of that. They would never turn their backs on one of their own, even if he had become a Southron wolf.

As Rickard lay down upon his pallet, he felt the bones of his hips creak and pop. He was getting far too old for such extended trips in the middle of winter. Perhaps returning to Winterfell early wasn’t such a bad idea.

Nothing like hot springs and hot tempers to relight the fire in one’s bones.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much for reading, and please feel free to share any thoughts or comments!

Next chapter will be back to the Wall, where the snowstorm hits full force :)

I will still be traveling off and on for the next two weeks for work, but I am hopeful that the next chapter will not be sooo delayed as I have a lot of it drafted already (unlike this chapter, which was basically from scratch). I sometimes get distracted though, and end up writing some of the fun scenes that are yet to come… the good thing is that hopefully drafting those scenes will make posting regularly easier over the long term!
Caught in the Winter Storm

Chapter Notes

Please note, the events contained in the next two/three chapters occur before Rickard’s POV from Chapter 14. It made more sense to keep Cersei’s and Rickard’s POVs together, and I wanted to break up the events at the Wall, as the timeline at the Wall is covered in much greater detail.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arthur

Unfortunately, the girl’s premonitions regarding snowfall from the storm proved accurate, a fact quickly verified at dawn when Arthur awoke to the loud sounds of a crash and a curse echoing across the stones of the tower.

Rapid movements and a jostle down the stairs revealed a very frustrated wildling girl pacing in front of the door opened to the outside world.

The problem was instantly visible, a pile of white spilling into the interior of the room, revealing several feet of snow built up in the entryway, blocking the exit to the courtyard. Arthur recoiled slightly at the sight, reminiscent of the dregs of a horrible sand storm in Dorne. Such occurrences could trap the unsuspecting man for days in the desert.

He shivered, both from the thought and from the freezing wind blowing through the open door.

“The wind must have swept more snow in front of the bloody door!” the girl cried, clearly upset. Arthur could see flecks of snow dusting her clothes in spite of her frantic movements. “We should have moved the horses last night…” The girl’s words turned to phrases mumbled under her breath, too quiet to be discernable, allowing Arthur a second to fully take in the rather precarious situation.
Within a few moments, Arthur felt Rhaegar and Oswell descend the stairs to join them in the room. Both of his friends were visibly perplexed by the image that met them, sleep still lingering at the edges of their consciousness, but Rhaegar turned thoughtful as they watched the girl pace.

Arthur’s mind moved to potential solutions - like any Dornish man, he had learned how to handle such traps in the sand, but he had been a young boy when learning such techniques. Usually structures were better prepared than the abandoned ruins were. As his thoughts churned through scenarios, his best friend pushed past him, approaching the girl.

The Crown Prince surprised Arthur out of his thoughts when Rhaegar reached out to place a gentle hand on the girl’s shoulder, pausing her steps. Her expression morphed into something Arthur had yet to see on her face, an unfamiliar emotion akin to hesitancy, though it was hard to see detail in the marginal grey light that filtered into the room. Rhaegar’s face was only half visible, but Arthur could see from body language that his friend was relaxed.

One thing was clear as the Prince and the wildling stared at each other, both leaning slightly towards the other - the action was remarkably more intimate than any other interaction up to that point. The thought was shockingly troublesome to Arthur.

“I’m sure we will find a way out. Or are you so desperate to leave us?” Rhaegar’s voice rang clear in the small space, gentle teasing accompanying the usual iron tones.

The girl sighed, relaxing noticeably, “I know. But Silver will be unhappy being cooped up - there’s no way to ride in this weather.”

“Gods, you ride every morning. I’m certain Silver will survive a few days of rest?”

“She’s not the only one who gets restless,” the girl grumbled, though it was clear she agreed with Rhaegar’s words.

Rhaegar chuckled, “Surely you can endure as well.”

The girl shrugged, then flashed a smile up at Rhaegar, “I suppose there are worse circumstances than being stuck with friends.”

Rhaegar chuckled again, releasing her shoulder but instead of simply returning his hand to his side,
he brushed his knuckles briefly along her jawline. Even with the limited grey light in the space, Arthur could make out the deep blush across the girl’s face.

Arthur frowned, turning to Oswell, who’d approached him sometime during the interaction. Unlike his own, Oswell’s expression was amused, as if such actions were typical from their Crown Prince.

Rhaegar had turned towards the open door, pushing aside some of the snow that had fallen into the tower. Arthur gathered the girl had attempted to open the door and the snow had collapsed down upon her, the wind causing the door to crash against the wall of the tower.

“It doesn’t seem to be nearly as bad as it looks,” observed Rhaegar from the entrance, where he was testing the weight of the accumulated snow blocking any exit. “The snow is still light, we may be able to clear most of the entrance.”

The girl sighed, exasperated, clearly not calmed by Rhaegar’s pronouncement.

“Aye, most likely the courtyard itself is not as deep, but the snow is too high for me. I need to see to my horses still, and Tor and Nymeria are both still out there.”

Oswell chuckled next to him, clearly entertained by the girl’s frustration as well as the fact that she was upset by. It was indeed a comical picture – the snow blocking the door itself rose to at least the girl’s waist.

“Well,” Rhaegar’s face twisted into a smirk, “‘tis a good thing you have gallant knights to save you from distress, fair lady.” Each of them was roughly a foot taller than her.

The girl rolled her eyes to this, though Arthur thought he could still spot a blush on her cheeks as she shook her head, mumbling under her breath as Rhaegar moved back to her side.

“You Southrons and your gallantry…”

The girl was interrupted as a howl pierced the air, only just preceding the leaping entrance of Tor, who flew through the door in a cloud of snow.
“Tor!” The girl yelped, though she hadn’t flinched like the rest of them. Likely she was used to these quick arrivals of the direwolves – as for Arthur, he had to admit the animals were prone to causing him brief but painful heart attacks.

Normally, in such a situation, Arthur would have felt a twinge of panic or guilt in noting that he and Oswell were positioned poorly to protect Rhaegar, should the direwolf’s arrival been a real threat. At present, however, Arthur was temporarily distracted by the Prince’s hand lingering protectively at the girl’s lower back, how the Prince had moved to protect her more than himself...

“Well,” Oswell observed, “clearly there is a way through.”

The girl laughed in response, having moved from Rhaegar’s side to Tor, whom she was petting affectionately while trying to brush off some of the snow covering his matted fur, “If you are a rash wolf, there’s always a way.”

Arthur sensed she was referencing to more than just the grey direwolf, but it seemed they were not privy to quite enough information to understand the underlying meaning.

On the positive side, Tor’s entrance had removed some of the snow from the doorway - admittedly, much of it was now within the tower, but that was easily dealt with.

It took some time to coordinate efforts to clear at least a path to the courtyard, where Nymeria was prancing around in the fresh snowbanks; at least one warm-blooded animal was appreciating the gift from the gods.

Truth be told, Arthur had to admit— standing in the middle of the courtyard, snow up past his knees and falling around him continuously— was a truly remarkable sight. The ruins of Queensgate were blanketed in a pristine layer of white, the gleaming blue and white ice of the enormous Wall a dominating presence. Falling snow obscured much of the scenery, but it was so quiet and calm, the only noises those produced by the four of them and their animals. At times it was so silent one could hear the gentle sound of the snowflakes landing on top of one another.

It was oddly soothing and deeply moving. It was moments like these when Arthur appreciated what was sometimes said about the North - that there was an innate magic in the land, that despite the cold and sometimes dreary landscapes, the land was thrumming with life.

Once free to make it to the courtyard without drowning in snow, the girl’s mood rapidly improved as
she joined her direwolf in playing in the snow. It was a charming sight; the woman more closely resembled a child at times like these.

The storm had yet to clear completely and darker clouds looked to be rolling in from the South. It was decided they might move the horses into the lower level of the tower after lunch, should the snow start falling heavier.

Back in the tower, the girl directed them to help cook a meal, using some of the remaining elk. Arthur had to admit she was keeping them better fed than even the Night’s Watch had most of the time. Though her cooking was simple, her ability to hunt improved matters immensely - the elk had lasted since they arrived— they would likely eat the last of it that night—but the hares she’d caught the day before would sustain them the next day.

It became clear that afternoon things had changed the night before, when Rhaegar had followed the girl into the courtyard. Something had happened, Arthur could see it as plain as day and he knew Oswell noticed it as well.

It was little things. The shy gazes, the casual touches, the teasing that seemed to hold just a bit more weight than before.

It was like they were drawn to each other. Arthur was certain they didn't even notice they were doing it - Rhaegar's hand flitting to the small of her back before he turned to walk back upstairs, her hand on his arm when she asked him to grab something while she was cooking, his eyes lingering on her figure as she prepared to trudge out to the horses….

Thankfully, the storm hadn’t worsened, so the girl elected to check on the horses after eating, ensuring they too were fed and warm enough. She shooed Rhaegar off when he offered assistance, wrapped herself in her fur cloak, and left to descend into the chilly ruins, Nymeria at her side.

Once the girl had slammed the door shut downstairs, Arthur turned to look at his best friend sitting by the fire. Arthur wanted his friend to be happy - and he certainly seemed to be smiling more - but this did not feel like a good idea at all.

“Something changed between you two.” He had planned on formulating a question, but the phrase came out as a statement of fact. After all, it was clearly obvious to Oswell too.

“With the girl?” Rhaegar asked, then shrugged, “I suppose.”
Oswell chuckled, “What, did you somehow meet in your dreams?”

“It certainly felt like a dream, but nay, it was real.”

Oswell looked confused, so Arthur offered him an explanation.

“In your deep sleep, you missed our Prince’s departure for a late-night adventure.” Arthur turned back to Rhaegar, “Please tell me you haven’t suddenly developed a man’s passions…”

“No, nothing serious. We just… kissed. Once.”

“You kissed once?”

Rhaegar nodded, looking both surprisingly embarrassed and pleased with himself. For a moment, Arthur felt as if he were speaking to a boy of twelve namedays, not a grown man of twenty-one.

“You kissed the girl once and it’s already got you like this?”

Oswell chuckled, “Must have been quite the kiss.”

“I don’t think she has a lot of experience, I didn’t want to scare her.”

“Seven bloody hells,” Arthur looked at his best friend incredulously, “you’re falling for her.”

Rhaegar shrugged, his voice neutral, though his gaze seemed distant, “She’s captivating.”

“You don’t know who she is! We’ve known her mere days. She’s most likely some commoner, though she could still very well be a wildling.”
After years of being offered nearly every maiden of reasonable birth, of course the man would choose such a woman. Where had the rational Crown Prince’s sense gone?

“Wildlings don’t have horses like that. And she doesn’t speak like a commoner,” Oswell interjected.

“Wildlings raid, she could have easily stolen the horses. And she may not speak like a commoner but she doesn’t speak or act like a highborn either.”

“She speaks of duty and responsibility as if she’s known it, and she’s far too knowledgeable to be a commoner,” countered Oswell.

“We are at the furthest edge of the kingdom, in the middle of winter. No self-respecting woman with a drop of noble blood would be found in such a circumstance, let alone act in the manner she has acted with three unknown men.”

“Oh, come now, my friend. You’re Dornish, you should know women like this. She’s harmless.”

“She is most certainly not harmless.”

“Honestly, if she wanted to harm us, I imagine we would already be dead.”

“Physical harm is not my primary concern at this moment.”

“You are worrying too much.”

“And you worry too little. Don’t you wonder who she is, why she is here?”

“Honestly, I don’t think it matters. We will likely never see her again,” Oswell gestured towards Rhaegar who continued to lounge next to the fire, silently watching his friends debate the situation, “He will never see her again. Why not allow him these days of being whoever he wishes to be, a man without the heavy thoughts of duty, prophecies and doom?”

Apparently, that was enough to prompt a dry response from the Prince, “I’m sitting right here, you
Oswell flashed Rhaegar a cheeky smile before turning back to Arthur. “In any case, what would be the solution? Leave? I am quite enjoying all of this sleep. Frankly, this has been the only decent part of this godsforsaken trip to the blasted North.”

Arthur shook his head, realizing that rational thinking was beyond both of his friends. “You are being blind fools.”

Oswell ignored the jab, seating himself across from Rhaegar and watching the grey direwolf, who seemed to nap through their little discussion. “Do you think she will be receptive to the idea of me stealing one of the direwolves?”

As if understanding Oswell’s question, Tor let out a loud growl, baring his vicious fangs though his eyes remained closed.

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow, chuckling while giving a response, “I think that’s a no.”

Arthur glanced between his friends again, who seemed not at all concerned about the situation. Of course, the girl herself was largely harmless, provided she did not choose to aim an arrow at one’s chest. But Arthur knew that irrational thinking ran in the Targaryen family when it came to choosing partners. Not so long ago, Rhaegar’s great-uncle had even given up his crown for a common woman. Rhaegar was in enough of a precarious position with the King as it was - the girl may disappear, but Arthur was worried that should things escalate, her memory might drive his friend to distraction.

And Rhaegar couldn’t afford to be distracted.

The door crashed downstairs, harkening the arrival of the girl who waltzed into the room with Nymeria moments later. Snow was plastered to her small frame, her face bright as it always was when she returned from any activity. She shook off like a dog, a motion immediately imitated by her direwolf, snow and ice falling to pool at the entrance of the chamber.

“The snow is heaviest around the other buildings, but it’s passable if you move around the banks. It should harden in a day or two.” Discarding her heavy fur cloak without a care, she plopped down by the fire among them, her hands moving to remove her soaked boots. “I fed your horses as well. As long as the wind does not get worse, I think they should be fine without. It would be a tight squeeze
with five horses downstairs.”

The girl’s knowledge of the keep was something they were learning went far beyond simply stumbling upon the spot. She had become more forthcoming as the days went on, as all of them settled into a sense of comfortable companionship, and it was clear that she had been here before. Her awareness of buildings and supplies was too vast.

Arthur sensed that such a topic might be a good way to garner more information on her, quietly mentioning such to Rhaegar as the girl and Oswell returned to a lively discussion they’d been having earlier about the advantages of a dirk versus a dagger. Arthur was not nearly as skilled as Rhaegar at subtly fishing for information - another skill his friend had learned long ago from a life spent in King’s Landing.

At the nearest break in conversation, Rhaegar casually brought up the subject with the girl.

“So you’ve been here before, aye?”

The girl nodded, leaning back to rest against Nymeria’s body, “A few times.”

“That’s why you are so familiar with the buildings.”

Another nod and a small smile. It seemed clear Rhaegar would get more from her given whatever budding relations they had...

“Do other people use this place?” There were traces of other human movement after all, pallets and horse feed that was far too recent to be from the last time the castle was fully manned. Then again, it was likely the castle was still used as an outpost in between Castle Black and the Shadow Tower.

She shrugged, “I’ve never seen anyone else. In the summer, I stay upstairs, ‘tis easier to see things from a distance.”

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow, “I didn’t know there was a room upstairs.” Then again, they hadn’t explored nearly as much as they might have, had they been without the girl. Arthur cursed himself silently for the oversight - he and Oswell had scoped out the surrounding ruins, but hadn’t truly explored the tower itself.
She looked at Rhaegar and her smile widened slightly, “Do you want to see it?”

Perhaps he was imagining it, but while the invitation appeared to be for all of them, Arthur understood that there was some silent implication that the words were meant primarily for Rhaegar.

As such, the intended invitee was the one who responded. He, at least, took it as an exclusive invitation.

“I would indeed.”

The girl nodded, pulling on her boots before scrambling to her feet, her hand grasping a fur.

“You should bring a fur, it will be chilly and I’m too lazy to build another fire.”

And just like that, she skipped out of the room, moving to climb up the remaining the stairs. They heard the creak of a door open and the fire flickered momentarily at the slight breeze that moved through the room, before the resounding thud of wood prompted further movement.

Rhaegar rose from his position while Oswell remained as he was, his hand petting one of the direwolves. Clearly he had also understood the invitation was primarily for the Crown Prince.

Arthur stood quickly, his mind briefly picturing the Prince walking straight into a trap. Such a method was certainly effective in getting him away from his guards.

Arthur grabbed Rhaegar’s shoulder as he moved to pass him, murmuring softly, “Rhaegar-”

His friend shot him a glare at the use of his given name, but Arthur continued.

“Just... be careful.”

Oswell snorted behind them, but Arthur chose to ignore him. Not only was Rhaegar his best friend,
but he was also Arthur's responsibility as a Kingsguard.

Rhaegar’s face was shrouded in shadows, the red light of the fire flickering across those sharp Valyrian features making the Prince look otherworldly. Yet his friend’s face softened once he saw the concern written across Arthur’s face and the words had sunk in.

Arthur sighed, realizing his friend would do as he wished; a guard and friend could only do so much in the face of true motivation.

Resigned, he gave a final warning, “I cannot protect you in this.”

Rhaegar offered a goofy smile, one he reserved for only those closest to him, as he clapped Arthur’s shoulder.

“I understand, my friend. I promise to heed your counsel and keep your words in mind.”

But as Rhaegar disappeared into the darkness up the stairs and another thud of wood echoed through the tower, Arthur had a sinking feeling they were well past the moment of heeding counsel.

Rhaegar

That night and the next, after long days of being stuck in the tower as the snow blanketing the keep continued to linger, Rhaegar and the girl escaped to the top of the tower. The room was small, and had likely been used as a lookout, given the many openings in the walls. A few missing slats in the roof had been hastily covered by pieces of wood that were cracked from ice melts and overnight
The two of them sat and watched the storm clouds rolling across the hills and mountains of the North, conversing into the night before fatigue pulled them back to their furs downstairs.

They spoke mostly of the North. Her husky voice strangely melodic, she told him the stories she’d grown up hearing. Sometimes they spoke of dreams, sometimes duty, though conversations about the latter remained vague.

Though she made a few mentions of her family, she remained vague about this topic as well: she'd grown up not far from the fortress, and had first visited with her oldest brother. She had always dreamed of being a warrior, had even thought of running away once. But her father taught her the bow and gave her a knife. She helped around the house. She spoke of days riding and mock battles staged in the snow with her brothers.

In spite of all the rumors of Northerners being savages and living terribly harsh lives, this girl’s childhood sounded far more enjoyable than his own. Her face lit up when she spoke of her family and her home, the good and the bad all approached with an unrelenting vigor for life. He found himself ruefully jealous, hoping that he might pick up some of her joy by merely being in her presence.

Rhaegar knew she wasn’t a wildling at his point as Arthur suspected for her words gave away an underlying sense of duty that only came from having forced responsibility. The more she spoke, the more convinced he was that she had to be from a decent family - mayhaps not higher nobility, but at least some upper merchant class or landless nobility. However, Rhaegar still could not ascertain why she would be here, at the Wall, alone. As far as he knew, nobody really lived in the area between the Wall and Last Hearth.

It seemed the more he learned, the more questions arose.

At the beginning, he’d asked more probing questions, which she effectively evaded for the most part. The more time they spent together, the more perplexed he became - while he enjoyed the mystery, he also wished to know who she was, to have her tell him she was at least the daughter of some lesser noble house. His rational mind refused to give up, and now that he’d started down this path, the dutiful Prince in him began hoping for some small reason which might excuse his actions.

And to some extent he wanted to prove Arthur wrong.
But it seemed she believed in Oswell’s line of thinking, of maintaining anonymity for the freedom it allowed. And she called him out for his questions on that first night.

"If you want to know something, ask it outright. We don’t like vague prying in the North, who likes feeling like they are about to walk into a trap?"

Rhaegar shrugged, "I’m just curious as to who you are..."

She huffed, "No one you would know, and no one you'll likely see again if we are being honest. I accepted to not know who you three truly are because it serves no purpose. Am I curious? Perhaps, but there's so much more freedom in not knowing, in not being known.” Her face was bright, as it always was when she spoke of freedom, that he felt himself succumbing to the reasoning without needing to hear the words themselves. “Right now, we can be who we really are, who we want to be, and that's so rare that I hope you don't mind me trying to hold onto it. After all, you did crash my peaceful sojourn here."

"I have a hard time believing anything is peaceful around you."

She chuckled, "Perhaps not, I'm sure anyone who knows me would say you're right. But nonetheless, it is quite nice to not have names or preconceived notions distorting our reality. We are here, we are alive, this is our reality."

He found himself smiling – a genuine smile, not like the one he wore in King’s Landing, but the one he found himself unable to hold back around this girl.

The idea of freedom was somewhat revelatory. Being who he wanted to be, who he really was. But who was he without all his duties and titles? He found that he didn’t really know. It was a perplexing thought, to not know who one was without the layers of responsibility. Suddenly, the temptation of freedom was enough to push away any rational thoughts of discovering her identity.

He liked being Jae to her, he liked the way the girl looked at him as a person not a position. The way her eyes shimmered with passion.

The fact that she was just "the girl," no titles, no courtesies.

Simple.
“No one you would know, and no one you’ll likely see again…”

An echo of Oswell’s earlier statement. Maybe they were right. It didn’t matter who she was because as soon as they left this place, they would be propelled back into their lives. Trapped by the responsibilities those lives mandated of them.

He sighed, sitting up next to her, “I suppose you’re right. I promise to stop prying.”

The girl rolled her eyes at this, “Oh please, don’t make a promise you can’t keep.” Then she winked, adding, “I know you can’t help yourself.”

“Well,” he tipped her face towards him, watching as her lips parted softly, “I promise to try at least.”

He crossed the remaining distance to allow his lips to meet hers, reveling in the feeling of soft skin, supple but slightly roughened from the brunt of the winter wind.

He felt like he saw a different side to her in these moments, tucked away. During the day, she was blunt and wild, a mix of sly laughter and smirks, though they’d seen her devolve into childish playfulness on more than one occasion.

But here sitting next to him under furs, with her fingers playing hesitantly in his, she was innocent and curious, all that effusiveness she carried normally translating into passionate exploration of something more intimate. The traits she displayed which made her so reckless and witty during the day manifested themselves in a completely different, breathtaking way when he kissed her.

And kissed her he did. As often as could be deemed appropriate.

She was a quick learner, pushing the boundaries and then pulling back. It seemed as though she was continually surprised by herself, every new sensation a shock to be absorbed, experienced fully. Her eyes would widen in contemplative wonder, her finger tips tracing the spot he last kissed.

He found a strange enjoyment in watching her, the emotions playing across her face vividly. He found particular amusement in her fascination with his hair, given the long strands were so starkly different from his natural color. Normally, it was the silver blonde that enthralled, though he
supposed he should not be surprised that she enjoyed something the ladies of Court would not. Then again, her comments were often on the feel, as opposed to the color.

He made an effort to never push her to move too fast, in spite of every fiber in his body yearning for more. It made him appreciate how men could get caught up in the embrace of a woman, as he found that no matter what, he couldn’t get enough of her.

She confounded him, and he found himself utterly thoughtless with her lips on his, her hands carding through his hair.

*What is this girl doing to me?*

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**Lyanna**

She knew she shouldn’t be doing this.

Whatever *this* was.

Lust? Desire? Physical affection? All of it was foreign to her. Brandon was the one who did this, not her.

But they both had the wolf’s blood, didn’t they? Alas, perhaps she wasn’t so different from her older brother. *Mayhaps* whatever had lain dormant before was snarling to life, the feral beast within her driving her to listen to her body’s impulses.
Somehow, her mind just seemed to flee around Jay, all rational thought disappearing.

She’d never really viewed herself as beautiful. In fact, she had long felt a tinge of pity on whatever Lord ended up saddled with her for the rest of his life. After all, it was the innocent, sweet girls or the women with generous curves and spicy smiles that drove men crazy. And Lyanna would never be either of those things – in fact, she was quite certain she would rather die than become some pretty girl who was considered “pleasing.” Gods, to be reduced to no more than one’s looks, that was the fate of most women.

Lyanna had long preferred breeches to dresses, primarily because of the additional mobility and comfort but also because she always seemed to ruin dresses – they were an inconvenience, and an unnecessary expense. She passed more time in the company of men, enjoyed pursuits generally limited to men, and usually ran roughshod over any intimation of developing female sensibilities. She had never truly believed there was a need to be desired by men. Instead, she had merely wished for their respect.

But in Jay’s eyes, she felt like a woman who could be desired. The way he looked at her was different than the lust she saw in other men as they watched the pretty service girls; no, his eyes were respectful, but appreciative.

What made it all the better was that he liked the real her, the version of her that could be alone at a deserted castle in the middle of winter, stripped of titles and expectation. He didn’t like Lady Lyanna or Lady Stark. He liked Lyanna. Just Lyanna.

Though she knew this was temporary, and she could never give up who she was, the fact that Jay wanted her, in spite of her less-ladylike qualities…. Well, that only made her like him more.

Other than a quick peck stolen by Roose Bolton in an effort to distract her and win a race on horseback - which had merely caused her fierce annoyance - she had little to no experience kissing. But with Jay, everything was tentative and sweet, and he was a good teacher. Each touch, each kiss made her body crave more. Though she would never dishonor herself or her family - certainly not after chastising Bran so harshly - she was quickly learning how easy it might be to succumb to such… affections. And the freedom granted by their false identities was a potent thing, permitting her to push the boundaries.

Her favorite thing about Jay was his eyes - somber, serious, a deep purple that was almost black at night, though they gleamed brighter in the sunlight. Maron’s eyes were lighter, though no less striking. Lyanna had no idea such a color was so common in the South, but she supposed that ancient Valyria had made more of an imprint on the Seven Kingdoms than the books might say.
Sometimes, Jay reminded her of Ned, not because of the color, for her middle brother’s eyes were a deep, dark gray – no, it was more the sentiments held within their eyes, a deeper level of seriousness, everything thoughtful, rational. While it had been years since she’d seen Ned, his letters carried much of the same tone as Jay’s words. Perhaps with a tinge less doom and gloom; Jay could be awfully melancholy if left to his own thoughts for too long.

‘Twas unusual to her, such brooding. All of her serious thoughts were taken up by duties around Winterfell; when she had free time, she was quite out of rationality.

Then again, Jay was several years her senior. Likely his age granted him more maturity, and experience.

To some extent, Jay’s experience when it came to physical intimacy made her nervous. On more than one occasion, she found herself blushing or looking down at the floor, embarrassed by the direction of her thoughts while angry that she should feel thus.

But she couldn’t help it, and on the second night they escaped upstairs, after a poignant pause as he held her hand, his thumb drawing circles on her skin, she found herself worrying that she might disappoint him.

To her chagrin, her voice came out quiet as she stuttered out, “I don’t… I mean, I haven’t really done this much before.”

His gaze drifted from their entwined hands to meet her eyes, a small smile gracing his face.

“Nor have I, to be honest.”

She chuckled and shook her head, “Even handsome when he lies. It’s quite tragic.”

He smirked at her, “Did you just call me handsome?”

She barked out another laugh, smacking him playfully with her free hand, “Don’t let it get to your head.”
His only response was to grab her hand as she hit him and pull her into his lap, her knees falling on either side of his hips. She laughed as she settled there, adjusting to get comfortable until his hands shot out to freeze her movements. His eyes were blazing when she looked up, his muscles tense. She allowed her gaze to drift from his eyes to his lips, a shiver shooting down her spine.

Time slowed as she watched his lips part so subtly. They were so close that she could feel the hitch in his breathing as his warm exhales shuddered across her cheek. Their breath mingled, sharing the same air.

Grey eyes met indigo and she noticed how dilated his pupils were in the shadows of the moonlight, almost all trace of color overwhelmed by darkness.

She couldn’t tell who moved first, but in a heartbeat their mouths were pressed together, melding to one another. His hand slid to her lower back, pressing her closer to him - her hips tilted forward, her back arching slightly in response. Their tongues fought a battle for control, a constant struggle of attack and retreat, taunting and dominating. Her hands were tangled in his hair, pulling him closer as she luxuriated in the feel of his silken hair running through her fingers.

Breath was insignificant as clothes began to feel like an obstacle, preventing her from seeing more of him, consuming more of him. She was so warm, her body alight as if his touch was the very essence of fire. Jay, his heated lips and reverent hands, was all that was tethering her to land.

She was burning and freezing all at once, her body dictating its own actions. Jay released a low moan that seemed to only incite Lyanna’s urge for more. Bereft of thought, she caught his lower lip between her teeth, biting down a tad harder than appropriate, the wolf in her snarling in appreciation. Jay’s hands moved to grip her hard enough to bruise, one hand on her hip while the other had moved to her neck, his body rippling with tension.

Despite his hands pulling her impossibly close, he separated from her lips. She felt a growl at the tip of her tongue, keenly aware of the absence of his mouth on hers. As he stared straight into her eyes, he traced his lower lip with his tongue, a motion that seemed to captivate her attention. She had drawn blood - not much, but enough to cause a feral hunger in her.

They were both gasping, faces inches apart, as he traced her lips with his fingers. She was utterly lost in his eyes, the intensity of them driving all thought from her mind, no rational thought capable of overcoming the wash of dark indigo.

She was tumbling down into the darkness, warmth welcoming her to her doom.
She leaned in slightly as his fingers slid just beneath her shirt, the touch feather-light on the bare skin of her lower back. She would give everything to fall deeper into the flames that seemed to consume her when he touched her.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, fear struck her - not of death, nor of physical pain, but of falling for something, or someone, she could never have. A trap she could not escape. A cage of her very own making.

In an instant, she broke eye contact, removing her hands from his hair to play with the hem of her shirt. He noticed her withdrawal and allowed her retreat. She refused to meet his eye as she slid from her position straddling him, though she remained close enough that her knee just barely grazed his upper thigh. Lyanna stared at the spot, bewildered by the pleasant feeling of that simple touch.

Jay was silent the whole time, watching her, his eyes following her moves. She could sense it, but it was not insistent or disappointed. At least one of them was comfortable, patient. She couldn’t tell if she was proud or frustrated with herself. Restraint was not normally a strong suit of hers, though it seemed to be one of Jay’s.

He wanted more, she could see it in the lines of his body and the expression on his face, but he would not force her. Lyanna was not so innocent as to not recognize the hunger in a man’s eyes when he was looking at a woman he desired. She’d seen it in men for years, even in her own brother when he lusted after a pretty servant. Most men pursued like a hunter out to catch prey - but Jay was giving her the control, he was allowing her to set the pace. It made her feel powerful.

This man who she barely knew was giving her a choice. It made her want him more.

And wanting was a dangerous thing.

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU for your patience :) I promise I have not forgotten this - on the contrary, I loathe being kept away. Unfortunately, bills must be paid and thus, job must be
worked! I'm staffed on a crazy deal at the moment, but hopefully things will slow down in April and I'll be able to get back to more regular updates.

As always, thank you for your engaging comments!!

The next chapter will be a bit more fluff, a little reprieve before the drama starts to unravel :)
Chapter Notes

Experimented a bit with quick changes in POV voice, but enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rhaegar

The girl would be leaving tomorrow.

She hadn’t given a reason and by this point he hadn’t expected one. He had decided it was time he and his men departed as well. They themselves had tarried too long at the Wall, particularly at Castle Black, though he was not displeased about the fact that they wouldn’t have to linger long outside Winterfell—spying was not his preferred mode of operation, and the dye in his hair was starting to fade more rapidly than he’d expected.

Each additional day only increased the risk of being discovered, and given the Northerners’ preference for brutal honesty, he wasn’t sure he wanted to see the Warden of the North’s reaction to the heir to the Iron Throne sneaking around his lands unannounced.

However, the thought of leaving left a painful twinge in his chest. It had been just shy of a week here, yet he found himself strangely at ease with the developing routine of their days. If it hadn’t been so bloody cold all of the time, he was certain they would have endeavored to stay longer.

Rhaegar had never been a carefree soul. Born in destruction, among the raging fires of Summerhall, he had grown up in a viper’s nest, surrounded by greedy men, false courtiers, and a powerful father who sank further into madness with every passing hour. Rhaegar was serious and thoughtful—slow to trust and even slower to laugh.

Yet here at Queensgate, with his two best friends and this wild girl and her enormous direwolves, he
found himself smiling with more ease than he was truly comfortable with – here there were no titles, no real names, no duties to the realm nor pointless pleasantries. Life in the North was simple, harsh but fulfilling. Despite sleeping on a straw pallet in a dilapidated tower, he had slept better than he had in years on a featherbed in a sumptuous castle.

He knew the girl played a key role in his state of…. contentment. Initially his attraction to her confused him. She was nothing like the women at Court—full of poise and grace, with sumptuous curves emphasized to make men’s eyes fill with lust. Nay, the girl was not a great beauty of the South. She was her own creature, wild and unique, a beauty built not solely on pretty features, but also on the expressions worn upon them. She was incredibly alive, her grey eyes a storm of emotions.

Rhaegar was drawn to her in a way he did not comprehend. When Arthur had asked him about it the day before, he found himself quite at a loss of words. It was physical attraction, yes, but also something more, something indefinable. She was his opposite in so many ways, but as they spoke in the deep of the freezing nights, he also saw so many similarities: restlessness; a commitment to duty, yet displeasure at the weight of it; a belief in the mystical and fantastic. She valued her freedom and her free will above most things. Rhaegar had never really had much freedom growing up as Crown Prince, so he couldn’t fully appreciate the importance she placed on it, but after a few days with little to no responsibilities beyond basic survival, he thought he might understand the appeal.

He found her saddling her charger as the sun was dropping toward the horizon, one of her saddlebags balanced in the snow behind her as the black direwolf watched.

“Can’t even bear us another night?”

She looked up, startled, before a small smile appeared on her face. “I’d never be foolish enough to leave when you could come riding after me.”

“You assume we would wish to ride after you. I do believe you’ve threatened each of us more times than we can count.”

She shrugged nonchalantly, “You all deserved it.”

Dropping back to the real question, Rhaegar asked, “So if you aren’t departing, where are you riding to?”
Her eyes met his, mischief painted plain in the steely gray, “Oh, just to one of my favorite places in the North.”

She was baiting him, and he couldn’t stop himself from playing into her game, “Your favorite place in the North, eh?”

She nodded, moving to secure the saddlebag to the horse. He approached her to stand just behind her, smiling at the little gasp she let out as he grabbed her waist, leaning down until his lips brushed her ear.

“Would you care to share with a curious Southerner?” he whispered.

The shiver he felt shoot through her, her control slipping a little, was quite pleasing. Finished with her task, she turned to face him, her face composed. She was so close, and he couldn’t help but allow his eyes to glance at her mouth, to take note of the small distance between his lips and hers.

She stared into his eyes for a long moment, her face neutral, as she seemed to debate the question. He waited, hoping, like a green boy asking to be granted his darling’s favor.

Finally, she smiled again, answering, “I suppose.” She then placed a hand on his shoulder, leaning on it as she turned to hoist herself into the saddle.

“You’ll have to saddle your horse quickly though, I’m not very patient.”

He gave her a cheeky grin at that before removing her booted foot from the stirrup and lengthening it, leaving her foot dangling out of reach. She raised her eyebrows, silently questioning his action. He moved around the front of the horse, stroking the courser’s fine coat to calm the beast as it huffed at a stranger. It was a magnificent horse in truth, young and powerful, the type of horse boys dreamt of. Up so close, Rhaegar could also see the fine detailing on the horse’s tack as he lengthened the stirrup on the other side.

The girl fidgeted in the saddle like the courser beneath her. As she opened her mouth to pose a question, he held up a hand and, looking into her stormy eyes, stated, “I thought perhaps we could ride together.”

Her blush was a small victory; she seemed temporarily shocked by the suggestion. Rhaegar took
advantage of her momentary lapse in attention by fitting his own boot in the longer stirrup and pulling himself up behind her. His hands went to wrap around her waist, fitting her back against his chest. A small protest left her lips as she pulled her cloak closer around her, moving his hands to rest on her hips outside the circle of her cloak. Nonetheless, it was a tight fit, her body pressed close.

Seemingly recovered, the girl huffed but still leaned back into him, “Fine, but I lead. And behave. Silver doesn’t like squirming.”

As they rode out of the ruins, Rhaegar saw Arthur moving as if to follow them. With a confident gesture, Rhaeger waved the knight off before turning away, missing his best friend’s hardened grimace.

Lyanna

Riding had always been her one source of pride – on a horse, Lyanna was unstoppable, completely in control. It was the only time she felt truly free, untethered to duty, responsibility, or family. She was one of the best riders in the North, easily outriding most men; as a woman in a world dominated by men, this gave her a sense of power.

She had not ridden with someone since she was a very young child still learning, and she had certainly not shared a saddle with an attractive man with whom she had shared flirtations. Nonetheless, while the present situation was not an entirely comfortable one, she did not find it displeasing.

Though they both wore thick cloaks against the chill, Lyanna could feel the heat of him pressed against her back, his hands resting lightly on her hips. The wind had picked up as they rode out, so they’d both pulled their hoods up, Nymeria ran beside them, her loping movements relaxed despite the weather. After an hour of riding in relative silence, they reached the edge of a copse of trees which shielded against the wintry gusts.
Silver slowed a bit, no doubt tired from the additional weight, picking her way through the familiar trees. Lyanna made this ride on every sojourn at Queensgate, often times more than once. However, having adjusted her plans modestly given the thick snow and the additional company, she had not yet made the ride this time.

With the wind fading as they moved deeper into the trees, she and Jay began speaking in hushed tones. He asked questions about the area and Lyanna told him of tales about the Northerners who had first tried living in the Gift and of wildlings camping in the woods. He jokingly asked whether he should be concerned, since this would be a very secretive place to kill him.

Lyanna shrugged, “Perhaps. You’re not making it very difficult.”

Before Jay could rebuff her statement - he was, in fact, making it very easy should she wish him harm - the clearing came into view.

Jay's slight intake of breath brought a grin to her face.

_Silly Southrons, always underestimating the North._

The clearing was not very large, an indent in the earth between two rocky hills, the trees soaring high into the night sky. Ice and snow covered everything in shades of white until a few feet from the pool, leaving untouched the landing and the expanse of steaming water.

The water itself was a pale blue color, opaque from the minerals released from the underground springs. The steam rising off of the surface blanketed the surface with a thick mist, trapped between the rocky cliffs.

“What is this place?” he asked as she indicated that he should get down - she couldn’t climb down with him still grasping her from behind.

He followed her silent instructions, dismounting and reaching up to grip her waist. She thought to fight him - she was not some simpering Southron lady who could not get down off of her horse - but his face looked so eager that she allowed him to lift her down from the saddle.
Jay kept her close once she was back on the ground, his hands lingering as he gazed at her. She smiled before moving to tie Silverwing to a tree at the edge of the landing, allowing Jay to take in the clearing for a few more moments. She hadn’t shared this place with anyone other than the guards who had accompanied her to the Wall over the years. Of course, everyone knew of the hot springs at Winterfell, which ran under the keep and heated many of the walls. Lyanna had spent many hours in the warm water with her brothers over the years; however, nothing compared to this place.

After securing Silver with enough lead to move and graze on some of the shrubs that remained alive due to the warmth of the pool, Lyanna moved to remove her saddlebag. She’d brought an extra shirt to change into after bathing and a small square of fabric with which to dry herself before returning to the frigid cold that pervaded the North. The little clearing was a warm haven, but wandering around after swimming while still dripping wet was a recipe for disaster and sickness.

Nymeria growled softly before fading into the trees. Lyanna imagined the direwolf would keep watch while scrounging for a meal nearby.

She noticed Jay’s eyes watching her, puzzlement still clear on his handsome face. Only then did she realize she hadn’t answered his question.

Lyanna shrugged, “Does it need to serve some purpose? ‘Tis simply a gift from the Old Gods, a sanctuary from the cold.”

She caught herself before she added a comment about the hot springs which lay beneath the walls of Winterfell. Such a statement would have surely caused too many questions - she was so close to leaving, and she had already decided that whatever this experience was with Jay, it would remain behind when she left.

Jay still stood to the side of the landing, his curious eyes soaking up the scenery. She, on the other hand, was eager to soak in the burning waters. Northerners might love the cold snowy realm they called home, but they too enjoyed the soothing warmth of a hot bath.

There was a set of boulders to one side of the landing, near a shallow part of the large pool. It was there that she leaned the saddlebag and began to unlace her boots.

She kept her back to Jay, her cloak hanging from her shoulders as she peeled off the many layers of clothing. Her thick overshift and the wool breeches came first, allowing her to easily remove the two sheathed knives she kept beneath her clothes. She’d keep her undershirt on along with her thin small clothes, given she had brought clean ones in her bag.
She glanced over her shoulder as she heard Jay tentatively approach. All she had left to remove was her cloak.

“Turn around and don’t peak.”

To his surprise, the girl had walked over to a small set of boulders at the foot of the pool’s entry, and now she stood, her cloaked back to him and her overshirt folded on top of a small pile of clothes. She was in the process of removing a number of sheathed knives from an assortment of hiding places. She glanced over her shoulder as he approached, a cheeky smile plastered on her face.

“Turn around and don’t peak.”

Still confused about the present situation but hoping to maintain some semblance of propriety, he did as she bade him, staring into the surrounding trees as he heard the whisper of cloth falling and of water displaced. He tried to control the direction of his thoughts, but then the girl let out a low moan and his brain was a jumble, the suspense only feeding his muddled mind.

“It’s okay now, I’m already in the water.”

As he turned around, he drank in the image of her.

She was submerged to her waist, wearing nothing but a loose white undershirt which he imagined she had stolen from a brother. The material clung to her slender form where it had gotten wet, revealing the gentle curve of her figure. The opacity of the water prevented him from seeing more than what remained at the surface, but Ray couldn’t help but stare, desire bubbling to the surface.

She was undoing her braid, allowing the wild dark strands to cover her back in dark waves, a stark
contrast to the pale white-blue of the water. He was frozen for a moment watching her nimble fingers attempt to untangle the unruly curls, remembering the feel of those same fingers sliding across his scalp.

**

She was aware that he had yet to enter to pool, but chose to give him a moment - maybe she had misjudged him. Was he uncomfortable being in the water with her like this? Her brothers had never cared, though it had been a few years since they'd swum like this, and she hadn't yet been a woman. And the guards had always stayed a short distance from the landing, allowing her privacy when they had accompanied her.

It was no concern of hers, though. If he was uncomfortable, he could very well wait with Silver until she had enjoyed the springs for a while.

*Must be those Southron sensibilities Bran is always joking about.*

Finally finished with undoing her braid, she dove under the water, allowing the hot sulfuric water to engulf her fully, her worries sluicing off of her with the dirt and grime.

**

He watched her dive under, releasing him from the trance he'd fallen into. He realized he was sweating on the landing, his winter apparel far too heavy for the hot mist of the spring.

Slowly he removed the layers of heavy clothing he had taken to wearing in the North.

The girl had swum further into the pool, almost completely hidden by the white cloud of hot mist which hung over the hot springs, with only her dark hair floating in the pale blue water as a sign of her location.

Realizing his undershirt would undoubtedly not dry in time for them to return, and not wishing to freeze to death in wet clothing, he stripped shirtless. When he glanced up, the girl had disappeared into the mist, granting him a moment to finish undressing. His breeches were the last to be removed and folded hastily. He finally stepped into the pool, feeling the steaming water seep into his muscles and bones.
It was glorious and as he ducked down to submerge up to his neck he couldn't stop the sigh that left his lips as the water surrounded him.

As the water soaked into his skin and warmth seeped into his bones, he felt something within him come roaring back to life. After months in the North, he had begun to think he might never be warm again, and dragons were creatures who thrived on heat.

He paused for a moment, the water up to his chin, allowing his mind to shut down as he relaxed fully into the water.

His hair was floating like a dark cloud around him and he could see the strands of silver that were becoming more and more numerous with each day, the dye fading slowly. It was odd, this feeling of paranoia that accompanied the slow return of his natural hair color. ’Twas such a part of his heritage, the silver blonde of Valyria.

The sounds of splashing water brought him back to his present situation, or more importantly, his present company.

**

She had swum into the hazy mist, reveling in the heat of the water and the perfection of the location. Everyone said the North was a cold and dreary place, devoid of beauty. But they had never swum in these hot springs, with the pale blue water and the clouds of mineral mist, surrounded by peaceful forest blanketed in snowy white. She reached the little alcove that she had found on her last visit, the rock creating a smaller pool, large enough to allow extensive movement but protected from the wind that sometimes still managed to howl through the space, with a ledge suitable for lounging.

She dunked her head once more, her hair caressing the skin of her shoulders and back as hit floated about her.

When she emerged from the water, she tipped her head back to stare into the sky.

It was stunningly clear at the moment, the storm clouds threatening at a distance. But for now, they were granted a reprieve, the brightly glimmering stars and sliver of moon complementing the glorious feel of nature. The tall trees and the cliffs framed the sky, creating a world away from everything. She felt so close to it all, as if she were one with the sky, drowning in starlight and the heady warmth
of the springs.

Breathless giddy laughter bubbled from her as she savored the perfection of the moment.

**

He found her thus, her head tipped back, eyes staring into the heavens with a look of awe and happiness softening her face. The moon granted only a little light, supplemented by the radiant stars, but even that only enhanced the ethereal nature of her features. Somehow she seemed a natural fit with the colors of the clearing, the pale blue of the water, the light grey of the mist, the dark greys of the rock cliffs, the white of the snow, the deep brown of the towering trees, and the midnight blue of the sky.

Not for the first time, he saw the North embodied in this one girl, her features the natural lines of the land, her moods the ever changing weather patterns.

**

She noticed him watching her out of the corner of her eye, his figure partially obscured by the heavy mist. Part of his chest was out of the water, and she couldn’t help but appreciate his body. He was much leaner than most Northern men - certainly more so than her brothers - which was even more obvious without the layers of heavy cloth covering him. His muscles were long and graceful, instead of bulky. It suited him, a body matched to this thoughtful and fluid knight.

She might have felt bashful in her blatant staring, except he seemed to be doing very much the same.

**

She was outright staring at him, but he found he did not mind, not when he saw the flash of appreciation across her face as she took in his bare chest. Plus it gave him leave to stare right back.

Not that he hadn’t been already before she had noticed his approach. Now that she was looking at him though, he could appreciate the curve of her small breasts and the line of her collar bone above the damp shirt. In truth, the shirt did little to hide her, the fabric completely see-through when wet and clinging to her body like a second skin. Then again, there was something mildly amusing about the look of the fabric covering her figure, as though it were some sore attempt at propriety.
He slowly approached her, watching her eyes widen as he got closer.

Perhaps it was the heat of the water or the minerals in the mist that made him lose his senses, but the Crown Prince in him was no longer yelling at him to be rational.

No, tonight it was just him and this wild girl who had stolen his heart.

**

He looked like he wanted to consume her as he slowly stalked towards her.

And she wanted him to.

He stopped a mere pace away, his hand reaching out to trail along her jaw. She closed her eyes, embracing the feeling. Even that small gesture made her hum with pleasure.

Her eyes were still closed when she felt his lips on hers, softly guiding before becoming more firm. She leaned into him, her hand coming to rest on that chest she had just admired. His skin was soft and smooth beneath her fingers as she explored his body. His hands began their own adventure, sliding down her back and pulling her into him.

Her blood was boiling, as heat was everywhere. He was everywhere, his touch burning through her more than the scalding water they were in.

Suddenly he was lifting her up slightly, as he cradled her in his arms, his one hand grasping her ass to hold her up while his other slid up her back, tracing the bones of her spine. She arched her back in response, her breasts skimming his bare skin, the friction of the shirt against her sensitive nipples making her gasp.

**

He couldn't get enough of her smooth skin, and the feeling of her gasping in his arms was almost
enough to break his control. He tried to remember that she was young and that he shouldn't push her, but when she bit his lower lip and held it in her teeth and she stared into his eyes, it nearly drove him insane.

She didn't realize what she was doing to him.

In a second, he had moved to sit along the shallow ledge and grasped the hem of her shirt, pulling back so he could silently request permission to remove one of the last pieces of cloth separating them. Her eyes were dazed, her lips slightly swollen from his ministrations, but she smiled, nodding her acceptance.

He slowly eased the soaked fabric over her head and arms, the warm mist protecting her from any chilly effects of being bare. He pulled her back into him, his groan at the feel of her bare chest against his lost in her mouth.

**

More.

She wanted more.

It was both exciting and terrifying what this man was doing to her. He was setting her on fire from the inside.

Something was building in the pit of her stomach, something deep and unknown.

The warmth of the water and the mist only seemed to add to the heat of the moment, leaving both of them gasping for air.

She found herself grinding her hips into him, the friction glorious despite her not understanding the nature of the feeling. The moment was far beyond the need for explanations and she couldn’t help the strangled moan that she released as a bolt of pleasure flashed through her.

His face pulled away to look at her, his pupils blown wide and some unknown emotion flashing
across his face.

A blush colored her cheeks, as she suddenly felt nervous.

“I’ve… I’m… I’ve never done… this…”

“That’s okay,” he breathed in her ear, relaxing as his hands softened on her skin, “we don’t need to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“But that’s the problem,” she sighed exasperatedly, pulling back so that she was staring straight into his eyes, “I do want this. I… I want to do everything. With you. But… I can’t… my… my maidenhead…”

He silenced her babbling with a quick kiss, his free hand rubbing small patterns on her lower back. “I know. I understand. I would never dishonor you.”

**

Her face fell, disappointment plain on her features as she half swam, half walked back from him, eyes turned to the side and chin tilted down. She bit her bottom lip before responding.

“Oh. So, should we stop?”

He chuckled, causing her to glare, that fiery temper of hers never far from the surface.

“My little wildling, there’s quite a lot we can still do if you want.”

He pulled her against him once more, this time her back against his front.

“We don’t have to stop ever,” he whispered into the shell of her ear, as one hand trailed lightly across her clavicle, fingers tracing the fine bones, as his other hand held her around her waist beneath the water. The motion caused a strained breath to pass through her lips.
His fingers on her jaw turned her face towards him, his lips covering hers once more.

**

“Do you trust me?” he murmured against her lips.

Her answering giggle eased some of the tension, “I don’t even know who you truly are.”

“Nor do I know who you truly are.” His lips moved back to her ear as he nibbled her earlobe, “That didn’t answer my question.”

His finger gently traced her bottom lip, causing her to arch her back and press into him harder, a breathless moan escaping her lips.

“Yes…” she whispered.

And she did trust him, as strange as that seemed. For he knew and accepted the real her, and for one moment, she wanted to just bask in that feeling. Of being wanted because of who she was, not what she represented.

He nuzzled into her neck, placing featherlight kisses across her shoulder. One of his hands rested on her hip, swirling small circles into the skin just above the line of her small clothes. His other hand he dropped to her leg, tracing a slow trail up her inner thigh starting at her knee.

"Relax, I've got you."

**

He felt her relax in his arms, the tension slowly leaving her body as she let his hands glide over her, sending shivers down her spine with every touch.
She was hot and flushed, his ministrations generating a different kind of heat in her body.

His one hand reached the apex of her thighs and she felt her body react on its own, her legs parting to grant him access to that part of her no one had ever touched. His touch was light and she may not have even noticed it had her body not been completely attuned to his every move. As is, his fingers sliding gently over her small clothes provoked a quiet whimper.

The sound brought a smile to his face, knowing he wasn't the only one completely aroused. He imagined she was well aware of his arousal, that she could feel it pressed along her back.

"Jay-" she breathed.

"Hmm?" He questioned, nibbling the sensitive skin beneath her ear as he maintained the slow gliding of his one hand while the fingers of his other slipped just under the band of her small clothes.

"Please -" she murmured, though she didn't know exactly what she was begging for. She just wanted more, more of him.

Encouraged by the request, he briefly halted his hands in order to pull off the last piece of clothing between them. Before he could even complete the movement though, her hand shot out to grab his wrist.

"I didn't want you to stop." She rasped, her voice laced with anger and desire.

He chuckled at her eagerness and stroked her side languidly with his free hand, turning her face to his.

"Eager are we?" She glared at him, so he reassured her, "don't worry, I'm not even close to done with you. I was merely about to remove this," he grabbed the hand that had just grasped his wrist, bringing it down so that their entwined fingers slid to the edge of her small clothes, "piece of clothing. Is that okay?" He asked, as her eyes widened in comprehension. Her eyes once again shifted to curious innocence as she nodded.

Keeping their fingers intertwined, he eased the fabric down her thighs, though once to her knees, the girl took over, bending over to take them off the rest of the way. The wet garment was tossed to the side of the pool, giving him a moment to control himself. He had to inhale deeply through his nose to
calm himself as her bare ass rubbed along the base of his cock.

The warm water enveloped her bare skin, and she realized she was now completely naked, sitting in a stranger’s lap.

But she didn't feel scared. Maybe she should, but all thoughts fled as Jay’s hand started moving up her inner thigh again. She eased herself back into his chest, relishing the feeling of his heart beating and his hand on her body.

Reaching the apex of her thigh once again, he slid a single finger across her, barely touching her sensitive skin, but the contact was enough to make her body jerk in surprise.

He had stilled his other hand, just resting it on her waist to support her against him. His lips remained near her ear, occasionally dipping to kiss her neck.

His finger rested on the little nub at the peak of her, pressing gently on the bundle of nerves. Slowly, he began to rub there in small circular motions, easing her into the pleasure of the moment. He added the pressure of another two fingers, though the motion remained soft and gentle.

The girl sighed into him, her body relaxing fully into him, her legs parting just a bit further to grant him more access. Urged on by her reactions, he allowed his other hand to roam up from her stomach to trace the outlines of her small breasts.

She was temporarily distracted from the unbelievable tingling between her legs when the fingers of his other hand tickled the underside of her breast, the feeling unexpected but not unwanted. Her breath caught when his fingers found her nipple, tugging on it lightly.

And then her body arched when his finger slipped inside of her. It felt foreign but enjoyable in a way she’d never felt before.

One of her hands found his thigh and gripped it for purchase as his fingers brought on such unusual feelings in her body.

He kept his movements shallow at first, allowing her to get used to the feel, but after a bit of time her hips were grinding into his finger, pushing him deeper.
Her other hand reached back to tangle in his hair as she pulled his lips to meet hers. It was a slow 
heady kiss, only interrupted periodically by her breathless moans.

His long fingers played her like a fine tuned instrument, eliciting the sweetest sounds he had ever 
heard. He was losing himself in her heat, in the way her ass ground unconsciously into his cock, 
how she arched her back and mewled when he curled his finger and hit that spot... just... there...

Her legs were quivering like a bowstring pulled too taut, and with every touch she felt like she was 
about to break. She wasn't sure how long she could take this before it overwhelmed her completely.

And then, as he moved his finger within her, his thumb just barely brushed a sensitive spot and her 
body exploded, sweet relief and burning pleasure shooting through her limbs. She faintly heard the 
sound of her own moan, the noise barely registering above the beating of her heart. Her mind was a 
blank space, her thoughts jumbled as the tremors of her pleasure rolled through her, her fingers 
clenching his thigh under the water. She relaxed back into him, his body the only thing still 
grounding her to reality.

His hands continued stroking her gently. Seeing this woman come undone beneath his fingers was 
the single most erotic experience he'd ever had. While he may not be as innocent as she was, none 
of his previous sexual encounters had been half as pleasurable as this one, and he wasn't even on the 
receiving end of the physical act.

“What... was that?” she breathed, barely grasping at the thoughts in her brain.

She heard the smile in his voice, though she could not manage to do anything but remain curled up in 
his lap at that moment.

“That… was pleasure.”

“Mmm…” was all she could muster in response. Her rational mind had many other questions about 
such a powerful feeling but she was struggling to formulate the words in her mouth.

She lifted her head from where it lay on his chest, her breathing finally returning. Her head still felt 
foggy, the remnants of her high mingling with the mineral mist of the spring and making her dizzy.
His breathing remained even behind her, his arms cradling her protectively while not limiting her. The girl wondered if she could stay like this forever, in a perpetual state of bliss.

Neither of them spoke for several moments, but never one to be still for long, the girl soon shifted in his lap, her legs swinging around to the side so that she was half turned to him.

The movement of her smooth skin in the water against his hardened cock drew a groan from him. His hopes of her not noticing his continued arousal were doused as her eyebrow rose, curiosity flooding her face. She shifted away a bit, allowing him some relief but before he could think of a manner in which to deflect, he felt her timid fingers graze his stomach. He only barely caught her wrist before further damage might be done.

Her expression was confused as his hand held her wrist, and she glanced at the space between them, even though the opacity of the water made it all but impossible to see the body parts in question.

“I need to help you now, right?”

“You don’t need to do anything. I’ll be okay...”

She frowned, “That’s certainly not what I’ve heard. Isn’t it uncomfortable? If you don’t...”

He raised an eyebrow in response, “And how would you know that?”

She blushed at the look he gave her, before shrugging, “I have brothers.”

“Ah, yes...”

“I suppose they can be selfish pricks, though. But it only seems fair that I’d do something for you in return.”

She looked at him thoughtfully and he realized she was completely serious.

“Hey,” he cupped her jaw lightly, “I’m being honest when I say you do not owe me anything.”
She scoffed, “Of course I don’t owe you anything. It’s a question of equality. Your...” her voice rose slightly as she spoke the next words, “pleasure is just as important as mine. If I expect a man to treat me as an equal, it’s only fair I do the same.”

He realized at that moment that she viewed this as some adherence to her moral framework - that in her mind, equality meant in all aspects of life. That one person’s pleasure was no more important than another’s. It was naive, but adorably refreshing.

He was briefly lost in his ruminations over her philosophical justification for pleasuring him, so she took his silence as affirmation that she was on the right track.

Removing her hand from his loosened grip and sliding almost completely off of his lap, she smiled at him shyly as she traced her fingers down his chest. The movement jolted him out of his mind, and he grabbed her wrist once more before it passed below his waist.

She looked up at him and spoke before he could say anything, “You’ll have to teach me what to do, for I’m afraid I’ve never done this.” Her voice turned sly then, as she flashed him a small, if a little tentative, smirk, “But I’ve always been a quick learner.”

She reached out tentatively to glide her fingers along the underside of his cock and he felt himself twitch. She was hesitant, but with the extent of his arousal, he expected it wouldn't take much - he felt like a green boy, eager for her touch and ready to burst at the slightest brush of her fingers. Knowing he couldn't handle anymore teasing, even if she did it unknowingly, he guided her small hand up him, feeling the callouses on her fingers from her bow. As she gripped him softly but firmly, sliding down to the base of his cock, the water easing the process, he realized he was doomed.

His groan was both a sound of approval and of resignation.

She didn't know quite what she was doing, but his breathless moans and growls incited a strange feeling of satisfaction within her. There was a sense of power in the act, her hand stroking him, her actions making this warrior in front of her lose his strength. She became more confident, exploring the way his body reacted to variations in her movements. Not all of them were right, but he guided her lightly.

He felt himself at the brink when she glided a thumb over the head of his cock, a low noise emitting from his mouth, a mix between a moan and a plea.

His eyes snapped open and he grabbed her face, his hands cupping her jaw roughly as he smashed
their lips together as her hands continued to move. His mouth was wild, and she responded greedily, high on the pleasure she herself was deriving from making him thus. They were a mess of lips, tongues and teeth until one of her hands slid down to explore the sensitive skin at the base of his cock. The combination of the sensation while she stroked him fully, her hand firm as the wet skin slid over the ridge of his cock, was mind blowing.

In an instant he was doused in fire, pleasure zipping through his skin as he released into the warm water. He didn't know when he had closed his eyes, but he kept them closed until the blast of colors faded behind his eyelids, his hand shooting out to pause her now lazy movements.

He opened his eyes to see a self satisfied, though slightly dazed, smirk plastered on her face.

He couldn’t help but smile back, resting his head back and pulling her fully into his arms.

He thought he might never want to leave.

Rhaegar

He whispered silly japes and stories into her ear as they meandered back to the keep, her light chuckle the only sound for leagues. It was like they were the only two humans in the whole universe, a universe of mystical beauty. He couldn’t help himself from placing small kisses on her neck and nibbling on her ear, smiling every time she shivered. Somehow he knew it wasn’t from the cold.

They were both slightly delusional from fatigue by the time they arrived as the moon was descending from its peak, keeping quiet to not disturb the two knights sleeping in the tower. He dismounted before reaching up to pull her down to him, placing a finger to her mouth to stop the protests from
bursting through her pale lips.

His tiredness was temporarily forgotten as he held her in his arms, quickly closing the gap between them as he covered her mouth with his. Her hands found the nape of his neck, pulling him in and deepening the kiss. She nibbled his lip, prompting him to grip her waist harder, pulling her impossibly close.

Gods, this girl drove him to the brink of insanity.

His tongue traced her bottom lip, eliciting a low moan from her, before tangling with hers in a languid battle for dominance – it was slow but powerful, with just a little hint of desperation.

He was lost.

When they separated, he kept her close, his forehead resting upon hers as he gazed into those stormy grey eyes, trying to memorize the shade and intensity - eyes of the North.

Rhaegar helped her take care of Silver, keeping her as close as possible. She told him that Nymeria was out hunting, but that she would return eventually. It was starting to snow lightly, but she didn’t think it would cause any delays.

Their tasks completed, he took her hand in his as they walked to the tower.

Tor took note of their silent arrival before returning to his slumber, while Arthur and Oswell remained asleep. He pulled her to him just before laying down in his furs, kissing her slowly and carefully. A silent farewell.

His pallet had been moved closer to hers sometime during the day’s activities, so he was able to see her as they tucked under the furs.

She smiled sleepily and he reached out to grab her small hand, interlacing their fingers. He fell asleep watching her breathe.

He slept peacefully, with not a single nightmare to plague his mind.
In the morning, his hand was cold and empty.

She had left without a trace, leaving no tracks in freshly fallen snow.

They couldn’t even tell what direction she had taken. For all they knew, she’d magically gone through the Wall.

He tried to hide his disappointment, but both of his friends’ understanding eyes spoke of his failure.

It was a long, silent ride back to Castle Black.

Chapter End Notes

Oh the highs and lows!

Thanks as always for the comments - ya'll are the best!
Duty's Embrace

Chapter Notes

Two updates in less than a week! A bit on the short side, but I didn't feel like waiting to post - plus this was originally part of the previous chapter but it got too long ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lyanna

She ran away.

She had never thought that she would run away from freedom. She had always expected to be running to freedom. But the taste of freedom was dangerous, and sitting in Jay's arms had made running away to never ending freedom feel all the more attractive.

The guilt had drowned her that night watching him sleep on the floor of Queensgate, as she felt his fingers within hers. After spending years chastising Brandon for acting on his desires, here she was doing the same. She felt like a hypocrite, a disgrace. How could something that felt so amazing in the moment make her feel so wretched after the fact?

Her actions would shame her, her father, her family, House Stark.

For the first time in her life, she found herself cursing the damn wolf's blood flowing through her veins.

So, she had run away. Away from freedom, away from desire, and back into the warm, heavy embrace of duty. Her father would decide on the best marriage for their House and she would do it. Responsibility provided a shield to the emotions crashing down on her.
She had to forget Jay and the feelings that his touch had elicited. She’d never felt such desire or such wanting, and part of her wished she never had, for it was all the more painful to will herself to pursue a life without it now that she’d experienced it.

Her only hope was that her father would choose a man at least worthy of her respect. Love and passion were not commonly found in noble marriages, but she could live a long and fulfilling life with a man whom she respected. Love and desire were better left in the songs.

The comforting outlines of Winterfell rising in the distance had never been a more welcome sight than on the morning she crested one of the rolling hills north of the keep. She’d barely slept for five days, stopping only for brief periods to rest the horses but pushing all of them to the brink of exhaustion – even Tor and Nymeria, with their seemingly endless stores of energy, seemed to be drooping on the final leg of the journey.

But any lingering doubts about leaving the precious bubble of Queensgate evaporated as her weary mind focused on her home, the beautiful grey walls of a castle she knew by heart.

A Stark patrol met her on the road, escorting her back into the life she’d known for sixteen years, her brothers with their Northern looks standing there with open arms and big smiles.

House Stark, Winterfell, the North. This is what was important.

Passion was fleeting. Duty was forever.
Rhaegar

One can only run from duty for so long.

After a few days back at Castle Black, Rhaegar had begun to think that maybe he had only dreamt of Queensgate and the mysterious girl who had bewitched him there. The memories played through his mind constantly, almost too sweet to be true. Perhaps he wished for them to be dreams, for living such moments only to have them torn away seemed to be more painful.

Torn away they would be, as upon their return to the seat of the Night’s Watch, Maester Aemon had handed him a letter from the King.

King Aegys Targaryen had summoned his heir to return with haste - Rhaegar was expected to be in attendance for the King’s nameday celebrations in just under two moons. It would take them roughly that amount of time to return to the capital, so their Northern excursion was officially coming to an end. The news had sent him even deeper into his melancholic state - he had not even realized the relief of being away from his father until the threat of returning had appeared.

The only positive to be found was that such a summons left him little time to linger in the North. The risk of being caught was ever increasing, and he hoped Richard and Myles had found out enough about the Starks to satisfy his father’s curiosity. Rhaegar himself had seen little to suggest the Lord of Winterfell planned much of anything; even the information Aemon had shared with him—that the Starks were revered far more than the Targaryens in the North—was not altogether surprising. The North hardly mingled with the other kingdoms, and the Targaryens had done little to ingratiate themselves with their Northern subjects.

Nay, there was only one Northerner that was giving Rhaegar grief.

The night before they were to leave Castle Black, Rhaegar found himself playing the lilting tune of Jenny of Oldstones in the library, surrounded by scrolls and tomes older than Aegon the Conqueror himself. Somehow the tune matched his mood, his thoughts lingering on his mystery girl. Arthur had been relieved when the girl left no tracks to follow - would he have forsaken reason and actually chased her? Rhaegar wasn’t certain, which, he supposed, was the reason for Arthur’s relief.

He had just finished the final notes of the song when he realized he was no longer the only occupant
of the room.

"Ah, Jenny of Oldstones. It has been many years since I heard those bittersweet notes, 'Tis not sung in the North much. I daresay I have never heard it arranged in such a way."

Rhaegar smiled at his great-great-uncle, "I hope it pleased you, Uncle. The arrangement came to me at Summerhall during my last visit. I haven't played it since though."

Maester Aemon shuffled forward, seating himself in a chair next to Rhaegar, "And yet you find yourself playing it now. Perhaps you found something at Queensgate to inspire such sentiments?"

Rhaegar looked up. Aemon might be old and almost completely blind, but he was remarkably perceptive. Rhaegar hadn't said much about the trip to Queensgate upon their return a few days ago, and he knew Arthur and Oswell would likely take the story to their graves. Yet, for a moment, Rhaegar wondered if perhaps his uncle knew of the girl - it had been his suggestion to go to Queensgate in the first place - but, as quickly as the idea came to him, he dismissed it as wishful thinking. Aemon had said the outpost would be empty, void of life.

Rhaegar found himself wanting to ask if his ancestor possessed the sight, for it seemed as though he knew things he couldn't possibly have known otherwise.

"Did you know my great Uncle Duncan well?" Rhaegar asked instead.

Aemon sighed before responding, "Does anyone ever know someone well? Targaryens have always been a volatile bunch. One could say that even the sane ones have an ounce of madness in them. My brother often wrote to me of his children - Duncan was a good boy, his first son, born when Aegon was still Egg, before he ever imagined he would be King. Like his father, Duncan enjoyed roaming and got along well with the lower classes. Egg himself married for love, and he once wrote to me that he should have known his children would struggle to do as they were told. Of his children, only Rhaelle followed through on the betrothals set up by the King and Queen. Egg and his council did everything in their power to discourage Duncan, to convince him to give his sweet Jenny up. Alas, Duncan loved his Lady Jenny, and willingly traded his title as Prince of Dragonstone. He could not be persuaded."

"Do you think he ever regretted his decision?" Rhaegar pondered.

"That I cannot say. He certainly never seemed to show any outward signs - he brought Lady Jenny
to court, and he seemed satisfied to support your grandfather Jaehaerys as heir. He was satisfied in
his decision, as far as Egg knew, until the day he died at his father's side."

Silence reigned for several minutes, as both men became lost in thought, memories of a burning
palace and dragons lying among the ashes.

Aemon broke the silence, his voice quiet but thoughtful, "My boy, did you ever wonder why the
men of the Night's Watch take no wives and father no children? It is the same reason Queen Visenya
encouraged the practice followed today by your friends in the Kingsguard."

"Because they are to be married to their duty."

"Aye. It is so they will not love, for love is the bane of honor, the death of duty."

Rhaegar felt the words sink in. Considering where his mind had run off to over the last several days,
he could well see the truth behind them - the girl that plagued him had only been a complete stranger.
The feelings she had elicited in him...

Suddenly he found the thought of returning to his dispassionate existence with more fondness. He
could ill afford to forget his duty - not while his father still sat the Iron Throne and certainly not when
he became King himself.

"My boy, I will leave you with this last thought - life is not like the songs, but duty is a cold and
unfeeling mistress. We are only human, and the gods have fashioned us for love. That is our great
glory, and our great tragedy."

With those words, Aemon shuffled out of the library, presumably to his bed. Rhaegar understood he
ought to do the same - he had sent Oswell and Arthur to bed hours ago in advance of the journey - so
he stood and replaced the tomes he had been studying earlier. Gathering his papers in one hand and
his harp in the other, he too left to find his bed, unsure of whether he would be able to sleep at all as
Aemon’s words spun around his head.

*The death of duty... our great glory, our great tragedy...*
Lyanna knelt by the heart tree in the godswood, staring at the red sap weeping from the face carved into the tree’s trunk. She didn’t know how long she had been sitting there, staring at the face, her prayers for her family and Winterfell’s well-being having already parted from her lips.

She had been back a few days and the memories of deserted castles and Southron knights had already begun to fade, taking on the dazed quality of half-remembered dreams. Of course, there were certain memories that were harder to run from, which had wiggled their way into her actual dreams and caused her to wake several times, flushed and uncomfortable. She couldn’t help but send a silent plea to the Old Gods that those memories too would fade.

Fortunately, Lyanna had been kept incredibly busy upon her return. While Winterfell had not fallen into disrepair in her absence, Brandon’s time ruling for their father had not exactly gone smoothly. Poor Benjen had never seemed more relieved to have her return to tackling duties, and Brandon himself had been much more helpful.

Lyanna could tell that something had occurred between her two brothers in the fortnight she was away - she had yet to find the time to ask either for the story, but whatever it was, it seemed to have been enough to motivate Brandon. He still drank far too much, but he had remained within Winterfell since her return, and often spent a portion of the day working with her on the business of the North. It had not been easy, the gaps in his knowledge all the more apparent, but tempers had yet to flair and Lyanna had to admit that she appreciated the effort. He was also making time to train with Ben, which Lyanna was immensely grateful for. Benjen had worshipped Brandon for a long time and even though he no longer saw Brandon as a flawless hero, Lyanna knew that such moments were precious to her little brother.

As if thinking of him summoned him to her, she heard the heavy crunch of boots on icy ground
making their way towards her in the godswood. She could tell it was Brandon, recognizing the familiar pattern of his footfalls.

In a moment, he was kneeling next to her, staring up at the face of the weirwood as well. The Starks held to the faith of the Old Gods, the ancient religion of the First Men and the Children of the Forest before them, but Brandon had told her of his brief foray into the Seven.

Knighthood in Westeros was associated with the Faith of the Seven, the Southron gods that the Targaryens had accepted after Aegon’s Conquest. Most of the North had never adopted the Faith, like many other cultural aspects of the South, but Northern men who wished to become knights in the Southern fashion still had to swear their vows within the Faith. Brandon said they were just words, that the vows to protect were no more or less important just because they were sworn in the eyes of the Faith. The Old Gods saw all. Lyanna thought her brother might have actually come to appreciate the Old Gods and their solemn faces carved into weirwoods all the more after taking his vows.

They were silent for a few moments, each lost in their own thoughts. The Stark children had all developed a deep appreciation for these silent moments in the godswood from their father - it was here that Rickard Stark would come to be alone after exacting the King’s Justice, cleaning the blood from Ice, or after a particularly brutal wildling attack, when he would spend hours cleaning each of his weapons. But the godswood was not just for contemplating death, as each Stark used the clearing to seek guidance or ponder difficult situations.

Yet it was death that prompted Lyanna to speak, her eyes still staring at the face in the wood.

“I dream of the deserter sometimes. I see his dead eyes staring back at me as his blood seeps into the snow at my feet. Sometimes his eyes turn pale blue, like ice, like Nan’s tales of the Others with their dead eyes – those nights scare me more than the others, something like dread sinking into my bones.” She paused, feeling Brandon’s eyes on her even though she kept staring at the weirwood before them. “How do men live with this burden? The burden of death?”

She finally turned to him, taking in the serious expression plain in his grey.

“It was our duty. Taking a life is never easy, nor should it be. The man knew he walked to his death when he walked away from his vow at the Wall. But I do not know how men who kill more live with it. Drink, women, gambling, the sins of life take away the sting of death. But I think you eventually harden to it, falling back on the reliable nature of duty and justice. That is what Father told me once; that he comes here to pray, clean his sword and when he walks out, he returns to the comfortable weight of his duty.”
Lyanna nodded, understanding that sentiment very well. It was the same feeling she had experienced upon her return from Queensgate - the relief of returning back to her duty, driven by rational thought and justice.

“I think I understand why it is hard for you to resist the draw of freedom.”

Brandon raised an eyebrow, urging her on.

“At Queensgate, I tasted freedom. ‘Twas intoxicating, even more so than ever in the past. I could do as I wished, be who I wished. Having felt it makes struggling to resist the draw all the more difficult.”

Her brother frowned but she was not done yet. She sighed, turning to look at the weirwood tree.

“But you know, as I lay in my furs on the last night there, I realized that it would never be enough - that type of freedom isn’t meant to last. ‘Tis like the snow we love - no matter how much falls, it will eventually fade and hard ground will still be there. Duty, honor, family, those are the only constants in life. They will never let one down. Duty may be harsh but it is stability. It is comfort, particularly for us. The wolf’s blood makes us reckless; duty grounds us.”

Brandon was staring at her when she turned back to him.

“When did you grow so wise, Lya?”

She smiled tightly at him, ignoring the pang in her chest despite knowing her words were true.

“Serving for Father certainly helped.”

“I’m truly glad you are back. The gods only know we would have never managed for longer.”

“Alas, Winterfell still stands - you must have done a better job than I expected.”

Brandon scowled at her, but she only offered him a sweet smile. They passed back into
companionable silence for a moment before Brandon continued.

“I hope you know that I really do wish you could inherit Winterfell. A fortnight you were gone and I realized I did not know what I was doing. You and Father always make it look so easy. He’s groomed you for it. I know it hurts him that you aren’t the heir.”

“The latter isn’t true - Father believes in you, even if you do not believe in yourself. But it makes no matter,” she tried to keep the bitterness from her voice, knowing she was failing, “My duty will take me far from Winterfell, perhaps even far from the North. Walys is simply looking for the highest bidder - such a match will likely be Southron in nature.”

“I will fight for you, Lya.”

She turned to look at her brother, a fresh round of emotions crashing upon her at the thought of leaving home, of leaving her family and all she held dear. Living away from her father and her brothers who loved her and protected her…

Brandon grasped her hand to comfort her as he continued.

“Even if I didn’t get a choice in my marriage, I’ll make sure Father doesn’t send you to some Southron fool. And if your husband should prove ungallant, I shall ride my horse through night and day to geld the man myself.”

She giggled at the image of Brandon, a madman on a horse, riding up to some castle in the South, demanding her future husband come out and pay for hurting his precious sister. Frankly, she hoped even he would have better sense than to do such a thing.

“I pray you do not do such a foolish thing, for surely it could cost your life. But I will certainly be glad for your voice with Father. No doubt we will need to counterbalance whatever nonsense Maester Walys has decided to spew on the topic.”

“The man is awfully tiresome, isn’t he? He was suspicious of the marriage you arranged for that woman, Tasy.”

“He is quite certainly the worst Southron I have ever encountered. He did not even bother to hide his disdain from his face when I returned.”
“I was not aware you were familiar with many Southrons.”

Lyanna blushed, mumbling something about the visiting knights from the South, but fortunately Brandon was no longer paying attention.

“I went to see her, you know?”

Lyanna looked at him questioningly, so he explained, “Anna, the little girl.”

“Oh,” was all she could manage. She was surprised he had even bothered.

“It wasn’t my idea, obviously. Ben made me go with him, but I’m glad he did. She’s a sweet little girl.”

She arched an eyebrow skeptically. “She is indeed. One cannot lay any blame on the child. She’ll be well taken care of, I spoke with the husband before the couple married - he’s a good man.”

“He seemed like it when we met him. A better man than me.”

“Do not punish yourself overmuch, Bran. The girl may be a Snow, but she still carries the Stark blood in her veins. The pack will never turn against one of its own. But is that why you’ve been more helpful around Winterfell?”

Brandon sighed, his face serious, “Yes. I guess I just never really thought about the consequences. I know Father will be furious when he finds out.”

Lyanna patted his arm, “Undoubtedly. I would not recommend continuing your conquering of maidens’ hearts with such fervor, especially now that the betrothal with the Tullys is finalized. Though in truth, Father may be too absorbed in his fury over my little jaunt to the Wall…”

“ Gods, I don’t know how Walys found out the truth about that.”
Lyanna sighed, not wishing to speak again about Maester Walys and her father’s inevitable anger at her running away for a fortnight, “Brandon, you just have to be more careful. Imagine if it was a high-born lady? Hoster Tully is an ambitious man, he would never allow his daughter to be shamed. “Family, Duty, Honor” are their words after all. Dealing with another bastard might put us in a horrible position - frankly, I can’t even imagine if you were to get a child on some bannerman’s daughter.”

Brandon flinched, and Lyanna raised an eyebrow.

*Gods, please tell me he hasn’t dishonored some bannerman’s daughter.*

“Lya, I’m not made for this.”

“That’s nonsense, Brandon. You are a Northerner, who has simply spent far too long enjoying the pleasures of the South. Or do you wish to be known as the whoring oaf of the North?”

“And rival Lord Robert Baratheon?” Lyanna scrunched up her face in displeasure. Robert Baratheon was one of Ned’s closest friends, if Ned’s letters were any indication, but that didn’t dampen any of the rumors that reached Winterfell about the man. He too already had a bastard in the Vale. Apparently, he’d also embarrassed himself at Court by challenging Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning.

“Ben compared me to him when we fought in the tavern. Others take you both.”

“Gods, I should think you are not nearly as bad as him yet. And fortunately for you,” her lips tugged into a smirk, “you have your caring siblings to keep you in line.”

Brandon barked a laugh as he rose to his feet, offering her a hand up, “More like beat me into submission.”

“You know you should give Catelyn a chance, didn’t you say she’s quite lovely? Father wrote that she was the perfect example of the Southern lady, gracious and demure.”

“Nothing like you, huh?”
Lyanna sighed as they began moving back towards the main keep, “Nay, nothing like me. Though thank the gods, can you imagine a marriage between two wolf blooded Starks?”

“Winterfell might very well have been at risk for burning then.”

“I should think so. But Catelyn will be good for you. Her father says she is an accomplished young lady, who has helped with many of her deceased mother’s duties around Riverrun.”

“She’s still a stuck up Southron,” Brandon growled.

“But she, like me, is being forced from her home to a place she’s never been, surrounded by people who don’t know her.”

He softened, “And she’ll be replacing such a beloved Lady Stark. It will be a tough role to fill.”

Lyanna giggled, “You know I’ve always hated when people called me Lady Stark, because that’ll always be Mother to me.”

“And that’s why all the servants call you Lady Lyanna?”

She nodded, “I only accept the title when I’m taking petitions for Father. It will be strange having another woman take on the name.”

Brandon sighed, “Maybe we should run away.”

“Run away? Brandon!”

“What? You used to dream about it when you were younger!”

Lyanna tried not to think about the fact that she had been but a few days younger when she had last considered the idea. Nay, it did no good to think of such impossibilities.
“Yes, back when I thought Father would allow me to wield a sword and we could run off and join the Golden Company, fighting side by side.”

“And what, now, you are content to be a little lady?”

She scowled and hit him in the chest as they entered the main courtyard, “I may be little, but I’ll never be a real lady.”

“Certainly not if you hit your superiors in such a manner.”

Lyanna just scoffed, “My superiors, now that is a jest if I’ve ever heard one...”

Chapter End Notes

I do love writing Brandon and Lyanna’s brother-sister relationship, the whole wolf’s blood/impulsive nature makes for really dynamic (aka volatile) characters.

Couple new POVs (plus Arthur, the man) next chapter and the myriad marriage plans get rolling...

Thanks as always for the comments and feedback - I know I say this every chapter, but you guys give me lifeeee (and feed the motivation!) :)}
I should be working on a work presentation that's due tonight, but I just got the edits on these soooo obviously this had to come first!

Quick warning that there is a depiction of an incestual relationship in this chapter, but this is ASoIaF and it is a canon relationship. But figured I'd throw the disclosure up there just in case :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jaime

Jaime hated King’s Landing.

He couldn’t imagine why Cersei loved the place, though surely his haughty sister hardly ventured outside the confines of the Red Keep.

Jaime was certain that his sister was the only redeeming thing about the whole despicable place.

And she certainly looked it as she stood next to their father in the courtyard of the Red Keep, her golden hair shining under the chilly winter sun. Her red and gold dress hugged her shapely figure beneath a cloak that was certainly nowhere near warm enough for the winter weather. King’s Landing was warmer than much of the rest of the Kingdoms, but it was by no means warm. Nonetheless, Jaime thought he had never seen a sweeter sight than that of his twin smiling up at him. She almost offset the displeasure of seeing his father standing next to her, a scowl firmly in place on his face.

Jaime wished he could ignore the man. Alas, it was his duty to greet his Lord Father first and foremost - and even the heir to Casterly Rock knew better than to slight the most powerful man in Westeros. Yet, Jaime smiled to himself at the thought of such a blatant show of insolence. It
appeared Lord Crakehall had been correct when he said that Jaime’s aptitude with a sword had gone to his head.

Not that Jaime needed any more reason to boost his ego. Being a Lannister and the son of the Hand of the King had already ingrained far too much arrogance in a boy of five and ten. To be distinguishing oneself as an accomplished swordsman at so young an age had only made matters worse.

Jaime dismounted his horse to kneel before his father and sister, bowing his head to hide his smirk. Father would no doubt be wroth if he did not behave himself.

“My Lord Father.”

“Rise, son of mine. Welcome to King’s Landing. You may greet your sister.”

Jaime stood and nodded at his father before turning fully to the other half of his soul.

Cersei was poised and calm, her face a mask of neutrality much like Tywin’s, but her emerald eyes sparkled with love and happiness. Knowing how much Cersei loved the pomp and circumstance of Court, Jaime opted to take his sister’s delicate hand, raising it to his lips. He kissed her knuckles, very much wishing the digits were her lips. Or better yet, her….

“Darling sister, ‘tis a joy to be reunited after so long.”

“Brother, I am quite happy to see you arrived safely.”

Father interrupted then, clearly wishing to proceed with matters.

“Let us return within. Cersei, you will show your brother to his chambers. Jaime, I will expect you in my solar in an hour. For now, I must handle affairs of the realm.”

Both siblings nodded at their father’s crisp instructions as they turned towards the Tower of the Hand. Jaime offered his arm to Cersei, who promptly placed her hand in the crook of his elbow as they followed Tywin Lannister inside.
Father walked briskly away from them to his solar without so much as a glance at his children. Jaime and Cersei on the other hand slowly meandered through the halls of the tower, Cersei guiding him easily to whichever chambers had been prepared for him.

Once inside, Jaime took in the space, unbuckling his sword and resting it near the door. While the accommodations were better than what he had in Lord Crakehall’s service, they still paled in comparison to his rooms at Casterly Rock.

Cersei entered with him and quickly dismissed the servants who had been tidying the room. The two girls scurried out in a hurry, eyes cast down like frightened animals beneath the glare of his beautiful sister. He had no doubt that the servants of the Red Keep had learned of Cersei’s fierce temper when faced with incompetence.

He smiled when he heard the heavy thud of the door being barred and barely turned in time to catch his sister flying into his arms.

Clothes were a barrier. Shirts shed, laces loosened, and then he was home, where he belonged.

The twins had shared the same womb, had entered the world together, each body a mere extension of the other. Only with her did he feel complete.

His sister, his friend, his lover.

As they lay tangled on top of the crimson silk sheets, sweat shining on their skin, Jaime basked in the feeling of contentment. He watched her chest rise and fall beside him, her hair slightly disheveled and her green eyes bright with pleasure.

Certain societies might say what he shared with Cersei was wrong, but Jaime would never believe them. How could something that felt so right be wrong?

In any case, the Targaryens had long practiced incest. In fact, they married brother to sister even when love was not a factor - the King and the Queen themselves were siblings, born of parents who were siblings. The Crown Prince that Father had promised Cersei was the product of incest twice over. Why should the Targaryens alone be above the rules of society? Were not the Lannisters as rich and as powerful? Why should Jaime and Cersei be kept apart? The Lannisters did not need to be bothered by the opinions of sheep, of lesser people.
Cersei turned onto her stomach, her long lithe leg fitted perfectly between his legs, her torso balancing partially on his chest. Her blonde curls fell in a curtain around her face, tickling him where they grazed across his skin.

“Father says I am going to be Queen.”

Jaime chuckled, his free hand skimming along the skin of her bare back. He smirked wider when he saw her shiver at the action.

“Father has been telling you such for years, Cersei. What makes you so sure now?”

“I happen to know that Prince Rhaegar is returning to King’s Landing shortly. It is high time he marries, and I am the only viable option.”

“How do you know you are the only viable option? Didn’t the King reject the betrothal before?”

“That was years ago. And the King has since granted Rhaegar the right to choose, provided he makes a decision in a timely manner.”

“And what makes you think he will choose you?”

Cersei scowled at him, attempting to pull away, but he held her to him.

“I am the most beautiful woman in all of Westeros, daughter to the wealthiest and most powerful man in the Seven Kingdoms. It is only right that I marry the most beautiful and gracious man in the Seven Kingdoms.”

Jaime frowned but Cersei continued, her eyes gazing towards the window.

“Just imagine, the Silver Dragon King and the Golden Lion Queen. Father says he is King Jaehaerys come again, that he will be the best King that Westeros has seen in a century. And I will be there, by his side, a crown of gold and rubies. We will rule together, all powerful and courtly. But
“at night, it will be passion - he will be all mine, and I shall give him silver and golden haired babes, dragon lions to sit the Iron Throne.”

“How do you know he won’t tire of you and take a mistress?”

She scoffed, “Do you ever tire of me, brother?”

“Nay, but I am not your husband, nor the future King.”

“If only we were Targaryens, brother, then you could be both.”

“I find I much prefer to be a Lannister.”

“Princess Cersei Targaryen. It has a nice ring to it I suppose.”

“You will give up the Lannister name?”

“Nay, never, but I shall of course use my husband’s name when he so desires.”

Jaime found the idea to not be comforting at all. He had nothing against Rhaegar Targaryen himself - nay, it was the fact that his twin and lover was so wrapped up in her desire for a man she barely knew. She pined over the Crown Prince while still flushed from sex with the man she claimed to love above all others.

Jaime grimaced, his hands tightening reflexively on her hips, pulling her closer to him.

“What, brother, are you jealous?”

“How can I not be, when the woman I love will belong to another man.”

“Nonsense. I will always be yours, just as you will always be mine.”
He turned to rise out of bed, grabbing and pulling his discarded breeches back on.

“You know Father will require that I marry. I imagine it is the reason for his summons. I am not to be in King’s Landing long.”

Cersei pouted, her beautiful plump bottom lip jutting out just so. He leaned forward to catch it between his teeth but she pulled away just before he could.

“You will not ask to stay longer? To spend more time with me?”

“Cers, you know I would if I could,” he responded, donning his shirt once more, “This is Father’s orders we are talking about though.”

“He will listen if you ask him for longer in the city! Perhaps you could train here for some time with one of the knights in the Red Keep. Mayhaps a Kingsguard even.”

“I do not think he would agree to such a scheme.”

That got his beautiful sister out of the bed, as she ran up to grasp his shirt, “Oh please, won’t you ask though? Jaime, I need you, I need you here by my side. I miss you so much when you are away.”

He stepped away from her, glaring at her. “Only because your precious Silver Prince isn’t here.”

She pulled him back to her, a finger tracing the lines of his neck as she gazed up at him from under her lashes.

“Nay, brother, no one fills me like you do. Even Rhaegar Targaryen will not replace you in my life or in my heart. Stay with me, Jaime. I need my lover here by my side, in my bed.”

Jaime could never truly walk away from her, especially not when she rose on her tiptoes and captured his lips so sweetly. She was his weakness, but gods, there never was a more delicious weakness.
A knock on the door broke them apart just as her hands had moved to remove his shirt again. Cersei quickly moved to grab her discarded dress, stepping back into the blessedly simple dress and lacing it back up - now that he saw it, Jaime frowned. Cersei hardly ever wore simple dresses. She must have known she would need to redress quickly.

“My Lord Jaime,” yelled the guard from the other side of the door, “I apologize to bother you, but ’tis the hour appointed by your Lord Father for your meeting.”

“Very well,” he replied, eyeing Cersei as she finished lacing the dress, her hands straightening her hair.

“You will ask him, won’t you, brother?”

His sister gave him the devastating smile that had broken hearts and he could not resist her. He would do anything to keep that smile directed at him.

“Of course, sister.”

He winked at her before entering the hall, following the guard to the Hand of the King’s solar. Within, he found his father writing a letter, his concentration undisturbed by the arrival of his son.

The door thumped close as Jaime moved to stand before his father, who seemed to remain unaware of, or perhaps was deliberately ignoring, his presence.

“Father, you wished to see me?”

His father glanced up before returning to his letter. “It is time we speak of your future.”

Jaime took a seat in the chair in front of his father’s desk, just as his father’s eyes flashed up to him.

“Do not get comfortable. You will not be long in the city as I am sending you to Riverrun. If all goes according to plan, you will wed the second Tully sister. I would have preferred the eldest, but it
seems Lord Stark has secured her already.”

“What happened to Princess Elia?” Jaime remembered the pretty Dornish girl. Though she and her brother Oberyn had not been as kind to Tyrion as he had hoped, Elia had been kind to Jaime himself, and witty, and his mother had always wished for him to marry her.

“Princess Elia married Baelor Hightower over a year ago. It is said she was found to no longer be a maiden. In any case, we will not ally ourselves with the Dornish. Mariah Martell is smart, but her health is failing and her eldest is said to be cautious and slow to action. The Tyrell girls are both married, and Lord Arryn has no daughters or nieces.”

“What about the North? I recall Tyrion telling me that Lord Stark has a daughter.”

Tywin grimaced, “Aye, Lyanna. She is a half a year older than you. The Stark maester even suggested her, for a ridiculous price. But she is of no concern.”

“What do you mean?”

“It matters not. You will leave for Riverrun in three days to deliver missives related to some taxation concerns in the Riverlands. I expect you to remain several weeks, learning of the castle and the lands, as well as getting to know the girl.”

Jaime understood that the trip was not solely for the purpose of his introduction to a potential wife, but to determine the nature and lands of the Lord Paramount that would be tied to the Lannisters by marriage.

“Father, I was actually hoping to remain for a bit longer in King’s Landing.”

“Were you?” His father was clearly irritated. “For what purpose? I do not need you here.”

“I thought perhaps I could continue my training here in the Red Keep.”

Tywin stared at him for a moment before speaking again.
“Is Lord Crakehall’s instruction somehow insufficient?”

“On the contrary, Lord Crakehall has been an excellent instructor. Perhaps too good of one.”

“Too good of an instructor you say.”

It was not a question but Jaime continued - it was rare to get such an opening with Tywin Lannister.

“Indeed. But many of the greatest knights in the realm are stationed in the Red Keep, some without squires to train. As the son of the Hand of the King, I would be remiss to ignore such an opportunity to better my skills.”

Tywin raised an eyebrow at him, the only movement on his father’s neutral face.

“I thought perhaps to ask one of the Kingsguard to train with them for some time. Not for long, and it would not impede any trips to Riverrun.”

_Not that I have any desire to spend time at Riverrun._

His father stared at him for a moment as if considering the notion. Then he surprised Jaime by responding.

“Perhaps it is not a bad idea. You would gain exposure to the greatest knights in the Kingdoms and it would allow you time to learn some of the responsibilities of the realm at my side. Very well, you may ask if they will take you on and I will inform Lord Tully that you shall visit at a later time. But be smart, I will not have you begging. Lannisters do not beg.”

“Of course not, Father.”

“Good, Jaime. I had not thought such strategic thinking was within you, but it seems your time with Lord Crakehall has been beneficial.”
Jaime blustered at the back-handed compliment, particularly knowing that the idea was not his own. But the thought that he had succeeded far surpassed any insult his father could hand him.

Jaime bowed, taking leave of his father a quickly as he could without notice; he couldn’t wait to see the smile on Cersei’s face.

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Arthur

*He’s thinking about the girl again.*

It had been a long, cold few days of riding from Castle Black towards Winterfell, and the Crown Prince had once more been alternating between his usual deep melancholy, a modest anxiety over their return to King’s Landing and King Aerys, and some unknown emotion akin to longing.

When it came to the latter emotion, Arthur had never seen his friend this way. Rhaegar was not the type of man driven by sins of the flesh. He was not fond of gambling (despite a particular talent for counting cards), did not enjoy the company of courtesans or frequent brothels, and rarely drank to excess. He was an intellect with a firm sense of justice, and a diligent knight, though he derived no joy from the song of swords like Arthur. He took his duty to the realm as Crown Prince seriously, recently serving as King often in all but name. If it wasn’t for his irrational obsession with this prophecy, the man could be said to be quite perfect - there were certainly many who called him thus, though they didn't know him like Arthur. They weren't there late at night, when Rhaegar was plagued by self-doubt and fear of the destruction bearing down on his people— a war he didn't understand but was convinced was coming.

After years with Rhaegar, growing up together, becoming knights and men together, and then guarding the Prince, he had heard enough of the cursed prophecy to last him a thousand years. The promised prince, whose song will be the song of ice and fire, come to save the world from the great war to come. He knew Rhaegar had found more information at the Wall, stories and tales of the
Long Night, the Others and a savior wielding a flaming sword. Arthur hadn't paid much attention to understand it all, but there did seem to be some connection between the stories and the North.

_Maybe Rhaegar should adopt part of the Starks' family saying – “Winter is coming.”_

The thought struck Arthur as odd, causing him to furrow his brow, purging all thoughts of the beautiful girl from Queensgate. He remembered something he had overheard Brandon Stark say, the one time he had encountered the heir to Winterfell, at a tourney in Lannisport.

="Lya is as Northern as they come. The girl practically has ice running through her veins."

_If any place is as likely to have some mystical villains appearing from nowhere, it would undoubtedly be this hell hole with all its blasted snow and freezing winds._

"What if Lyanna Stark is the "ice"?"

Arthur didn't even realize he had spoken until Rhaegar's eyes were boring into him.

"What?"

Arthur had never been bookish like Rhaegar, preferring his sword to a scroll any day. Explaining the tangled thoughts in his mind was not something he did often, but he had already begun, so he knew he owed his friend some semblance of an explanation.

He shrugged, "The song for your prophecy is of both ice and fire, is it not? I was just thinking on the words you used a few nights ago - "fighting the great war to come" - and how you could adopt some of the Stark words as your new House saying. They are awfully similar, ominous."

"Winter is Coming," breathed Rhaegar.

"Aye. Brandon Stark yelled it whenever he won a sparring match at Lannisport."

Rhaegar chuckled, probably remembering a young Brandon, reckless and wild with a sword, taking
on knights in the yard.

Arthur continued, figuring it better to close the loop of his thoughts, "Brandon said something else at Lannisport too - though he was certainly a few deep in his cups..." His friend nodded for him to continue, "He said his sister Lyanna was as Northern as they come, that she practically has ice running through her veins."

He watched as his friend weighed the words, the wheels turning within his mind. Arthur knew next to nothing about the Northern girl, as much as anyone else at court for that matter. He knew Aerys had considered demanding the girl's hand for Rhaegar, the King’s idea of a punishment for both his heir and the illusive Starks. The King saw treachery in every shadow, and he was not well pleased that the Starks had “hidden” the girl. The feat was impressive, in fact, as there were more than enough stories about her father and brothers, even the youngest. It was like the old gods of the North conspired to protect the girl's image.

In any case, she was a maiden of six and ten from a great house, and if she could fulfill but a sliver of Rhaegar's damn prophecy while solving the problem of his inevitable requirement to marry, the girl would already prove a good enough match. It was certainly preferable to Cersei Lannister.

"I had never considered the "ice and fire" from that perspective, though I suppose it's possible. The Targaryen blood as the fire, the Stark blood the ice. It would seem to fit, a fulfillment of the Pact of Ice and Fire." Rhaegar remained pensive, seemingly neutral to the idea.

The Prince had never expressed much emotion regarding his eventual marriage, except modest annoyance at both of his parents for their politicizing of the whole matter. As far as Arthur could tell, if it weren't for the need for children to continue his line and complete the damned prophecy, Rhaegar would gladly remain unmarried, surrounded by his books.

This wasn’t due to lack of options. Every lord in the Seven Kingdoms had tried parading a daughter or two in front of the Crown Prince in an attempt at capturing his eye - or at least six of the seven, given the North had withheld their precious Wolf Maid. Beautiful and plain, smart and dull, young and old, maiden and widow, Rhaegar had seen the full spectrum of women without finding a single one worth pursuing.

For a while, his friend had indeed tried, dancing with the women at feasts and speaking to them in court. Rhaegar would inevitably return from these events, talking about the frivolous nature of women and stating he couldn't imagine marrying a woman who saw only his crown. To be sure, Rhaegar had grown more indifferent in the last few years, but Arthur knew these things still bothered his friend beneath the princely exterior.
For this, Arthur was glad Rhaegar had had the foresight to decline the Martell's offer - Elia was a lovely woman, graceful and witty, but Arthur knew that Elia had grown up believing herself a Princess. The Martells wanted Rhaegar precisely for the crown he would wear - he was a means to an end, a way to make Elia a real Queen. Ashara had also pointed out that, while Elia could manage passably in Court, she was the exact opposite of what Rhaegar really needed. Elia was sharp of mind but weak in body; her poor health would likely make bearing multiple children difficult. She was not a challenging or imposing figure to craft the court to fit her needs, nor was she docile or sweet enough to play the conciliator. Rhaegar was thoughtful enough for two - he needed a wife to balance and complement him. If there was such a woman of decent enough birth, Arthur wondered where she was hiding.

More than one lady of the court had even offered herself outside of marriage - not that Rhaegar would ever avail himself of this type of mistress; he was far too proper to dishonor a lady, much to the chagrin of many noblewomen. His friend had taken a couple of lovers early in his teenage years, but all of these liaisons had been brief and all had ended years ago.

This is what made the Prince's little fling at Queensgate so perplexing - to both Arthur and Rhaegar himself. The girl had affected Rhaegar in a way Arthur had never seen. Her identity still irked them - well, not Oswell, who said it didn't matter. She had been wild and dangerous enough to be a wildling, educated enough to be noble, but too unguarded to be from the main branch of a noble house. Ultimately, Oswell was right in the end - they would never see the girl again.

Arthur saw how that fact pained Rhaegar – he felt bad for his friend, who had been tempted with the taste of infatuation, only to have it taken away to remain forever out of reach. But that didn’t stop Arthur from secretly thanking the Seven that the girl had left in the dead of night, leaving no trail in the snow. While the Crown Prince knew he would never be able to pursue a woman outside of the nobility, he had proven to be rather impulsive when it came to the girl.

No, if Rhaegar wanted a Northerner, he would have to settle for Lyanna Stark. The Stark girl's brothers seemed to manage well enough in proper company, particularly the second one who had been at Court the year before with that idiot Robert Baratheon. Arthur had never believed in Court rumors, but he prayed the Stark girl wasn't as uncouth as the whispers said.
As the surroundings became more familiar, a peculiar mix of excitement and anxiety settled in Ned’s gut. It had been more than four years since he last rode through these woods and it felt as though time had frozen. The woods had not changed, though he supposed he shouldn’t have expected them to; they had remained thus since the time of the Kings of Winter. He was just another Stark, a second son at that, who would one day be forgotten in the annals of history.

This would all be Brandon’s after all.

A gust of frigid air blew past their party and he heard a string of mumbled curses from the bulking mass of furs riding beside him.

“Seven hells, how do people live in this blasted wasteland? This is a new level of torture. You Northerners are bloody crazy if you think there is anything beautiful here.”

Robert Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End and Lord Paramount of the Stormlands, was by no means a soft man. Ned’s best friend was a mass of muscle, standing at six and half feet, with piercing blue eyes and shaggy black hair – his laugh was as powerful as a swing of his warhammer. Bold and boisterous, rash really, the man was committed to pushing his suit for the hand of Ned’s sweet sister Lyanna – so committed that he had impulsively convinced Ned to accompany him on his journey to meet Lord Stark at the Inn at the Crossroads.

Yet, Robert failed to understand that winter was a very different beast in the North. While fostering at the Eyrie, Robert had never enjoyed the snow and ice that arrived in the depths of winter. In fact, he’d once proclaimed the only good thing about winter was that women were more desperate for warmth, which he was more than willing to provide, ‘if granted access to their personal pools of heat.’

It came as no surprise that Robert was less than pleased about the weather in the North, where snow was not infrequent even in summer. While Ned was busy inhaling the familiar scents and embracing the cool grays and whites of his childhood, his friend’s mood was steadily souring with each gust of wind. It helped matters none that the Lord of Storm’s End had started the journey in a foul mood.

Robert Baratheon was many things, patient was not one of them.
He had spent the entire ride to the Inn at the Crossroads, where Ned had agreed to meet his father, japing about how soon enough they would be brothers for real. Robert had talked about the jewels and dresses he would buy for “his Lya,” how he would train their boys in swords and Lya would teach their daughters to be perfect ladies. His friend’s joy seemed so genuine that Ned didn’t have the heart to tell Rob that he wasn’t sure Lyanna would really like any of that – except maybe the training with a sword, and then only if she could partake.

Robert’s mirth quickly twisted into displeasure when, upon their arrival at the Inn, Rickard Stark refused to even broach the subject – he never conducted such business on the road, and certainly didn’t intend to when the trip was purely to see his son. Ned had expected nothing less, considering Father was so protective of his only daughter, but Robert had been irate, storming out of the inn. The man was moody the rest of their stay, bedding several of the tavern wenches, much to Ned’s chagrin. Ned tried to explain to Robert that he didn’t think Rickard Stark would take kindly to such actions, but Rob’s biting response was that he needed the stress relief. On the last day, Robert tried again to bring his suit, only to be rebuffed once more. The Lord of Winterfell would address matters concerning his family only when in Winterfell.

That proclamation led to Robert demanding Ned accompany him to Winterfell – he would bring the suit in person to the North and he wouldn’t wait a minute longer. Ned saw no need to rush, since Father himself was stopping elsewhere before returning North. He tried to explain that his father doubtlessly wanted to get Lyanna’s opinion on the matter. This explanation seemed to only incite Robert further as he ranted about how she could have no possible objections and that she seemed a dutiful daughter in all of her letters.

In the end, it had been Rob’s innocent enough question that convinced Ned to accept his friend’s impulsive decision. “Don’t you want to see your home and your siblings again anyways?”

The journey had been a relatively unpleasant one, as they had not intended to travel past the Riverlands. Robert remained aloof and moody, demanding stories about Lyanna during the day and bedding a new whore every night.

It reminded Ned of the first time Robert had seen Lyanna’s portrait – it had been over a year ago, when she had sent it with one of her letters. Apparently Maester Walys had convinced father to commission several small portraits upon her fourteenth name day – horrified by the idea of them being sent to undesirable suitors, Lyanna had managed to get her hands on all three copies, sending one to Ned, another to Bran, while hiding the third.

Part of Ned wished she hadn’t sent him one at all, for as soon as it fell into Robert’s hands, the man had convinced himself he was in love.
For more than six moons, Rob had taken to finding pale, dark-haired whores on their trips away from the Vale. At first Ned thought it merely a coincidence – that is, until one night, deep in his cups, Robert had explained that he did it so that he could imagine being between sweet Lya’s legs. Uncomfortable with this revelation, considering it was his little sister, Ned expressed his dismay. It seemed a slight on his sister’s honor that Rob was so focused on having her for his sexual gratification. Rob had merely laughed, saying Ned needn’t worry because it wouldn’t be long till he wouldn’t need such entertainment.

“No need for proxies when you have the real thing, eh?” he’d explained, clinking his glass into Ned’s before downing the contents.

The words certainly hadn’t comforted Ned then – in fact, thinking about them now made him scowl.

When Robert had first started drinking and whoring, Ned had excused it as a coping mechanism. They were away from their families in the relatively isolated Eyrie. Ned certainly missed the care and support of his siblings and parents, and while he didn’t particularly enjoy sleeping with whores, he could appreciate the temporary relief it might bring a young man separated from affection.

The drinking and the whoring had gotten worse when Robert’s parents had died, and again, Ned could but only excuse such behavior - Robert was not a sentimental man, but Ned saw the way depression had hung to him since he became the Lord of Storm’s End. The title did not sit well with him, as he claimed that Lord Baratheon was his father, should still be his father. Only once had Robert broken down and revealed how powerless he’d felt, watching his parents’ ship sink into the bay in view of the castle. Clearly, alcohol and sex were Robert’s way of escaping the pain. Ned could not fault him for that - he was Robert’s best friend, wasn’t it his duty to be there and support his friend?

Robert had been there for him after all, when his own mother had died. Ned had returned to the Vale feeling both shattered and guilty - he’d barely seen his mother in all the years leading up to her death. But he’d also felt resentful. It had been his father’s idea to send him away from Winterfell, from his home and his family. Did they not want him? Robert had taken him out and they had gotten drunk - they had been young then, 14 and 15 maybe. And instead of leaving with a woman, Robert had sat with Ned and told him all of the things he admired about Ned - his kindness, his listening skills, his commitment to duty, his ability to whip Robert into a pulp with a sword. Robert had helped him weather the storm of his grief.

In spite of all of that, Ned could not help but feel uncomfortable with his friend’s continued habits, particularly given Robert’s proclaimed love of Lyanna. Lyanna might be dutiful, but she was quick-witted and willful. And while she was beautiful, she was also far more than a pretty object for some Lord to purchase for his pleasure.
Ned shivered to think what his father would think if he heard Robert say such a thing in his presence. Already Ned had a feeling that Rickard Stark would not appreciate this unexpected visit.

Fortunately, they were approaching the edge of Wintertown and the dark shadows of Winterfell could just be seen in the distance. Hopefully Lya and Bran had received their raven from the Twins and knew to expect additional guests.

Taking a deep breath to clear his mind, he focused on all the things he planned to do upon his arrival: meeting the mysterious new pets Lya had brought home a few years ago, praying in a real Godswood, and hunting with his brothers. For the first time, Benjen would be joining them.

The woods may not have changed, but he imagined many other things about being home would be different.

Chapter End Notes

Have quite a few of the next POVs written, but just need to find time to edit them. Work has been grueling, and my beta was on vacation, but hopefully going to get back on track :)

Thank you guys as always for the amazing comments! Ya'll make this so much more fun and constructive!

Next up: As of right now, the title of the next chapter is "Unexpected," though that is subject to change. But should give you a little idea of what's coming :)


Lyanna

Another day as Lady Stark.

Lyanna smoothed down the fabric of the new dress once more as she gazed in the mirror. She didn’t usually wear dresses unnecessarily, but this one felt special. Not because it was some elaborate confection like those worn down South. In fact, the dress was simpler than what she tended to wear when House Stark entertained noble guests. Instead, the new wool gown had been a nameday gift from the two ladies who ran the orphanage in Wintertown - they had said it was a small thank you for the support she had given, but she still found herself overwhelmed by the kindness.

It was a simple long-sleeved kirtle, full skirts of wool in a dark grey reminiscent of her brother Ned’s eyes. The bodice was fitted without being tight, not requiring a ridiculous corset like her formal dresses, but still accentuating her small frame. The skirts themselves left plenty of room to allow her to ride astride - certainly a feature the ladies had considered, knowing Lyanna’s distaste for riding side-saddle. The neckline swooped across her chest, revealing a modest amount of her pale skin, the dark fabric contrasting with her slender neck.

It was basic and perfect, the ideal dress for a girl who hated frippery.

A knock on the door roused her from her thoughts before a guard peeked in to inform her that they were ready for her.

She allowed a sigh to pass from her lips as she nodded, grabbing her cloak as she followed him out to the courtyard.

Soon enough, Lyanna was riding down the main street of Wintertown, watching the local people
bustling about their tasks before the coming storm.

A message had come from one of the constables who handled disputes among the local peasants - the disputes rarely made it to the court at Winterfell except when significant, but it was not uncommon for the constable to elevate a concern to the Lord should he deem it necessary. Lyanna had long since taken care of these matters for her father, forging a bond with the lower levels of society. Part of her longed for a simpler existence, and handling matters with the local people always gave her a sense of purpose. While she couldn't live the simple life she yearned for, she could work to ensure her people lived fulfilling lives.

It was one of the only responsibilities as Lady of Winterfell that she genuinely enjoyed, as well as one of the only times she willingly dressed the part: the long folds of the Stark gray dress, one of her finer fur lined cloaks on her shoulders, her hair cascading down her back in curls, with only a few strands pinned back in the Northern fashion.

They had made a brief stop at the orphanage, so that Lyanna could thank the women once more and show off their beautiful work, which meant they were a little behind schedule as they moved through town.

Guiding Silver around a large cart of supplies headed for the castle, she noticed Nymeria growl and bound off towards the doors of one of the inns, stalking up to a few figures who had just exited the building. A few shrieks filtered through the air - likely newcomers who had not yet seen the direwolves roaming the area.

Lyanna felt her brow furrow at the sight of Nymeria so familiar with strangers; she urged Silver in the direction as one of the large men reached out to scratch behind the direwolf's ears. Recognition flared when the man looked up, just as another figure emerged from the inn and Lyanna found herself lost in familiar indigo eyes.

She hadn’t expected to see them again, let alone so soon. So much of their interaction had been based on the idea of anonymity, of never seeing each other again.

Yet here they were, witnessing her in all her Stark glory.

Here he was, those pools of indigo staring into her soul.

For a moment she hoped he wouldn’t recognize her. Frankly, she looked nothing like the half-wild
girl she’d seen in the mirror when she returned from Queensgate. A pang of fear shot through her at the dishonor the stories could cause, should he choose to disclose—

“Is something amiss, Lady Stark?” called one of the guards, noticing her attention being drawn to the three Southerners.

Well, if they didn’t realize before...

She saw the subtle flash of shock at the title, Jay’s eyes narrowing as he took in her appearance. Without looking away, she responded shakily, "No, nothing is amiss." Her eyes flickered to her direwolf now circling Maron, before returning to Jay's curious gaze, her heart beating loudly in her chest, "It seems Nymeria has made friends with some travelers."

Nudging her horse further in the direction of the inn, Lyanna paused as she heard the thunder of charging hoofs and her name being yelled with urgency. She frowned seeing Jory Cassel approaching their party at full-speed.

“Lady Lyanna! Lady Lyanna-” he continued to yell while still several lengths away.

She sighed, knowing that whatever news he bore was unexpected and likely unwanted - Brandon was still in the keep and she’d only left a quarter of an hour ago, so he would only send a rider if it was something he couldn't, or didn't want, to handle.

“Jory? What is it?”

The man bowed in his saddle before rushing out a stream of words, "Lady Stark, I apologize for interrupting but your brother demanded your immediate return to the castle."

Lyanna scowled, "What could possibly warrant such an order? I'm here on Winterfell’s behalf." The fact that Brandon would seek to order her to do anything of the sort, particularly knowing that she was handling duties in town that should be his responsibility, made her blood boil.

Jory noticeably paled at the icy tone, still breathing heavily, "I'm sorry, Lady Stark, Lord Brandon does indeed understand. Banners have been sighted on the Kingsroad, my Lady.”
Lyanna felt her frown deepen; Father was still at least a few days away, and she hadn’t heard of any other parties due to arrive. Yet only noble guests would be flying banners...

“It can’t be Father, he’s at least a few days from Winterfell. Could they tell any sigils?”

Knowing that Brandon had the right of it - he was completely useless when it came to preparing accommodations and Benjen would only be helpful with foodstuffs - Lyanna chanced a glance at the three men with whom she had spent a week, who had undoubtedly put together the pieces of her true identity. Walt and Maron both nodded, though in farewell or in understanding, she wasn't sure. It was Jay's thoughtful mask that perplexed her - only his eyes spoke of any emotion, and even that she couldn't read with his hood drawn over his brow.

_I should have never left the Wall._

By then Jory had composed himself enough to speak again, “Lord Brandon believes it may be Lord Eddard.”

That response was not at all what she expected and she whipped around to stare at Jory.

“Ned? Why would Ned be here? He was due to return to the Eyrie after meeting with Father.”

“I know not the details my Lady, but the banner of House Stark flies alongside the stag of House Baratheon.” Jory huffed, still trying to catch his breath.

Lyanna blanched, “Others take him…”

Of course, she was thrilled to see her brother, but the circumstances of his arrival were perplexing. Why in the name of the Old Gods would Ned show up to Winterfell unexpected? And if the Baratheon banner was any indication, he’d brought his infamous foster brother along with him. It would have taken them near a moon to reach the North from the Inn at the Crossroads. Surely they could have written!

“My lady, I’m sorry for the haste, but Lord Brandon bids you to return to the castle at once to see to preparations.”
She rolled her eyes, sighing exasperatedly, “Of course, because he can’t possibly arrange for rooms to be prepared.”

Lyanna glanced back at the three Southerners, who were watching the scene unfold. They seemed to still be processing the news, though Walt was quick to offer a smile as he pet Nymeria.

She wished she could stay with them, to return to the easy camaraderie of Queensgate. To laugh and joke with Walt and Maron, to lose herself in Jay’s eyes, to feel free.

But that freedom was gone and only duty remained. She sighed, recognizing that her position required her to go against her heart’s wishes. She had run away the other day, and she would have to turn away now. Such freedom was not meant to last.

Turning to the Stark guards, she resigned herself to the task at hand, “Very well, it seems we must return to the keep at once. Donnel, please continue on and give my apologies to the constable? Hopefully one of us will be able to attend to him this afternoon.”

“As you wish, milady.”

She turned Silverwing back towards Winterfell, her gaze once more lingering on the faces of the Southerners. Words of welcome, an invitation, were on the tip of her tongue, but she fought them back as she realized she had no explanation for knowing them. The circumstances under which they had passed a week’s time were certain cause for trouble - she knew not how she would ever explain the friendships to her father.

Before she did something foolish, she called to Nymeria, sparing a weak smile for each of the men as the black direwolf loped to her side.

Lyanna paused for a moment when her eyes caught Jay’s, hoping to communicate her desire for different circumstances. Those indigo eyes still haunted her dreams. But all she got in return was a distant but thoughtful gaze.

She straightened her back, fighting her disappointment as she nudged Silverwing back to Winterfell, the guards forming up around her.
Rhaegar

Rhaegar stood frozen, watching as the girl disappeared down the busy street leading to Winterfell, his mind a muddle of emotions as the pieces fell into place.

Lyanna Stark, the wild Wolf Maid. It was her all along.

Memories of smooth skin pressed against him, soft lips, bite marks and stormy grey eyes burning with desire flashed through his mind, his heart racing. Elation, at not only seeing her again, but at all the possibilities.

She wasn’t a wildling at all, nor a peasant, nor the daughter of some lesser noble house. The girl who had haunted his dreams for the fortnight since they’d parted was the daughter of the Warden of the North, the man whose political movements had prompted his father to mandate this trip.

The woman his father had almost commanded him to marry out of spite.

The irony was not lost on him.

While somewhat perplexing, the situation kindled something he had not felt much in his life - a fresh breath of hope. The daughter of a Great House was certainly a viable option as the wife of the Crown Prince. In fact, she was one of the most attractive candidates now that the Dornish arrangement had fallen through.

Above all that, Arthur’s words about Lyanna Stark potentially fulfilling the prophecy came roaring back. All at once, Rhaegar was certain she was the missing piece in both his life and his destiny. How had he been missing it all along?
The ice to my fire… it is as though the gods have fitted her for me.

The thought of having her for himself shot a shiver down his spine. The idea of holding her again, of seeing the joy in her eyes after a long ride, of waking up to her beautiful face every morning, of sharing a life, a burden, a bed...

Realizing Arthur had been speaking, he emerged from his thoughts, which were about to turn progressively more scandalous, asking his friend to repeat what he said.

Arthur gave him a knowing look before repeating his prior statements.

"Well, she's certainly the highest bred wildling I've ever seen." Oswell chucked behind him as Arthur continued, his voice dry, "Who would have guessed the girl was a Stark. I suppose we should have recognized the signs - wild, reckless, beautiful enough to warrant overprotective brothers..."

"The direwolves," Oswell added.

"Enough you two," Rhaegar needed to stop thinking about her. The image of the girl had already been driving him to distraction - the truth of her identity made far too many dreams he’d considered impossible now tangible. But this was not the time to think of such things. Marriage proposals took time, and several individuals would undoubtedly need to be involved in the decision.

Concentrating on the reason for their stop in Wintertown, he redirected the conversation, "Let's find Richard and Myles. The fools ought to have some information on these Lords of the North by now."

"If they haven't drowned in their cups," Oswell supplied.

Nodding, he ran through the new information the Winterfell guard had shared - Robert Baratheon was his cousin, and while the man might be drunk more often than not, he would still recognize Rhaegar, even with his hair dyed dark.

Aside from Rhaegar though, Robert would most certainly recognize Arthur - not only was that dratted sword hard to hide, but there was no love lost between the two men.
Robert had drunkenly challenged the famed Sword of the Morning the last time he had been in King's Landing, and not one to back down, Robert had shown up to the training yard the next day in all his pride, bellowing japes at the Dornish man. Arthur had quickly dismantled Robert's defense, toying with the man for a time as the new Lord of Storm's End put together sore attempts at attack. The idiot continued to spew jokes questioning Dornish men's prowess, but it wasn't until he mentioned Arthur's sister Ashara - something to the effect of "Ah but your sister is a beautiful thing - I wonder if her cunt is as pretty as those violet eyes of hers" - that Arthur allowed himself to end the farce.

In three motions, Arthur had disarmed the man, sending him to lay flat on his back, clutching his groin. As Robert moaned on the courtyard floor, Arthur flicked the edge of Dawn across the man's cheek, leaving a long, shallow cut, before holding the blade against his neck. Robert's "yield" had been barely more than a whisper but it echoed around the full courtyard, which had fallen utterly silent. Arthur's anger was quickly extinguished as he walked back to the White Sword Tower, where the Kingsguard quarters were housed.

The courtyard had cleared quickly once Arthur was gone, whispers spreading the tale, but Rhaegar had lingered, watching the newest Lord Paramount struggle to his feet with the help of his companion - Eddard Stark, now that he thought about it.

But what Rhaegar remembered best was the anger and hatred in Robert's eyes.

*Ours is the Fury. The oaf takes his house's words too literally.*

In any case, they would have to be careful. It wouldn't serve to initiate conflict in the Stark household, particularly not if he wanted any chance at securing Lyanna Stark for himself.

His mouth lifted in a small smile at this thought as he turned down the road towards the tavern where they'd last left his old squires. In spite of the hood hiding most of his face, he still caught Arthur's smirk, insolence written all over his face as he noticed Rhaegar's smile.

There was far too much mirth shining in those violet eyes.

*One day, I'm going to slap the insolence off that man's face.*

As it turned out, it was his former squires he wished to kill. Or congratulate. He wasn’t sure yet, his
mind still a muddle when they learned Myles and Richard had managed to secure an invitation to stay in Winterfell for the last few months.

Rhaegar couldn’t help but scowl as Oswell reported the news he had gathered from the bartender - they were not to draw attention to themselves while in the North, particularly when it came to the Warden of the North. And while his former squires having spent months staying in the household of the Starks was likely to have garnered more information on Winterfell’s inhabitants, it also increased the danger that knowledge of his presence in the North might spread.

With his cousin about to arrive at the keep, they decided Oswell would go to Winterfell to retrieve the new knights while Arthur and Rhaegar remained at the inn.

Not long after Oswell departed, they had the good fortune of watching Robert Baratheon ride through the streets of Wintertown next to Eddard Stark. At least Rhaegar thought it must be his cousin, given the sigil on the horse and the hulking body frame - any recognizable feature beyond that was buried deep in layers of furs.

He and Robert had never been close, despite almost being of age. Rhaegar’s great-aunt had been Robert’s grandmother, leaving the current Baratheons as one of the closest relations to the Targaryen family. Despite that, Steffon and Cassana had decided to foster Robert with Jon Arryn in the Vale instead of in King’s Landing. Steffon and Aerys had been close as young men, but while Tywin served as the Hand of the King, the prior Lord Baratheon had chosen to remain in the Stormlands with his wife and younger children.

As they had grown into young men, Rhaegar had discovered that he shared very little with his cousin - Robert was boisterous and rash even as a boy, loving the great pleasures of life - hunting and war, and as he got older, alcohol and women. Robert had enjoyed making fun of Rhaegar’s bookish nature, and in the few times Robert had spent time at Court in their childhood, Rhaegar found he did not enjoy his cousin's company. He had never gotten the impression that Robert cared for his company either.

Though he knew his cousin was close to the second Stark son, Ned, who had apparently come home unexpectedly, Rhaegar wasn’t sure what brought his cousin to Winterfell. Regardless, the Baratheon lord’s presence was not comforting. Robert was known to be a lady’s man, with a bastard in the Vale and likely others scattered wherever the man went. Tales across Westeros spoke of how Robert liked beautiful women.

And Lyanna Stark was a beautiful woman.
"My friend," Arthur interrupted his thoughts, "I know this isn't what you want to hear, but..."

"Go on and say it Arthur. You've never been shy before."

"You know we can only spare two days. Three at best. We'll have to ride hard as is to make it back by your father's nameday, and that's only if we are lucky with the weather."

Rhaegar's shoulders slumped, and for a moment he felt nothing like the regal Prince, only a dejected boy who knew his arguments would fail.

"I know and I was fine with that until... now with everything, with her being..."

Rhaegar had never been interested in marriage, viewing it as a burden. Who would have guessed that a single moment outside of an inn in Wintertown would change everything? The image of his eventual wedding suddenly shifted to one of joy and contentment - he could already see her hand in his as the High Septon wrapped a ribbon around them, feel her dancing in his arms in the Great Hall with a slender crown of silver on her brow, imagine her beneath him as they reveled in the intimacy they had only begun to share at Queensgate...

He let out a sigh, tucking such images away in his brain, and then squared his shoulders, "It makes no matter, we will do what we can in three days and hope it is enough of a foundation. My father's order is not a matter to be trifled with."

Of course, he wasn’t sure the best way to approach the situation. Rhaegar had learned enough about the real Lyanna Stark at Queensgate to know that she wasn’t an easy woman. Suddenly, he worried about how she might take the news of who he was - the North believed in honesty, and Rhaegar hadn’t been forthcoming about his presence in the North. Not only that, but she had mentioned on more than one occasion how men were always stifling and how disdainful the South was.

"You Southerners call us savages, but what is so civilized about lying and manipulating your fellow men? What honor is there in obscene shows of wealth and passing days in meaningless gossip? Frankly, the more I hear of the South, the less I desire to travel anywhere south of the Neck."

She craved adventure, escape - he knew that they shared the same sentiments, but would she see it that way if he tried to cage her? He had no illusions that King’s Landing would be exactly that, a cage, particularly with his father in his current state. Wouldn't marriage, even to him, still be a way of society taking away her freedom?
I'll try to give her a choice. Some measure of freedom.

But what if she didn't choose him? What if she still ran off like she had only half-joked about? He had no doubt she could survive with the Free Folk, but would he survive her choice? To finally have found someone he wanted to spend his life with, who somehow managed to be everything he needed in a consort, who could be the missing piece of the prophecy, the ice to his fire…

“We will speak with Myles and Richard. Surely they have learned something that could help us when dealing with the Starks. I’m afraid we may not be able to be as forthcoming.”

“I have heard Lord Stark is a reasonable man.”

Rhaegar grimaced, “He is not the only Stark I am worried about.”

Lyanna was clearly furious.

"Excuse me? What right do you possibly have to command me? Must I remind you that you are in my home, granted food and shelter by me as Lady Stark and the acting Warden of the North?"

"Aye, but you shan't be a Stark much longer, if I'm to have any say in the matter."
"Who's to say you'll have any say in the matter whatsoever?"

"Why, your father of course, if he's as smart a man as Ned claims him to be."

Looking at his sister, Ned imagined that Lyanna was only barely restraining herself from slapping a red-faced Robert Baratheon.

Stepping in before his sister could respond, either with words or actions, Ned grabbed her arm and gently steered her towards the doors of the hall, murmuring, "Perhaps it would be best for us to speak privately."

Realizing that they had caused a scene, Lyanna agreed. Had he not been so concerned about the rapid deterioration of the situation, he would have been impressed by the way she quickly schooled her face into a mask of neutrality, nodding to men seated further back in the hall and pausing for a few moments to speak with a servant about some household matter.

As it was, his mind was still processing how things had escalated so quickly.

They’d only just arrived a few hours ago – granted, it turned out the raven had never arrived so they were unexpected, but his siblings had been more than pleased at his return. His sister had all but launched herself into his arms.

Sure, Lyanna hadn’t seemed fond of Robert’s lingering gaze. Brandon even less so, though Ned thought it hypocritical given Brandon’s own tendencies towards philandering. But Robert’s words had been the pinnacle of propriety, every bit the image of the handsome Southern knight that had earned hearts across Westeros.

After settling them into seats before the fire of the Great Hall, Lyanna had scurried off to see to all the accommodations. To Ned’s surprise, Brandon had followed her to cover duties for Father in town. Benjen had stayed with them to hear stories from their days as squires. Neither he nor Robert had yet been knighted, but they both hoped it would be soon – Robert had even taken to petitioning Jon Arryn, saying as Lord of Storm’s End, it made sense for him to be a knight already.

But things had started to deteriorate when Lyanna had returned from her tasks. Robert had by this point finished a number of tankards of ale, and while his best friend was many things, subtle was not one of them. A few off-kilter jokes about ladies’ arts and a poorly worded order later, Ned found himself caught in the stormy ire of two of the people dearest to his heart.
Now, he and Lyanna made their way across the courtyard and up the stairs to the small room she used as a solar in silence.

As soon as the door closed, she rounded on him.

"What is the meaning of this? You bring your friend with barely any warning, and then when he thinks it well within his right to order me around, you defend him?"

While he had learned that in the South, bluntness was considered improper and rude, he hadn't completely forgotten the plain speech of the North. Thus, he decided to be out with it as quickly as possible - surely it would be easier to deal with the consequences head on?

"Lya, he didn’t mean to offend you, he just misjudged the situation.” She scowled, but he continued, "Rob means to ask for your hand in marriage. Maester Walys indicated Father would be amenable and when he tried to broach the subject with father, he was told to bring the suit to Winterfell for consideration."

"Father might be amenable to the discussion, Ned! Not to the marriage! And what of my opinion on the matter? Surely you know Father wouldn't make such a decision without asking me. Your friend speaks as if the deal is done, the contract written and the ink dry!" She crossed the room, throwing open the window to allow the cool winter air in.

Ned hoped it might cool her fiery temper.

"It is a good match, Lya. Robert is my closest friend and a Lord Paramount now that he has taken his seat at Storm's End. While he may have his faults, he is a good man - he will care for you.” He paused before adding, "I intend to speak in favor of the match and I believe Father will accept."

At this last sentence, his sister whipped around to face him once more.

"How could you? I do not wish to marry the man and you shan't make me! He is a bumbling fool with a penchant for wine and theatrics! Do you not hear the stories they tell about him? We may not hear much of your Southron affairs, but his whoring has even reached our ears. I do not care for the man one iota and I care even less for your implication that I shall have absolutely no say in the matter."
As she continued to mumble insults at him, at Rob, at men in general, it was Ned’s turn to become angry, though his anger manifested in a low icy calm.

"How could I? I come home to propose an incredibly strong alliance for our house, with a man I trust with my life, who is like a brother to me, and you see fit to throw insults into my face? Father will see the reasoning behind the match, as Maester Walys has already expressed his approval. Robert believes himself in love with you already, so I can't imagine he’ll want to delay - you will do your duty as the only daughter of House Stark and marry into one of the other Great Houses. It’s a fate most ladies would only dream of and you will not bring dishonor to our house, all because of your trivial beliefs in songs and tales."

She stalked towards him, danger plain in her eyes, "Do my duty, you say? Uphold the honor of our house? What do you think I’ve been doing for the last few years while you played the Southron fool in the Eyrie? Or does running Winterfell for Father not count towards your lofty definition of honor?"

He was temporarily rendered speechless by the fury in her voice, so she continued, “So I’m to be sold to the highest bidder? What, you couldn’t manage to get a bid from the royal family in all of your time in the South? Nothing from the Lannisters of Casterly Rock? What honor is there in selling me to a man who clearly couldn't care less for his own honor, let alone that of his House? Or do you think it's honorable to be known across the Seven Kingdoms as a drunk whoremonger? He has a bastard, Ned! Do you deny it?”

Realizing lying would get him nowhere, he shook his head in the negative.

“Exactly, and that’s just the one we know about. You say he loves me – what a ridiculous notion,” She threw her hands up in the air, exasperated, “He just met me. He thinks I like embroidery and dancing. He doesn’t know me at all! And if you agree with him, then you don’t know me either!”

"Lya, if you only...

She interrupted him, holding up her hand, "No, Ser. I believe it is now Lyanna to you."

The formal address stunned him into silence. He knew what she was doing - she only allowed people who she trusted to use her nickname - the name she preferred to her full name. Lyanna was what her Father called her when he was wroth, the name Maester Walys used in their lessons.
His baby sister was revoking his right to call her Lya. She was signaling that he had lost her trust.

His mouth went dry and his tongue felt heavy.

Taking advantage of his shock, Lyanna lifted her chin in defiance, a mask of neutrality taking the place of her fury, as the next words echoed around the small chamber.

"If you'll excuse me, Ser, I must see to the storerooms. I didn't account for your brother's alcohol needs when calculating provisions for the next moons."

She turned on her heel, thick skirts flouncing as she exited the room. He stared at the spot she had occupied moments ago.

*Oh gods, what have I done.*

He hadn't known she would react so strongly. He knew she was willful, but she had always been sweet with him.

But it had been more than four years since he had been home, and even then he had only had a moon at home, most of which was spent with the whole family. Suddenly, he realized it had been years since he had spent more than a few moments alone with his sister. Her letters had seemed candid, her words kind and playful, but they were clearly no substitute for being with her in person.

She was right – he didn’t really know her.

Exiting the solar, he approached the balcony overlooking the courtyard to see her walking hastily towards the storerooms. Brandon separated from the men he was with, catching her arm. Ned watched, heart dropping, as Brandon took her head in between his hands as he spoke softly but passionately, their foreheads touching. Brandon hadn’t been in the Great Hall to witness the argument, but he must have heard about the situation from someone.

After a few moments, Lyanna visibly relaxed, allowing Brandon to take her into his arms. Ned felt a heavy sadness seep into his soul - he hadn't comforted her at all. Instead he’d yelled at her about doing her duty and upholding the honor of their house.
Brandon's eyes lifted to meet his and he could see the disappointment and betrayal in them.

And then Benjen called to his siblings from across the way, and Brandon took Lyanna under one of his arms, guiding her to their youngest brother. The Young Pup barreled into her arms, prompting a loud laugh from Brandon before the three of them turned to walk towards the Keep’s doors.

His three siblings, his blood, walking away from him. The wolf pack, leaving behind a member who didn’t belong.

His mind revolted, pleading silently for his siblings to remember him.

*Turn around. Don't block me out. Remember me. I'm your brother too. I'm right here. Turn around. Please.*

But as they neared the doorway, indignation surged through him. How could they fault him for doing his duty? He had only made the best of his situation in the Eyrie. Did they think he wanted to be sent away? All he did was listen to Father. He was sent all alone to the South while they got to be together, at home in the North. Robert may not be his brother by blood, but he understood Ned, he knew how important duty and honor were to him. Rob wouldn't shut him out for doing what he thought was best, like his blood was right now.

Despair threatened to overwhelm him as his brothers separated from Lyanna, Benjen laughing while Brandon chased the youngest Stark in apparent exasperation.

But then his sister glanced back at him. For no more than a second, their eyes connected, so quick he could have missed it had he blinked. It was enough to see the hurt and frustration... and something else. Something familiar. Maybe his mind was playing tricks on him, but beneath the pain, he thought he saw a sliver of love and forgiveness.

Hope chased away his despair. Not all was lost.

By the time his thoughts caught up, Lyanna had disappeared inside, undoubtedly to see to the storerooms and kitchens.
To be honest, he had no illusions as to which Stark family member actually ran Winterfell – it was fairly obvious as soon as one entered the keep. His father had more than once lamented the fact that Brandon showed a decided lack of interest when it came to his responsibilities.

His sister, on the other hand, had quite effectively managed to establish a firm presence in the castle, respected by both the servants and the Northern bannermen. Over the past years, she had taken over not only those chores seen to by the lady of the house, which had been somewhat sloppily handled by various staff in the immediate years following mother’s death, but also many of Father's tasks, including those typically handled by the heir.

Ned recalled one of father's letters, in which he explained the reasons for denying Ned's request for Lyanna to visit the Eyrie:

*Your sister has proven herself a most efficient Lady of Winterfell. In truth, I'm uncertain as to whether the keep would not fall completely into disrepair should she be away for longer than a fortnight. I had quite forgotten the ease with which one can handle affairs when one's home and people are thoroughly content.*

Lyanna’s letter in response to the occasion had itself mentioned Father describing her as "indispensable."

Given this, he highly doubted Father would allow her to leave the care of Winterfell for at least a few more years – not only did his father dote on his only daughter, the man understood the value of a well-run household. No marriage alliance was critical enough at this point in time to warrant disrupting that.

Perhaps he could speak to his father about delaying a full contract. Father certainly hadn’t wanted to talk about it during their stay at the Crossroads, much to Robert’s displeasure. While Maester Walys seemed keen to wrap up affairs - the man could barely hide his ambitions and he certainly viewed Lyanna as no more than a bargaining chip - there was no need to sign anything formal when the wedding could still be years away.

He’d have to talk to Robert about delaying; surely his friend would listen to him on this. This was his family, Robert would understand that he knew them best.

A delayed betrothal would give Lyanna time to get to know Robert - without the immediate pressure of a formal contract - and give Robert time to grow out of some of his... unsavory habits.
Father is still a few days away. Hopefully this plan will appease Lya while still making Robert happy.

Those two could raze whole cities with their fiery tempers. He couldn’t imagine what would happen should they fall into an argument. It wouldn’t do to have Winterfell burn to the ground due to Robert’s poor delivery and Ned’s ill-timed explanation.

Finding himself in need of silence, Ned began his walk towards the godswood.

*May the Gods have mercy on us all.*

*Arthur*

Apparently, it was a day of surprises.

It was early evening when Oswell returned, Myles and Richard in tow. The knights were jovial, no doubt having spent the last moons in relative luxury in Winterfell.

“These Northerners are crazy, your Grace. They thrive on the snow and laugh in the face of storms.”

“It seems you have been living comfortably enough in the safety of Winterfell,” Arthur drawled.

“I thought we’d discussed how we were to not reveal our presence to the Warden of the North.”
Rhaegar said sternly, irritated the Prince’s former squires showed little regret.

“Lord Stark has been absent since we arrived. We only moved up to the castle when Brandon Stark found us in one of the taverns. He had just returned from the Riverlands, and has been staying with his two younger siblings.”

“I see. I hope you have been discrete at least?” The two young men nodded, and Rhaegar gave a curt nod before continuing, “Any news of the daughter of Lord Stark?”

Arthur almost rolled his eyes at the non-too-subtle eagerness in Rhaegar’s voice, but Myles and Richard seemed more than happy for the shift in his tone, and to be given an opportunity to share the information they’d learned.

“Ah yes, Lady Lyanna, though she loathes the title Lady. She’s as wild as some say – rides almost every morning and spends more time in the training yard than at any ladies’ tasks. It’s rare to see her in a dress in fact. She spends much time with her brothers, when not at her duties around the castle, her temper quick to rise.”

“And she has direwolves! Remarkable creatures—Living, breathing beasts the size of ponies. It’s a bit amazing that no news of them ever reached the South, for they are very much an obvious presence around Winterfell.” Myles added.

Amazing indeed. Lord Stark has done quite the job restricting news from the North, it would seem.

“Oh, and she mercilessly blackmailed Brandon into letting her ride out and stay alone at some destroyed outpost on the Wall for almost a fortnight.”

“Did she, now?” Arthur remarked, shooting Oswell and Rhaegar a glance.

Rhaegar glared at him - they had all determined it was best to keep quiet about their brief sojourn at Queensgate, but Arthur couldn’t help himself with Rhaegar in such a state. It was so very rare that the Crown Prince was this easy to taunt.

Perhaps sensing the tension, Richard continued, “But she runs Winterfell in Lord Rickard’s place – has been since we arrived, what with Lord Stark traveling to White Harbor and Riverrun. Not even Brandon seems to have as much responsibility around the castle.”
That was surprising to them all - Brandon Stark wasn’t much younger than Arthur or Rhaegar, and as the heir of Winterfell, he would have been the natural choice to serve in his father’s stead. It was highly unusual to have a daughter function as Lord when there were true-born sons in attendance.

“And you can tell, the servants all respect her, seem to genuinely care for her. For all her wildness, she takes her duty to Winterfell quite seriously, even rides into the village to hear petitions from the lower classes.”

“Brandon said Lord Stark has drilled a sense of justice and honor into all of them from an early age,” Myles added. “He also said he thinks his sister may have taken more of it on than her brothers since they all fostered, while she remained at her father’s side.”

Richard continued the thought, “Aye, she passed the sentence on a Night’s Watch deserter a few moons ago in the name of the King and the Warden of the North - Brandon swung the sword, but Lyanna was there. Brandon jokes she’d be a finer knight than him, and certainly a better Lord of Winterfell, saying it’s a shame she was born a woman.”

Myles scoffed at this, “Not a shame for the rest of us hot blooded men, though.”

Rhaegar interjected at this, “What do you mean by that, Myles?”

Myles exchanged a glance with Richard, before stumbling over his answer, “Um, just that, Your Grace, well, Lady Lyanna may be wild, but she is also quite…”

“So spit it out.” Arthur pressured, though Myles’ silence prompted him to turn to Richard, “Lonmouth?”

Richard’s cheeks heated a tinge, “She’s quite pretty.”

“Nothing we see in the South, but one can’t deny she is very pleasing on the eyes,” Myles put in, with a nervous smile.

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow as Oswell chuckled in the corner, “Pretty, you say? Pretty enough to be the Crown Prince’s wife, do you think?”
In spite of the joking tone, this seemed to make Myles and Richard more nervous. They were silent for a poignant moment, before Richard spoke again.

“Of course, your Grace, but only if she is not already the Lady of Storm’s End.”

Arthur watched the surprise crossing Rhaegar’s face, “I was not aware of any arrangement with my cousin.”

Richard clarified, “It’s the reason for Robert’s visit to Winterfell. Apparently, he spoke to Lord Stark on the road, and was directed to bring the suit directly to Winterfell for consideration.”

_Damn that idiot stag, of course he has to go for the girl Rhaegar has fallen for._

Myles jumped in again, “It was quite the scene though. The suit seems to have split the siblings just this afternoon, as the middle brother, Eddard, is speaking in favor of the match. Brandon was not at all pleased, even less so after seeing Lady Lyanna distraught over the news.”

This last bit of information seemed to satisfy Rhaegar, “The Lady was not happy about the idea?”

“From what we’ve heard, not at all. We were out with Brandon when this encounter occurred between Lord Baratheon and the Lady, but the servants were gossiping about Lyanna yelling at your cousin after he attempted to command her within her own keep. Apparently he informed her she’d soon be obeying his orders, so she should get accustomed to it. Her brother Eddard escorted her out of the hall then, and from what we gathered, they argued about the suit before she stormed out. Brandon said he was able to calm her, but the situation remains tense.”

Arthur contemplated this newest development. While it was a good thing that Lyanna, and presumably her oldest brother, were not happy about Robert’s marriage suit, it said nothing of Lord Stark’s opinion on the matter. The fact that Robert had ridden all the way to Winterfell after speaking to the Warden of the North did not bode particularly well, should Rhaegar wish to pursue Lyanna. It was ultimately Lord Stark’s decision to whom he married his only daughter. They would have to act much more quickly than Rhaegar had planned, and that was not comforting considering what they had already learned of Lyanna. Arthur did not think she would be fond of pressured decisions.

His head began to pound.
“What of Lord Stark?” Rhaegar questioned, “He is clearly not in residence if his daughter and son are serving in his stead.”

“Nay, your Grace. As we mentioned, Lord Stark has been absent since we arrived – it appears he has been visiting various bannermen, as well as passing some time in Riverrun.”

“No doubt clearing terms with Lord Tully for Brandon’s marriage.” Arthur remarked.

Rhaegar nodded to him, before returning to his questions, “So he’s been gone, what, three moons?”

The knights shook their heads at this, “Longer, your Grace. Lady Lyanna was in command for near three moons before we arrived – we only moved up to the castle shortly after Lord Brandon arrived a few moons ago.”

Arthur raised his eyebrows. If Lord Stark had left her solely in charge, Lyanna would have been running Winterfell for over six moons, outside of the time she spent at Queensgate. For the Warden of the North to have such confidence in his daughter, who had barely reached her majority, was surprising indeed. News of the North might be sparse, but Lord Stark was well regarded as an intelligent, just and impressive ruler of the largest Westerosi kingdom. Such a decision would not be made lightly, particularly with others on hand who might be a more natural choice.

“No wonder she spoke so vigorously about the heavy weight of responsibilities…” Rhaegar muttered to Arthur, who just nodded.

Turning back to his former squires, Rhaegar asked, “So Lord Stark must be returning soon, if Baratheon should deem a visit timely?”

Both men nodded, as Richard explained, “Lord Brandon believes his father to be only a few days behind the Baratheon party. Lady Lyanna predicted they would hasten their pace, given the lack of snow the last few days. She is hoping they arrive in two days time, and seems to be planning accordingly.”

Two days. That wasn’t allowing much overlap – a day maybe, at most. Arthur knew that Rhaegar had hoped to approach Lyanna herself, but with unexpected guests already in the keep and her father returning, she would most likely be occupied. Alas, they would have to settle for the next best option. Maybe they would get lucky and find a way to have her join...
“Myles, Richard, it seems the Stark siblings are fond of riding. Do you think you could arrange a little outing with Lord Stark’s heir?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm traveling for work again this week, but wanted to post before departing - hope you enjoy!!

As a note, this is kind of the "slow burn" part of the story, but there will be plenty of stuff going on to hopefully make it all the sweeter :)

As always, thank you thank you for the amazing comments, and sorry for being sloppy about responses - hard to balance writing with responding, but I will get to them!! You guys help motivate me to keep working!
Thankfully, Father arrived two days later.

Ned wasn’t surprised by how close behind them Father's party turned out to be - he knew Father had made at least two other stops on his trip, whereas Ned and Robert had headed straight to Winterfell from the Crossroads - but this was the North, and Father rode with a small party of Northerners who were accustomed to the weather and demands of snowy travel conditions. He also highly doubted Father's party had stopped at every inn for wine and tavern wenches, like Robert's party had. It seemed only natural they would catch up.

Ned had hoped things would settle down after the initial incident, but it seemed his siblings were just as stubborn as he remembered. Fortunately, most of the castle’s occupants remembered him fondly so despite his siblings keeping their distance, the days were not unpleasant.

Brandon had spent all of his time hunting with friends when he wasn’t hearing petitions. He had struck up an acquaintance with two Southern knights here on business, apparently for the Crown Prince, though Ned didn’t know the specifics. He couldn’t fathom what business the Crown Prince would have in the North that couldn’t be accomplished with a raven. The Targaryens were usually treated with a sense of indifference in the North, many neither loved nor hated the royal family – as long as they left the North alone, the North would reciprocate.

Only once venturing into town briefly on business, Lyanna was usually in Father's solar when she wasn’t riding with her direwolves. She took most of her meals in her own rooms, only appearing at the Great Hall for dinner. Even then, she barely ate and spoke only to Benjen, who often joined her in her tasks, if he wasn’t with Brandon or training with the master-at-arms in the yard.

On the afternoon before Father’s arrival, Ned did catch his sister as she was speaking with Brandon and the two knights from King's Landing - Myles and Richard. She had returned from her early
morning ride hours ago, her cheeks still flush, and now she looked composed as she stroked the head
of her black direwolf. In the last few days, Ned hadn’t had the chance to really look at his sister, yet
here she stood, playing the part of Lady Stark with just a bit of her usual wildness. Her hair had
been pinned and she wore a simple gray dress, which hugged her slender body – she was without a
doubt a woman now. And while he knew she had just celebrated her sixteenth name day, it still
shocked him. Somehow his baby sister had grown up and he hadn’t been there to see it.

She laughed then, a full-body laugh that filled the courtyard, and he was reminded of little Lyanna,
who would chase after Brandon when they were young. Unlike most children who cried when they
fell, Lyanna would laugh, even if tears were bursting from her eyes. She was joyous and relentless,
sweet and stubborn. She lived and loved fiercely, her love for her family and her house imprinted
into her soul.

Ned had never felt the crushing loss of all those years away until now as he contemplated the time
he’d lost. He found she was right the other night – the Lyanna he knew was still the five-year-old
girl with a stick in her hand, running after her older brothers. He didn’t know this Lyanna, who ran
Winterfell with an ease beyond her sixteen name days, who spent hours on ledgers and serving as
Lord in Father’s stead, who ran off to the Wall to be alone for a fortnight with her pet direwolves but
could still pull on a dress to greet guests, smile and laugh.

He wondered what they spoke of that could make her so happy. He tried to remember the things he
knew she loved, but he realized he wasn’t sure – she was fond of the winter roses that grew in the
glass garden, of her horse Silverwing with whom she spent more time than any human.

She certainly seemed to love the two direwolves she had raised as pets, considering the amount of
time she spent with them. The beasts weren’t particularly friendly with Ned, likely a reflection of the
cool distance that existed between him and Lyanna, and they seemed to share their mistress’ instant
irrational loathing for Robert, snarling whenever the man got close. Of course, Robert laughed it off,
explaining that a hound would make a better pet, but Ned could see the anger flash once or twice in
his eyes – Robert seemed offended that Lyanna’s beloved “pets” didn’t care for him.

Ned found that he was not at all surprised that this woman who his wild sister had become kept the
mystical beasts that defined House Stark. On the contrary, it made a lot of sense. It did not spare him
the pain of watching the symbol of his House trailing after all his siblings except him.

Down below, the lead servant of the household, Sella, arrived to speak with his sister. Lyanna
sighed exasperatedly as Bran made some joke, swatting at him and shooting a remorseful look at
Myles and Richard. The group dispersed as his sister left with Sella, Bran slapping the two knights
on the shoulder in a quick farewell before heading to the armory, the two Southerners turning to grab
their horses from a stablehand.
The evening passed as the night before – tense but without incident.

Lord Stark arrived early the next morning to find his four children waiting in the courtyard, with a very eager Robert Baratheon standing to the side with Maester Walys. After Lyanna formally received him and returned Winterfell to his command, Rickard seemed to sense the tension between them all, bubbling beneath the surface.

Sighing wearily, Father waved his children towards the keep, “Let us return within, my old bones grow weary in this wind.”

He added another thought as he passed Robert, a slight grimace crossing his face.

“All business will be addressed in due order.”

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**Lyanna**

Lyanna grimaced as she walked down the corridor to her father’s solar.

After so many moons walking the familiar path, it felt unusual to know that her Lord Father was back in residence. Though she had not always used his solar, usually preferring her own workroom, she’d still spent a fair number of days behind the heavy oak desk conducting Winterfell’s business.

To her displeasure, she had not been Father’s first call; she knew that Ned and Robert, with Maester Walys at his side, had already been granted an audience. The audacity of these men made her furious, but she attempted to temper her anger - speaking to Father in such a state would likely only
make matters worse.

Nodding to Jonnel Cassel, who stood outside of Rickard Stark’s solar, she entered the warm room.

“Ah, there you are Lyanna.”

“My Lord Father,” she murmured, sinking into a curtsy before seating herself in front of her father.

Rickard Stark stared at his daughter for a moment, before proceeding.

“Shall we discuss the business of Winterfell? I should like to hear the state of my lands from the acting Lady of Winterfell.”

Lyanna straightened her back and took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts before falling into a comfortable state of duty and responsibility. And then she began, moving through figures, missives and issues resolved in the more than six moons she had controlled the North. She summarized the dealings in Wintertown, the requests from bannermen and the many comings and goings from the castle. Next, they covered the continued trading from White Harbor before moving to the plans for Moat Cailin. On these issues, her father added information to her own, detailing his time in each location.

Father told her of his time in the Riverlands and of his dealings with Lord Tully. At this he paused, looking at her pointedly as he asked about Brandon and his behavior.

Lyanna sighed, knowing that her father likely knew of the result of Brandon’s shenanigans.

“There was a little girl, Anna, born of a common woman named Tasy. She has been married to a Stark guardsman and settled in Wintertown. I saw to the woman myself, and Ben took Bran to see them as well. He has not been as wild since. I believe he has come to understand that his actions have consequences.”

Rickard nodded, his mouth a tight line of neutral displeasure. “I do not think this will be the last of his indiscretions, but I hope you are right. I am content with the way in which you handled the matter. It has been kept quiet?”
She nodded and her father eased back in his seat, his hands templed in front of him as he gazed at her thoughtfully.

“You have done very well, Lyanna, as I knew you would. You’ve long been more capable than your years. And I see Brandon has finally begun to assist?”

“Aye, Father, he has been assisting me, particularly with petitions from bannermen, while Ben has been aiding me with stores and the ledgers.”

“Excellent. And the execution went without issue?”

Lyanna nodded, those dead eyes flashing across her vision. Her father must have noticed the guilt cross her face as his mouth drew into a tight line.

“The King’s Justice is not always easy, Lyanna, but it is the law. A man’s honor is only as powerful as his word. A man who goes against his vows has forfeited not only his life but also his soul in the eyes of the gods. Only death can redeem him. Did he die well?”

“He accepted the punishment in line with the crime. But he was scared.”

Father sighed, “As he should be. Death is nothing to trifle with.”

Lyanna swallowed hard as Father changed the subject.

“Any other news? Maester Walys said you managed much of the correspondence in my absence.”

“Nothing outside of the updates on the trading and a few minor issues with supplies. There was no response from the Citadel, which I find unusual given how much time there was for them to respond…”

“Yes, Walys said he believes we lost several ravens to storms, including the one Ned claims he sent from the Twins. I will send the Citadel another letter, to check on the response.”
“Of course Walys said it was lost - how would he even know about it? Father, he must have hidden it-”

“That’s enough, Lyanna. The Maester would not lie to me, on this I am sure. It would be foolish of him, as he could very well be dismissed for such an action. I do not appreciate you creating chaos under my roof simply because you do not agree with Maester Walys in all things.”

“Father-”

Rickard Stark stood, his Lord’s voice in full effect. “Enough. There are far more pressing concerns than Maester Walys and the letter from the Citadel at this time.”

Lyanna felt a lump form in her throat, knowing what was to come.

“Lyanna, I have given you many freedoms that most noblewomen are not granted. You have long been an asset to Winterfell, so I have turned a blind eye to some of your recklessness. But you are now a woman grown, thus such behavior can no longer be tolerated.”

She fought the sad, angry tears she could feel forming. Wasn’t Father just complimenting her for her diligence and care in the upkeep of Winterfell for over six moons? What did it matter how she spent the little free time she had?

Father’s eyes softened slightly, clearly noticing her distress, but his voice remained firm and Lyanna knew there would be no swaying him from this discussion.

“I made your mother a promise to hold off all betrothal discussions until your sixteenth nameday. That day has come and gone. ’Tis high time for us to examine the options we have, and I will need to you behave a proper Lady if we are to ensure the best match for Winterfell and House Stark.”

Lyanna was silent, not trusting her voice to speak. Father could not have agreed to Robert’s suit, not without consulting her….

Her father sighed before continuing, his voice icy.
“Robert Baratheon has presented himself as a suitor and has made a compelling case for such a match, even offering to pay a bride price instead of demanding a dowry - the funds would be drawn over time to cover required improvements in the North. While my decision has not been made, I believe it only right to inform you that it will be difficult to find another betrothal that will bring as many financial and political benefits.”

“Have I no say in the matter at all?” she asked, and she cringed at the dejected tone of her voice.

Rickard Stark stared at her for a moment before he raised an eyebrow.

“I am aware of your preference to never marry. I have every intention of granting you leave to express your opinion, but I expect you to view such arrangements from the perspective of House Stark, as opposed to a sentimental standpoint.”

Lyanna paused before phrasing her opinion in a manner that might be acceptable. “Then I would like to make it known that I do not wish to marry Robert Baratheon. I do not believe the political benefits will be what you think them to be, for Robert is a rash and vile man who cares little for his reputation or his House.”

"Lyanna, your brother Ned has spoken in favor of the agreement - he believes you and Robert will prove to be a good match if you are given time to get to know one another."

"Father, you've heard the stories -"

He held up a hand, sighing, "Aye, and I've seen the man myself. But Ned is convinced he will grow out of this phase - your brother says Robert is so enamored with you that he'll not stray. You are a strong young lady, and you will run your own household as you've run Winterfell - House Baratheon can provide a good life for you. And I have no doubt you'll bring any man to heel."

"But Father, -" she tried to interrupt again, but was silenced by his glare.

"Lyanna, you will listen to me. I have every intention of delaying any marriage a few years, and Ned suggested a courting period with Robert before signing any formal contract, much to Maester Walys' disapproval. But I must remind you, you are a daughter of House Stark - it is your duty to marry well and further the interests of our house, just as it is Brandon's duty."
"Bran's duty will keep him here in Winterfell at least! I don't want to go to the South, I certainly don't love Robert, I don't even like him, please Father..."

"Love? Oh my darling girl, love is hardly ever a given. Respect is a better goal to strive for. But this discussion is over for now. I am tired from my journey and we both have responsibilities to see to. We will speak of this more at another time. We will also speak of your little journey to Queensgate."

Lyanna had the decency to look down remorsefully at that. She should have known Walys would throw her to the wolves – damn that bloody fool, he was just jealous Father left Winterfell to her for over six moons.

*Stupid man, Brandon didn’t even care and it would have been him before Walys in any case.*

Her father waved a hand in dismissal, "You may go. And should you see him, remind your eldest brother to respond to the latest letter of his betrothed."

Brandon

“Lya!”

His sister looked like a veritable winter storm as she prowled back from Father’s solar. A smarter man might have allowed her time to cool down, but Brandon was never one to shy away from a wild temper.

"Maester Walys is a conniving fool, Bran!" she said, exasperated as he caught up to her. "It's a small
mercy that Father is willing to delay any formal plans until you wed.”

"Then thank the old gods that I intend to delay that for as long as possible.”

“I do not understand how Father can possibly consider marrying me to that idiot. Am I worth so little that he thinks such a match is fitting?”

“Of course not, Lya, you know that Father thinks the sun and stars of you. It’s just Walys whispering in his ear, but I’ll protect you from it.”

Brandon couldn’t imagine his brave and duty-bound sister being stuck with a man like Robert Baratheon, who made for better drinking company than for partnership.

* A man like me…

“You know he is not thrilled with you either, though I think his ire over my trip to Queensgate may surely mask any other concerns.”

“I will speak to him about Queensgate as well. Lya, you deserved the time away, it was only fair. He is likely tired from the road, I’m certain he will come to see the truth of that.”

Lyanna nodded as they entered the courtyard, joining the bustle of people moving about tasks. Brandon was headed towards the stables, having promised Myles and Richard a ride before they departed to return south, and Lyanna seemed to be more than happy to join him in crossing to one of the places she had always seen as a safe haven.

Myles and Richard stood at the entrance to the stables, their horses tied loosely behind them as they chatted with a few of the Stark guards who had taken to drinking with them.

“Lord Brandon, Lady Lyanna, good afternoon. Still interested in a ride, Brandon?”

“Aye, I need a good ride to clear my head,” he affirmed, chuckling as he turned to Lyanna, “sister, care to join?”
“I wish I could, but alas I promised Father I would handle some of the tasks that I didn’t have time for while he was away.”

“Surely if they’ve gone six moons without, you could put them off for a quick ride?”

“I dare not risk his further ire, Bran. Who knows, he could decide to sell me to the bloody stag early as punishment for poor behavior,” she shook her head and Brandon could see the anger surging back to life before she turned to Myles and Richard, “but enjoy gentlemen, the riding was lovely this morning, so I’m certain it will be decent this afternoon.”

They parted ways with his sister storming off - Brandon hoped she did not interact with anyone for some time, for there was no telling how she would behave in her present state.

“Is your sister okay?” questioned Myles as they left the castle into the Wolfswood.

Brandon snorted, “How would you feel if your father was even considering selling you to a man like Robert Baratheon?”

“He’s truly considering it?”

He sighed, “Apparently Baratheon isn’t demanding a dowry. My father loves Lyanna, perhaps more than he loves any of the rest of us, and he wants her to be happy, but he also is the Lord of Winterfell above all. He has plans for the North, and even I can see the financial benefit to our House.”

Myles and Richard exchanged an odd look before Richard spoke again, “What if someone else is willing to forgo a dowry and aid in funding?”

Brandon frowned, “And how many Lords would be willing to forgo a dowry on top of dealing with my wild sister? She’ll make the money up for them likely, but no one knows that.”

“You might be surprised,” responded Myles, “as you’ve said before, the South is different from the North.”
Brandon shrugged, trying to imagine his sister marrying the Stag Lord. No doubt the man would make her miserable.

“Honestly, anything is better than Robert. I don’t know what Ned sees in the man that makes him think he’d be a good husband to our sister. I can imagine drinking and whoring with the man, but marrying him to Lya?” Brandon shook his head.

They were silent as they picked up the pace, the winter wind howling through the trees as they followed a familiar path through the woods. Tor had joined them for the ride, the grey direwolf prancing through the snow as if it were as light as a cloud. Watching the direwolf, which seemed to grow larger with each day, reminded Brandon of his wild sister, her unrestrained joy in the little things, her fierce loyalty, and her dangerous fangs should she feel threatened. Tor was rasher than his sister Nymeria though, and Brandon supposed the wolf took after himself in that measure - the two wolf-blooded Starks with two direwolves at their sides.

They had just entered a clearing, Brandon calling for them to rest their horses, when another party of riders approached. The men all wore hooded cloaks, masking their figures, but Brandon could tell by their horses and weapons that they were not peasants. Nay, those were Southern bred horses, fit for knights.

Brandon was immediately on guard, his hand sliding to the hilt of the sword on his hip, but Myles and Richard seemed relaxed. Even Tor seemed at ease, and the direwolf was especially attuned to threats.

“My Lord Brandon,” greeted one of the men, as they approached, causing Brandon to flinch at the familiarity. The man pushed back his hood as they came to stop a few steps from one another, revealing a young man with striking features and black hair streaked with white. Something niggled in the back of Brandon’s mind, some degree of recognition...

“Ser, I’m afraid I do not know how to address you. We were unaware that other Southern knights were in the area.”

“Unfortunately I was unable to disclose my presence in the North, my Lord.”

Brandon frowned, noting how the man had not only failed to give his name but also implied that he had willingly chosen to not disclose his presence in the Warden of the North’s territory.
Movement behind the man leading the other group drew Brandon’s gaze, as the other two men pushed back their own hoods. These faces were more familiar, and if the faces hadn’t been enough, the hilt of the greatsword slung across the one man’s back would have been the deciding factor.

“What in the-”

Ser Arthur, the Sword of the Morning, who wielded the legendary greatsword Dawn, and his fellow brother Ser Oswell Whent. Brandon had seen the men on a few occasions when he had ventured south. Two Kingsguard would only accompany a member of the royal family…

He looked back at the man with black hair, recognizing that the streaks of white were not white at all but silver. The eyes that had previously looked dark blue suddenly seemed to shine a deep purple instead.

Before he could think about it, his sword was drawn, a snarl passing his lips. Tor, recognizing his sudden mood change shifted from relaxed to on guard and growling in a second.

The sound of steel loosening echoed around the clearing as both Kingsguards drew their blades with Myles and Richard seeming to back away from the now feral direwolf.

In all the movement, Rhaegar Targaryen had not moved, his eyes never straying from Brandon.

Brandon realized he was outnumbered, even with Tor - not that he would actually attack the Crown Prince of Westeros, but his anger only flared more knowing that he didn’t have a choice. Clearly Myles and Richard had known their Prince was here - they’d led him straight into a trap.

Nonetheless, he refused to sheath his weapon so quickly, as he snarled again, his words dripping with insolence.

“Are you sneaking around, your Grace? I can assure you none of us knew the Crown Prince was in the North.”

The Crown Prince gestured with a hand for his knights to stand down, which they did, though both eyed Brandon’s blade warily. Brandon refused to yield quite yet.
“If you must know, I have been at the Wall with my great uncle. ‘Twas a trip spent on scholastic purposes, so I did not wish to burden the North with pleasantries that I know you do not enjoy.”

Brandon frowned, not pleased with that answer. The Prince seemed to realize the answer was insufficient, as he frowned, his eyes glancing briefly to Brandon’s bare steel.

Recognizing that nothing would be accomplished while openly threatening a member of the royal family, Brandon sheathed his sword.

“Out with it, Dragon Prince, I know there’s more than that.”

Chapter End Notes

And so the betrothal drama begins!

If Rickard's reaction to Robert's proposal is surprising to some, please try to remember the context of the world in which ASoIaF is set - marriage was generally political, and one of the drivers of conflict in ASoIaF is actually the consequences of people going AGAINST this and marrying for love. Rickard knows Robert is a less than savory man, but as he mentions to Lyanna, there are worse things than a man who likes drink and whores (GoT even has several examples, i.e. Joffrey, Ramsay...). Rickard is of the mindset that a strong woman like his daughter could control Robert, especially given Robert believes himself in love with her. And given how dedicated to the North Lyanna is, that could strategically be a very good thing.

Hoping to return to my weekly update on weekends, contingent on my beta moving through the chapters at an appropriate rate as well :)
Rhaegar

Rhaegar sighed, watching the Wild Wolf, who looked and acted just as willfully as his sister.

“I would be honest with you Lord Brandon, for I have found I very much enjoy the blunt honesty of the North.”

“Aye, we aren't simpering pricks afraid of the truth.”

Rhaegar's eyes narrowed but he chose to ignore the insult.

"My time at the Wall was not the sole purpose of this journey. You see, my father is a complicated man." Brandon snorted, but Rhaegar pressed on. "And he was frankly not well pleased with the recent news of your impending nuptials. The marriage of two Great Houses is not a frequent occurrence, though not unheard of. What is more unusual is that it involves the North, a house that has historically remained removed from the politics of the... simpering pricks.”

“Is the King against the match?”
Rhaegar almost thought he heard a hint of hope in Brandon Stark’s voice, yet when he looked, all he saw was the man’s grimace.

“No. Not for the time being. However, he is... shall we say, curious. It has been many years since your father attended Court, and you and your brother have each only been once. Your two youngest siblings have never been past the Neck as far as stories go. It seems the Starks have been quite content to be absent. But people talk, and rumors abound, and suddenly absent has become decidedly less harmless. My father does not like mysteries.”

“Is that a threat, your Grace?”

“No, Lord Brandon. I am simply stating facts. If my father had his way, he might have sent for your Father's immediate attendance at Court. Or worse, sent Targaryen men to drag your elusive sister to Court. She has garnered the most mystery after all, and it is not always easy to understand the decisions of his Majesty.”

“Forgive me if I don't fall to my knees in gratitude.”

The man was certainly stubborn as an ox, yet Rhaegar continued, knowing he was close, so close to his true goal for this outing. Time was short unfortunately, and he saw anxiety creeping into Arthur's eyes. He decided to out with it and hope for the best.

“Lady Lyanna is the reason I’d like to speak, actually.”

Brandon flinched, “Why do you want to talk about my sister?”

The Prince tried to keep his voice steady, “I would like to ask about her receptivity to a marriage proposal.”

“Come to claim her as some prize like Robert Baratheon? To purchase her like a horse at auction?”

"Not at all, I’d like to give your sister a choice -”

At that, Brandon Stark suddenly started laughing. Rhaegar was surprised; even after a week with
Lyanna, the rapid mood shifts that seemed a characteristic of Stark children were still abrupt.

When the Northman finally found his voice again, mirth laced his words, "Gods, you’re serious, aren’t you? Better to not give her a choice, more than likely she’d choose to marry no one and serve as Lord of Winterfell for me in all but name. Nay, better to give her an alternative. She hates that buffoon Robert after only two days - can’t say I blame her - and I’m fairly certain she’d marry a peasant to escape marrying him."

"I would like to think I present a slightly better prospect than a peasant, Lord Brandon," Rhaegar drawled.

Brandon shrugged off the reproach, "Lya has never been one for titles - she gives her respect to men who earn it, irrespective of class. It’s the Northern way and it’s why she would have no qualms unseating me as heir if she thought she could manage it. To be frank, her marrying will be a loss to Winterfell."

"It sounds like your sister is quite accomplished in the running of the North."

Brandon chuckled, "Despite what I’m sure you’ve heard down south, she is not a feral beast. A wild one perhaps, but she is more Father’s right hand than I will ever be."

“That bodes well for any man who wishes to marry her.”

Brandon frowned, “I only do this because I won’t let her go to that oaf. I know he’s your kin but—”

“He has some unsavory habits. Though I must admit that I have heard you share some of the same tendencies, my Lord?”

Brandon glowered, “You can be certain I get my fair share of tongue lashings from Lya on that.”

“So I was told.”

Brandon grimaced at Myles and Richard, who looked down sheepishly.
“Lord Brandon, I don’t wish to be antagonistic-” Rhaegar began but Brandon cut him off.

“If you would tell me this, what exactly makes you so intrigued by my sister? Of course, I know that she’s far too good for any man in the Seven Kingdoms, but I dare say most in the South know nothing of her.”

Insolence certainly runs in the family...

“Aye in the South I believe there are rumors she’s a half-girl half-wolf who eats men alive.”

“Not too far from the truth, figuratively speaking...” Brandon muttered, which prompted a chuckle from Oswell.

“But to answer your question,” Rhaegar paused, thinking of all the things that had attracted him to the wild girl at the Wall - her joy for life, her confidence, her witty mind and sharp tongue. Combined with her commitment to duty and her apparent skill at ruling, not to mention her beauty and of course, the prophecy…

He sighed, “The truth is I seek a partner as much as a wife, a woman to complement my strengths and to compensate for my faults. I may not know your sister well, but from what I’ve seen and heard from Myles and Richard speaks to a woman who will challenge me to become a better man and a better ruler.”

“She will not make a quiet docile wife, but she will be a strong partner if you earn her respect. If that is your wish, then you are an admirable man, for I warn you it shan’t be easy.”

Rhaegar nodded, considering his next words.

"Had I wished for a docile wife, I am certain I would have wed by now. I surely wouldn't have looked for one in the North."

Brandon chuckled again - Rhaegar was starting to believe the Starks only had two modes of operation, laughing in mirth or growling in anger.
"No docile women in sight for leagues, your Grace. The North is harsh and it's people harsher."

Rhaegar allowed his mouth to twist up into a small smile, "And what man doesn't appreciate a good challenge?"

"Your Grace has the right of it. I won't warn you anymore than I have already, but will only say that Lya is nothing like your typical lady. And if you dishonor her, you will have more than four angry Stark men to deal with - the full force of the North stands with her."

*Now that is a thinly veiled threat if I've ever heard one.*

"I would expect nothing less, my Lord."

Oswell cut in at that moment, "Your Grace, my apologies but we should return to the inn before nightfall."

Rhaegar nodded, signing internally. He wished he had more time, but this would have to do. Hopefully he had convinced Brandon Stark enough.

"Lord Brandon, unfortunately business demands I make for King’s Landing at first light tomorrow - we have lingered too long in the North as is. I would ask of you a favor - I believe Lord Stark has returned to Winterfell?" Brandon nodded his assent, "Good. Would you be so kind as to see these letters delivered to your father this evening?"

Brandon seemed to find his manners for a moment, as he bowed in his saddle after accepting the letters, "Of course, your Grace. I'll hand them to him myself."

"I would prefer you not disclose my physical presence here, as it would surely only inflame tensions. You may say that Myles and Richard were the bearers."

Stark nodded solemnly. At least the man understood the political ramifications of the Crown Prince’s presence being discovered.
Satisfied, Rhaegar closed the conversation, "Thank you. I imagine our paths will cross again soon, and I appreciate your honest words."

"Safe travels, your Grace." And then with little more than a nod of his head, Brandon Stark turned his horse and galloped off into the trees towards his home.

Shaking his head at the slight impertinence, Rhaegar turned to his friends.

"We should return to the inn. Our journey tomorrow will not be a pleasant one, unfortunately. Hopefully the weather holds and we can make haste. King’s Landing and our King awaits."

Rhaegar grimaced, neither thought particularly appealing, and leaving Lyanna in such a situation didn’t help. Alas, he imagined that at least the books he had commissioned from the Citadel to King’s Landing had arrived.

At least I won't feel like my hands are going to freeze off at all times.

Ned

Lyanna refused to come down for dinner that night, much to Rickard Stark’s ire. She claimed to be feeling ill but all the Starks present, with the exception of Benjen perhaps, understood this was her lashing out after her conversation with Father about Robert’s suit.

Brandon seemed to be offended for Lyanna’s sake and took himself to the lower tables as soon as possible in polite company, bringing Benjen to the youngest Stark’s pleasure.
Robert took Lyanna's absence as a personal slight and proceeded to get drunk, though fortunately he remained in his seat, silently fuming. Rickard himself did not linger long in the hall, speaking with a few visiting bannermen before retiring.

Ned was left trying to convince his best friend to retire without the nearest serving woman to warm his bed, insisting that he would feel better in the morning if he got some sleep.

As they departed, with Ned partially supporting Rob, Brandon let out a whooping laugh with the knights who squired for the Crown Prince. He recognized them now from the last time they had been to King’s Landing, when Robert had taken his seat as Lord of Storm’s End.

Once in the corridor, Robert burst, convinced that the men had been mocking him.

“They mock me! Why won’t she even give me a chance?”

“I don’t think they were mocking you, Rob. And Lya can be stubborn when she feels she doesn’t have a say in a matter. Hopefully our time here will allow you to get to know her.”

Pulling away from Ned, Robert looked him dead in the eye to make a bold proclamation.

"I will have her, Ned. I’ve never wanted something this much - she is everything I want. They laugh now, but she will be mine."

At that, Robert turned to stalk off to his guest quarters. Ned stared after his friend’s retreating figure, wondering if his own words were truthful. Lyanna seemed to have no desire to get to know Robert, and Robert’s approach would only push her further away. They were so similar in some ways, but it seemed they had gotten off to a terrible start. Couldn’t they just go out and hunt for days, joking at Ned’s expense and talking about weapons?

This seemed like the perfect match, but I’ve never seen him like this....

Brandon’s angry words from their hunt yesterday, some of the only words they had spoken since Ned’s arrival, echoed in his head.
"He treats her like some possession. She is our little sister, Ned, and a Stark, not some prize to win and do with whatever he pleases. So yes, I'll fight for her with Father, against Robert and even you, because I respect her as a person and I want what's best for her."

The situation was tearing his family apart.

Yet again, he found himself wondering if he was making a dire mistake.

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Rhaella

Rhaella carefully smoothed down the long sleeves of her dress, fighting the urge to flinch as the motion prompted pain to flare up her arms.

As challenging as the long winter had been for most, Queen Rhaella had been secretly grateful for the Court’s adoption of long-sleeves and high necklines - it was far easier to hide the bruises and scratches. It did House Targaryen no favors to display Aerys’ cruelty on her body.

The Court saw enough of it in person.

She’d been spared Aerys’ presence in her bed for four moons - two filled with joy as she prayed the babe would remain healthy within her womb, two more to mourn yet another devastating loss.

Yesterday, the Grand Maester had finally told her husband that she had miscarried but was well enough to attempt the feat again.
Aerys had burned two men on pyres of wildfire in his fury before making his way to her chambers.

Rhaella still remembered the day she learned that true happiness was not to be her lot in life. Many thought that the King’s madness was simply a result of whatever terrible acts Lord Darklyn and his foreign wife had done to Aerys during the Defiance of Duskendale, but Rhaella knew better. Nay, the day she learned happiness was not hers to have was a day much earlier, before Aerys had even become Crown Prince.

The gods had seemed to laugh at her that day, the first day of spring many years ago. The sun was out, the temperature warm and the flowers in full bloom. Yet none of the bright colors or fragrant smells could wash away the sadness she’d felt when her father told her she was to marry her older brother.

Aerys had always walked a fine line between arrogant narcissism and irrational madness. For as long as Rhaella could remember, he had been a dreamer overly fond of praise, no matter how artificial. He was convinced he was destined for greatness, and surrounded himself by men who would tell him of his successes.

She had always seen past his handsome Targaryen features; she had seen the festering illness hiding beneath the boisterous personality. As his sister, Rhaella witnessed the early episodes, when the madness could be explained as youthful negligence, a testament to growing up in the royal family without limitations. But Rhaella knew that Aerys’ cruelty went so much deeper - no one treated a sibling the way he’d treated her growing up without some degree of insanity.

Pinching her when she was but a young girl when she slouched, yelling at her for her incompetence when she tripped over his feet as they moved through dance rehearsals, slapping her when she supposedly embarrassed him in front of his friends – his treatment of her was a running game of abuse. Their father had turned a blind eye to the behavior, rationalizing that Aerys was only doing what he thought best for his sister. And their mother had agreed, her love for her brother-husband shielding her from seeing the truth of her son’s character.

Rhaella’s only relief had come from her belief that he would never wish to marry her – he had made his views of her insufficiencies more than clear. That she might escape the horrors that haunted her day and night in King’s Landing was a small consolation that aided her through her darkest days.

She had even begun to hope for some measure of happiness.
It had appeared in the form of a young landed knight from the Stormlands. Ser Bonifer Hasty. They’d met by chance at a feast when she was not yet a maiden flowered, but he had been kind and witty. He told her horribly silly japes, making her giggle uncontrollably before her septa had found them wandering the gardens.

But Rhaella was a Princess, and while her family life might not have been worthy of joy, she was still in possession of some degree of freedom.

She and Bonifer began exploring the gardens with more frequency and the man grew to know Rhaella’s friends and ladies-in-waiting. And while many men spent hours praising her looks and seeking her favor, only Bonifer ever sought to know her person. To hear her thoughts and praise her mind.

His features may not have been as comely as others’, but by her thirteenth nameday, Rhaella had fallen in love with the man.

Their relationship had culminated on a grey day at the end of a long winter when by some miraculous occurrence, the young knight from the Stormlands won the Tournament of Bitterbridge. She still remembered the hushed whispers of the audience, watching as she accepted the beautiful crown of red and white roses, hearing Bonifer name her his Queen of Love and Beauty.

She had summoned the courage to ask her father for permission to marry the man that evening, the crown of roses still gracing her head hardening her resolve. She would seek the life she wished. After all, her parents had once gone against duty and married for love.

The next day, spring had dawned sunny and warm, but there was to be no warmth in Rhaella’s life. Nay, that day had ruined everything.

Her father claimed the betrothal was to fulfil the prophecy of the Prince that was Promised, the wandering words of a woods witch brought to Court by Jenny of Oldstones. Perhaps in part it was - Rhaella would come to curse the prophecy for more than just her damned marriage. But she would always remember her father explaining how the man she loved was not worthy of her affection - how Ser Bonifer would never be enough for a royal princess.

If she had thought being Aerys’ sister had been difficult, becoming his sister-wife had only been worse.
She was granted a reprieve from his cruelty early in their marriage for two reasons. The first being that, at that time, Aerys had reasoned that at least their marriage would yield true dragons, for they would keep the Targaryen bloodline pure. That reason alone prompted some small degree of appreciation – perhaps not of her person, but at least of the blood that pumped through her veins. This reasoning was only strengthened when she fell pregnant within their first year of marriage – by giving him a healthy son, in spite of the tragedy surrounding the birth, Rhaella had proved her worth.

For a little while.

The three years Aerys was Crown Prince as their father ruled were some of Rhaella’s best – she had a beautiful son to dote upon when she was not learning her duties at her mother’s side, and her brother-husband was kept busy by his friends and mistresses. She became close with her two ladies-in-waiting, Mariah Martell and Joanna Lannister, women she turned to as confidants. Her father, though sickly, was a capable ruler, and the death of Maelys the Monstrous during the War of the Ninepenny King’s ended the Blackfyre risk. Rhaella was happy enough to blissfully ignore the looks her brother had sent Joanna, particularly when it was announced that Joanna was to marry her cousin, Tywin, who also happened to be Aerys’ best friend.

Her happiness was not to last. It did not take long for things to fall apart.

First, her father had become ill, passing just three weeks into the fourth year of his rule. Rhaella had been on Dragonstone with Rhaegar, avoiding the potential risk when the news arrived that the King had died.

At the age of seventeen, Rhaella found herself Queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

Her brother-husband had appointed his friend Tywin as Hand, which seemed a gift as it allowed Joanna to remain at Rhaella’s side. But reality turned out to be much harsher – now King, Aerys had no qualms about displaying his interest in his friend’s wife.

Rhaella could see the way her brother’s leers and outrageous flirtations angered Tywin. At their wedding, Aerys had even joked that it was a pity that the First Night had been outlawed, which would have granted Aerys access to his servant’s wife on the night of her marriage.

When finally the King’s overtures became too much, Rhaella made the decision to dismiss Joanna from her service. It pained Rhaella, as she had had to say goodbye to her other confidant Mariah Martell only a few months prior when Mariah returned to take her seat as the ruling Princess of Dorne.
Court gossip quickly spread that the women’s friendship ended the day of the dismissal, given the harsh manner in which Rhaella delivered the news, when she demanded Tywin send his wife back to Casterly Rock where she belonged.

What the gossips didn’t know was that Rhaella had spoken to Joanna in secret the night before the dismissal and subsequent departure for Casterly Rock. She would never forget the look of gratefulness in her friend’s eyes as the new Queen kissed each of her friend’s cheeks in blessing. Though it was the last Rhaella ever saw of Joanna Lannister, they had written in secret during the Lannister woman’s years at the Rock.

The final straw had come when news arrived from Casterly Rock that Joanna was pregnant.

Five years had passed since Rhaegar’s birth. Aerys had re-commenced his husbandly duty once he became King and Rhaella had herself been pregnant three times in two years. However, each of the pregnancies had ended in miscarriage, the third not even two weeks after she knew she was with child.

With the news of Joanna’s pregnancy, Aerys’ fury had erupted, stronger than ever.

He raged about how he had never wanted to marry her, how Joanna should have been his wife, how the Lannister woman would have birthed him the dragons he deserved. He ranted about Rhaella’s weakness and her broken womb, accusing her of sabotaging her pregnancies out of spite for him.

That was the first night he truly took her by force. Henceforth, there had been no more respect for her Targaryen blood, nor praise for her ability to birth Rhaegar.

In fact, Aerys had decided their son was far too quiet, his preference for books and solitude over swords and companions driving the King to yell about Rhaella passing on her weakness to his son.

Whatever remained of their marriage was over that evening.

The violence had increased over the years, Aerys inflicting more pain with every miscarriage or stillbirth. Then her precious Jaehaerys had managed to take his first breath only to die within a year. Aerys had accused his mistress at the time of murdering the boy, and after that he had pledged himself to her bed only.
A curse and blessing, for now he could only take his pleasure in her body, but the result had been her second son Viserys, born seventeen years after Rhaegar.

There were few good things in her life – with Rhaegar a grown man with the weight of the world on his shoulders, Viserys remained a daily source of joy. The King could batter her eldest with his mistrust and vile words of treason, and he could yell at Viserys for being a stupid boy, but Rhaella would love them all the more to compensate. Aerys could not destroy her love for her children.

There was one other thing Aerys could not take away from her.

Her duty.

Rhaella had been born a Princess, destined to be Queen. She’d spent almost all of her life at Court, had watched her grandparents conduct themselves as rulers, followed by her own parents. She had seen the full spectrum of Hands of the King and Small Council members, strong men and simpering courtiers.

She had watched and she had learned. Men were ever prone to speak of things they shouldn’t when they thought a woman was weak and docile.

She had watched and she had learned, and in time, she had acted.

Her reign was not overt. Nay, Rhaella had long ago learned that courtiers saw what they wished to see - to most, she was a beaten and defeated dragon. But frankly, most at Court were idiots.

To them, they saw a King who wished to be praised while his son and Hand ran the Kingdom. Court saw a melancholy Crown Prince and a dour Lord Lannister. They might even notice the powdered eunuch whispering into the King’s ear.

No one saw the silent dragon pulling the strings.

For it was Rhaella who had the ear of the lesser crowd. The servants, the cooks, the septas. It was Rhaella’s subtle suggestions to the Citadel that led to the appointment of the the Grand Maester’s new acolytes - the Maester might be in Tywin Lannister’s pocket, but the information being fed to
him passed through the quiet Queen.

While the King appointed men who gave him elaborate praise and bent to his wishes, it was the Queen who called them to Court, who spoke with their wives and manipulated them into factions of Court. Rhaella knew the men who had coin at their disposal, who could summon armies and maintain loyalties. She knew the composition of Court, controlled the comings and goings of men and women alike. She worked with Rhaegar to ensure he had the support he would need, ensuring that nothing overt might upset the careful balance.

When it came to ladies, Rhaella knew the women with the true power - she knew which controlled their husbands or lovers, and which were flighty things.

And the gods blessed her when her son had requested her to take Ashara Dayne as a lady-in-waiting as a boon to his best friend Arthur. In Ashara, Rhaella had gained a wonderful ally - the women showed a particular skill in secrets, a wonderful and much better looking counterbalance to her husband’s reliance on Lord Varys.

Not that Varys was an enemy. Aerys’ madness was a fickle monster - Rhaella knew better than anyone, there was no taming of his insanity - but Varys, the Master of Whisperers, had managed to develop a method to direct the madness. Rhaella did not trust the man, but he was one of the few who knew of her maneuvering. She and Varys had come to a reasonable truce, based on mutual respect.

Over time, Rhaella held onto the strong and strategic women, sending the passive flirts to Cersei Lannister. The girl was the spitting image of Joanna, yet Cersei retained none of her mother’s finer qualities. However, Cersei served a purpose while she lingered at Court with her father, and most of the time, Rhaella let her be; Rhaella did not mind Cersei as long as she did not overstep herself.

Today, it was the beautiful Lannister girl that she saw first upon entering the Great Hall, surrounded by her tittering ladies, her gold and maroon dress showing off far more of her bosom than the weather might warrant.

Formal Court had ended, but it was the informal interactions that drove much of politics in King’s Landing. Rhaella quickly spotted the reason for her own outing today, a blonde wisp of a thing, cream skin and blue eyes brought out by the pale blue of her dress. The girl was no older than eleven namedays, not yet a maiden flowered, but certainly displaying the early signs of a Court beauty, a fact which had clearly been spotted by others.

The Queen watched as Cersei Lannister also spied the girl, standing off to the side staring wide-eyed
at the Iron Throne and the dragon skulls lining the walls of the Great Hall. Rhaella saw the thought cross Cersei’s face as she made her way towards the young girl.

Threat.

Cersei reached the poor girl soon enough, not noticing the Queen approaching from behind, and Rhaella walked up to the group just as the Cersei’s voice cut through the air. “Who are you and what are you doing at Court?”

“I-” stumbled the girl, clearly taken aback by the question, her doe eyes wide. She stumbled across her words as her eyes noted Rhaella’s presence.

“Lady Cersei, I don’t believe that is of any concern to you,” Rhaella announced, her voice smooth and light despite the hint of reproach.

Cersei and her friends turned around in a swoosh of silk skirts, dipping into curtsies as soon as they saw her, though the Queen noticed the Lannister girl’s curtsy remained far shallower than the others’.

“I was simply inquiring, your Majesty,” clarified Cersei, false sweetness infused into her voice, “It is important to know who is in attendance at Court and why.”

“‘Tis well and good to know those in your presence, Lady Cersei, yet often their reasons for being at Court are none of your concern. Perhaps mine or the King’s concern, or even the Small Council. But certainly your father would inform you, should you have need to know.”

A shot of anger flashed across the younger woman’s face, her neutral mien failing momentarily. Though she could not lie that she enjoyed watching the Lannister girl squirm beneath her gaze, Rhaella kept a straight face. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Rhaella turned to the young girl, softening her eyes.

“Darling,” Rhaella addressed the girl, who looked very much like her great uncle in his younger days, “I believe you are here to see your Great Uncle?”

The young girl nodded and Rhaella smiled, feeling Cersei’s stare. Rhaella turned to address the other girl’s assembled, introducing the girl that Cersei had so cruelly descended upon.
“Ladies, might I introduce Lady Lynesse Hightower, great niece of Ser Gerold Hightower, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard? She’ll be passing some time at Court with us before making her way to Highgarden, where her older sister is Lady Tyrell.”

The ladies assembled dipped into curtsies again, no doubt realizing their fault in harassing a young noblewoman with such strong connections. After all, most of Lady Cersei’s followers were from lesser houses, ladies attempting to garner more attention. That they thought the Lannister girl would grant them such was a youthful mistake - it was unlikely Cersei would assist them in any way beyond that which benefited her.

“Lady Lynesse, perhaps you would be so good as to take tea with me? Your great uncle was hoping I might be able to speak with you until he has finished his duties with the King.”

Lynesse curtsied again, “I would be honored, your Highness.”

“Excellent. I am certain Prince Viserys will enjoy meeting a new Lady, and the Crown Prince has already ensured your great uncle has time to spend with you away from his duties.”

Lynesse blushed at the mention of Rhaella’s eldest, and the Queen noted Cersei’s flinch. The Hightower girl was certainly far too young for Rhaegar, considering Aerys wished for a marriage by the end of next year, but it was amusing to see the Lannister girl fidget at the mention of Rhaegar caring for any other young maiden.

Not that Cersei had much of a chance of securing Rhaegar herself - Rhaella would hardly support such a choice, and Aerys would no doubt hate such an idea, but Rhaegar had never been a fan of the Lannister girl in any case. Cersei’s belief that she would be the next Crown Princess was woefully misplaced, but Rhaella had no intention of informing the girl. Why infuriate the Lannisters for no reason? The girl would learn her place in time.

Nay, the Quiet Dragon’s weapons were never overt.

“Come along, Lady Lynesse,” Rhaella indicated the young girl should follow her as she inclined her head at the other girls assembled, “Ladies, I wish you a pleasant day.”

Aerys might prefer pyres of wildfire, but Rhaella struck with grace and courtesy.
Kill them with kindness.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we will find out what exactly was in the letters Rhaegar gave Brandon, as well as a few reactions to the potential new suitor for Lyanna Stark's hand :)

As always, thank you for reading and leaving comments - it's really so awesome to hear from people who are engaged in the story! I'm trying to keep up with responding, and hope to answer people's questions as they arise (if I can without spoiling anything!).

Have a good week!
Brandon

The morning dawned brisk, the cold air clearing his head of any lingering hangover.

For once, he was glad he had chosen to forgo those last two pints when Myles and Richard had left to sleep in town. Brandon could even appreciate the calm of the early morning, such a pleasant contrast to what had plagued the Stark family during the later parts of the day.

He had spoken to his father last night right before the feast, delivering the Crown Prince’s letters, but not before Rickard Stark had shared some choice words about his wolf-blooded children.

“I see Lyanna handled your bastard daughter and her mother while I was away?” his father asked from behind the heavy oak desk.

Brandon blanched as he made his way to the seat in front of his father as Rickard Stark continued, his eyes boring into Brandon.

“Your sister did well. The affair has remained quiet, and the girl will be taken care of, as befits a child of Stark blood.”

“She was furious with me. As was Ben.”
Father sighed, “Your siblings are young, Brandon. Lyanna prides herself on the idea of honor, though it is a naive and pure form of it. One could say she is a paragon. But I believe her true feelings are similar to mine - it is not the bastard itself that angers her, but the implication that a man would care so little for the consequences of his actions, for the respect he is granted by his name and title. She views the Stark name as sacred. It is what she clings to. I imagine she also sees herself in Catelyn Tully’s eventual position, for she too will be married to the heir of some Lord. Benjen will take up any sentiment your sister has for now - the two of them are thick as thieves still.”

“You’re not angry?”

“Angry? No. Disappointed? Perhaps. It is the natural expectation when one enjoys the company of women as much as you do. But do not mistake that as approval. Do I wish you to continue this behavior? Absolutely not. But I shall not blame a babe for the actions of a willful child.”

Brandon bristled at the implication, but Father was not done.

“She was a commoner, thankfully. Managing another Lord,” Father gave him a knowing look, “would not be as easy.”

Brandon looked down at the floor. He didn’t know how Father knew of his little affair with Barbrey Ryswell, but Lyanna had warned him that Father knew far more than he let on.

Another reason to end the affair with the Ryswell girl.

Seeking to change the topic, Brandon had remembered his promise to speak in favor of Lyanna’s trip to Queensgate.

“I know you are angry at Lya for running off to Queensgate, but it seemed only fair to give her a break. She handled a lot while you were away, and the execution was hard on her.”

Father sighed, “I bless the day the Gods decided not to bestow the wolf’s blood on Ned or Benjen. You and Lyanna will certainly drive me to an early grave. Brandon, your sister may have a better handle on her responsibilities, but that does not make her any less willful. She knows how to manipulate others to get her wish, and I have allowed her many freedoms she will not be granted. I do not do this to hurt her, but she must learn that not everyone will appreciate such dangerous actions. She must also think about the implications upon our House, particularly if she is to go south
Brandon had taken that opportunity to hand over the letters, watching his father’s face closely.

Rickard Stark was a man who was usually impervious to surprises, so it brought Brandon some measure of delight to see the brief look of shock flash across his father’s face. But the shock was quickly replaced with the thoughtful face of a man weighing his options.

Brandon had always respected his father and the way in which he ruled the North. It was one of the reasons Brandon hated taking on the responsibilities as heir – deep down, he knew he would never fill his father’s shoes as Lord of Winterfell. Ned could, and Lyanna too, had she been born male – her wildness, a testament to her wolf’s blood, only seemed so pronounced due to her sex.

He wondered what Lyanna would think of the Crown Prince’s letters. The man had indeed written her a short missive as well, informing her of his request. Brandon hoped Lyanna would appreciate that; most noblemen couldn’t care less about the wishes of their respective spouses. Brandon certainly hadn’t asked Catelyn Tully’s opinion on their impending betrothal.

But the Crown Prince hadn’t actually proposed an arrangement – he’d requested the opportunity to discuss the possibility, suggesting a courting period. He wanted to give them both the chance to get to know one another, since they had yet to be formally acquainted.

Yet, Brandon understood from his father’s perspective that this posed a modest issue.

In the end, the Prince could very well not choose to pursue Lyanna. After all, he was the Crown Prince and undoubtedly had most of the maidens in Westeros at his disposal. Lyanna, while certainly not in a poor position given her noble blood, did not have quite the luxury as the Prince enjoyed. And in spite of her charm and her sense of duty, she had little enough desire to marry when forced – above all, she was proud, and Brandon couldn’t imagine her making any significant effort after a failed courtship with the Crown Prince. What could possibly come after the heir to the Iron Throne?

Ultimately, his father’s decision came down to accepting a known offer that would finalize an alliance with another Lord Paramount, or holding out in hopes that Lyanna charmed the Crown Prince. While the Crown Prince had seemed set on Lyanna himself, the odds were not exactly against Robert Baratheon, much to Brandon’s displeasure.
Lyanna’s absence at the feast hadn’t allowed either Father or Brandon to speak with her about the Prince’s offer, but Father had told him he would allow discussions to proceed discreetly. He was already planning on pushing back the timeline with Robert, and did not wish to have Lord Baratheon forcing his hand should it come out that there was such steep competition.

Rising early, Brandon had hoped to catch Lyanna before she left for her morning ride – he thought perhaps meeting the Prince in Wintertown, where she was comfortable, would ease some of the tension – alas, she had already taken off by the time he reached the stables. Knowing the Prince was likely to be departing early, he gave up the idea of trying to catch her in favor of ensuring he spoke to the Prince before he left.

He just barely caught them, recognizing Myles and Richard as they were walking their horses out of the inn’s stable. The Prince and his two Kingsguard were quite unrecognizable, wearing nondescript Northern clothing with no sigils. While it was only just dawn, there were already a few souls walking the road of Wintertown, so he suggested escorting their party out of town, as he was off on a ride in that direction. The Crown Prince nodded his consent, but hung back with Ser Arthur and Ser Oswell, leaving Brandon to jest with hungover Myles and Richard as they left the boundaries of Wintertown.

Once the last temporary structure disappeared behind them, the Crown Prince rode up beside him and Brandon explained his father’s position and desire to move forward, but in relative secrecy. This seemed to sit well with the Prince, as he nodded his assent.

“And your sister? What does she think of the idea?”

Brandon shrugged, “We weren’t able to discuss the matter with her, as she refused to speak to anyone. She wouldn’t even show up to dinner, much to Father’s displeasure.”

“If you were unable to speak to her about the matter, I can only assume this behavior was prompted by Lord Baratheon’s suit?”

“Aye. He told her yesterday morning that he was considering accepting Robert’s offer – the man is offering a significant bride price after all - but she’s not one to take things without a fight. She knew it would bother Father for her to be absent on his first evening back, and she wasn’t wrong.” Remembering Father’s ire the night before soured Brandon’s mood, “Honestly, she acts like she's the lowliest creature in the world facing death, as opposed to a maid of a Great House with potential marriage offers from the most eligible bachelors in the Seven Kingdoms.”

Ser Arthur chuckled, "I suppose it's only a matter of time before Jaime Lannister comes along to join
The Prince sent his friend a glare, clearly not pleased by the suggestion, before turning back to Brandon, "I'm sure she's not thrilled by the possibility of leaving her home, particularly if she is as integral to Winterfell as it sounds she is."

"But she was always going to leave," Brandon explained, his voice only a touch away from a whine, "She's a woman, even if she pretends she isn't, and she knows her duty. And it's not like Father hasn't been refusing marriage offers for years – he's only been doing that because he promised Mother he would wait until she was sixteen. Even if she was plain and simple, her name and position would warrant a good marriage." Slightly exasperated, Brandon reined his horse in a bit, realizing he had urged her faster while speaking. "Gods, she's certainly luckier than most. Not all of us even get a choice in the matter."

Ser Arthur raised his eyebrow, drawling, "Why my Lord, you don't sound bitter at all."

Brandon huffed, "Should have known Lya would get more than the rest of us. She's always been spoiled. I suppose it’s the result of being the only daughter of a Great House."

Sensing Brandon’s bitterness, the Prince diffused the situation, “Lord Brandon, if it eases your mind, I’ve heard Catelyn Tully is a great beauty. And your marriage will be quite a strong political alliance.”

Brandon sighed, staring off into the distant hills, “If only that was the extent of it.”

He could sense the Prince’s questioning eyes, but in that moment he saw two flashes of gray and a black shadow following them across a distant hill. His eyes widened as he realized who it was, and he let out a low chuckle.

“There’s the devil herself.”

The rest of the party followed his gaze, watching as his sister practically flew across the wide, snowy expanse, her direwolves weaving in and out of snowdrifts. She was moving fast, and not only would it add significant time to the Prince’s party to follow her, it would be near impossible for them to catch up to her in any case. She stopped on the top of a small rise in the distance, her hair streaming wild in the wind as her head tipped back in laughter that could only just barely be heard.
Turning to the Prince, he noticed the man’s neutral mask had fallen somewhat as he watched Lyanna – the Prince’s eyes glimmered with some emotion, perhaps admiration, perhaps curiosity. More than anything else the man had said, this moment eased some of Brandon’s worries. The Prince did not regard his sister’s willful solo riding at the break of dawn flanked by direwolves with aversion. If nothing else, he must at least have some idea that Lyanna was not the typical Lady, and was still interested.

Smiling a bit at the thought that some Southron lord might actually appreciate his sister’s unusual character, Brandon reached out his hand in a gesture of farewell, “Your Grace, I ought to go retrieve my wily sister before she rides all the way to Dorne. Safe travels, and I’m sure we will speak again soon.”

The Prince wrenched his eyes away from the sight on the horizon, studying him before grasping his hand in a firm handshake. “Thank you, Lord Brandon. I hope you are right and that it is not too long.”

Nodding quick farewells to the rest of the men with a smirk sent towards Myles and Richard, he spurred his horse into the snow, whooping as he galloped off to catch his sister. Halfway across the distance Tor began sprinting towards him prompting Lyanna to notice his approach, waving and letting out what sounded like another peel of laughter.

So lost in their personal glee, the siblings didn’t notice the sole figure watching them as his party continued on, his eyes memorizing the image of such unrestrained joy and love. Only when the man turned to gallop after his party did the girl notice his receding figure. Curiosity fled her mind however, when her brother challenged her to a race home, giving himself a head start.

Everything faded to the wind in their hair, the horses beneath them, the laughs tearing out of their throats and the hearts beating in their chests.

Lyanna
Father was sitting behind his desk holding a letter in his hand when she entered his solar.

“My Lord Father, you wished to speak with me?” She kept her voice neutral, the words formal. Lyanna knew her father would be wroth with her for missing the feast the night before, but she had been quite certain she wouldn’t be able to look at any of her family without screaming.

Father looked up from the letter, looking her over. "Apparently Lord Baratheon is not the only one to take notice of you reaching your majority."

Lyanna flinched, “Another offer?”

Father gestured for her to sit, “Not quite, but still worth a discussion.”

She couldn’t help the snide remark, “I’m glad my Lord Father deems it appropriate to discuss such matters with me.”

Father’s eyes flashed with a warning, recognizing the sarcasm, “Lyanna, I will remind you that you are still my daughter and under my authority.”

“Of course, my Lord. I have not forgotten,” she responded, her voice flat.

*How could I ever possibly forget...*

Sighing, Father reached across the desk, holding out the letter.

“It seems you have attracted the attention of the Crown Prince, though I cannot imagine how, considering I have done my best to limit any information from the North.”

Lyanna rolled her eyes, “I have at least one person in mind that would be more than happy to take credit, if he could.”
Father frowned at that, and she thought of the portrait Walys continued to insist she sit for now that she had reached her majority…

She lost her train of thought when she glanced at the beautiful script flowing across the paper she held and her father’s words sunk in.

_The Crown Prince?_ What the...

Skimming the contents, she looked up at her father, her confidence evaporated.

“He would like to have a courting period? Unofficially?”

Rickard Stark nodded, a thoughtful look on his face, “Whether that is for his benefit or yours, I do not know. While it is not a formal arrangement, it is still an expression of interest.”

“And it’s more time. More time to transfer duties to Brandon and eventually Catelyn, more time to get to know the man I marry…”

“It is not a given, Lyanna. The man may just wish to ensure he explores all of his options before choosing the best.” Lyanna flinched at the way it made her sound like a horse going for auction, “He is the heir to the Iron Throne. He will be choosing not just a wife but a Princess and a future Queen.”

Lyanna swallowed the lump in her throat. She had no desire to be a Princess. That was the dream of weak-willed maidens. All she wanted was freedom.

“Why would he even bother courting me? The Crown has never been interested in the North. We barely even attend events south of the Neck, let alone have a presence at Court.”

“I do not know. It is unusual, so we will proceed with caution. The Crown Prince has a good reputation as far as I know but there are other potential considerations when thinking about a union with the royal family. The attention is not necessarily a good thing.”
The unspoken hung heavy in the room. Lyanna knew not all of Father’s plans, but she knew enough, and she had spent more than enough time by her father’s side to build upon what he had shared with her. Certainly the rebuilding of Moat Cailin and the increased wealth from improved trade out of White Harbor would draw the attention of the Crown - and not in a positive way. Moat Cailin was placed in a prime defensive location. Once completed and fully manned, it would make entering the North by land without notice virtually impossible. It was a great risk her father was taking, particularly if the rumors of the King’s madness were true.

It was said King Aerys saw treason in every man. Bolstering the defenses of the North at such a time was dangerous.

But at that moment, Lyanna was more concerned about the explosive personality staying within Winterfell.

“Father, if we are to proceed with the Prince,” she said cautiously, “I should say that Robert Baratheon does not seem the type to enjoy having such a worthy challenger.”

Her father chuckled thankfully, “No, he does not. Undoubtedly, he would push for a formal agreement if he knew he had such a powerful foe – only a Prince of the royal family represents a better arrangement than a Lord Paramount. I have already requested more time to think on Lord Baratheon’s proposal, but I will speak with him to indicate he is not the only interested party. The Prince’s name will remain unknown. It is best we keep this between you, me and Brandon.”

“Brandon? How does Brandon know?”

“Young brother received the letters directly from the Crown Prince’s former squires.”

“Ser Myles and Ser Richard?”

“Aye, those were the names. I had hoped to speak with them, but it seems they departed early this morning.”

Lyanna frowned - she hadn’t noticed the knights’ departure, though it was awfully sudden after spending quite a long time at Winterfell. It was only yesterday that they had wished to go riding with her and Brandon. Had they only been here to deliver the letters? And if so, why only deliver them last night? It seemed unusual that they would not even wait for a response before departing, having waited so long. Perhaps that was not the only reason…
Her father’s voice interrupted her thoughts as he continued the painful conversation.

“Lyanna, I do want to caution you - while I wish to give you this choice for you are my most dutiful child, we must also consider the wellbeing of Winterfell and House Stark in the process. I know you would not wish to cause undue hardship on the North by choosing an unfavorable offer. Lord Baratheon has offered to pay a significant bride price over the course of a few years, and Maester Walys is confident such an offer would be very beneficial to our House. I’m of a mind to agree - you know first hand how hard we pushed Lord Hoster for Catelyn Tully’s dowry. To not have such a financial burden upon our House would be most favorable. I am aware of Lord Baratheon’s unsavory qualities, and obviously there are benefits associated with a potential union with the Crown Prince, but I hope you will keep all of the financial and political consequences in mind as we proceed.”

Recognizing the futility in arguing on the point - Father was after all at least allowing her a choice - Lyanna grumbled her assent.

“Ned has informed me that he and Robert intend to remain at Winterfell for a little longer than a moonturn. Hopefully this time will allow you the opportunity to learn more of Lord Baratheon’s character.”

Lyanna rolled her eyes, more than certain that she had determined Robert Baratheon’s character in the last two days. When her father continued to look at her expectantly, she sighed.

“Fine, I will do my best to be courteous, Father. Pray ask no more of me, for I imagine the man will reveal far more of his character to the whores of Wintertown than he will to me.”

“Lyanna!”

She giggled, amused by the scandalized look on her father’s face before he was able to calm his features.

“Worry not, Father, I will be the picture of propriety around dear Lord Baratheon.”

“Ned says the man is in love with you already.”
“I say he is a fool if he thinks he has such tender feelings for a girl he hardly knows.”

“Love does not always come first in marriage, Lyanna. Often it grows, stemming from mutual respect and responsibility. Robert may seem unbearable to you now, but he is young and will mature in time. I will not lie - his behavior at the Inn at the Crossroads was less than seemly, but there are many men whose faults are more dangerous than an excessive enjoyment of wine and women.”

Seeing she would get little out of an extended discussion on the merits of being viewed as a real person and not a possession, Lyanna chose to simply nod.

They spoke of a few additional items relating to the castle and followed up on issues related to her Father’s trip before she was dismissed.

She turned her thoughts and attention to completing her regular tasks for the day, relieved to have no more than her usual workload - running Winterfell, while rewarding, was immensely tiring and she’d had little time for herself outside of her getaway trip to Queensgate. By late afternoon, however, she found herself wandering the walls, her mind struggling to understand the rapid succession of events over the past two days. She had no desire to see Robert or Ned, knowing that there was little use in being in their presence if she was not prepared to be courteous. She had promised Father she would try. Just not in her free time.

She stood wrapped up in her heaviest cloak on the walkway of the outer wall of Winterfell. From here, the din of the bustling castle was reduced to a whisper, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Silence reigned as she gazed out over the frozen hills of the North - her home. The only home she’d ever known, the land that was embedded in her soul. Shades of gray dotted with the deep dark browns and greens of the Wolfswood spanned the distance.

Nothing could ever compare.

Southerners might think the North harsh and dull, but they were blind to the subtle beauty, the grace of the ice and snow. The North was cold, honest, and natural.

The blood of the First Men flowed through the Stark’s veins, an untamable wildness tied so intimately to the land of the North. The idea of ever leaving was appalling.
For a woman who had been thrust large responsibility, Lyanna was still a naive little girl in one respect.

She had held out hope, hope that duty would not prevail in this one small part of her life. That she would be allowed to remain in the North.

She should have known that such a hope was nothing but foolishness.

Brandon found her like this, staring out into the expanse, the cold slowly seeping into her bones like the welcome embrace of a lover.

“I’m assuming you spoke with Father this morning?”

Lyanna sighed and nodded.

Her brother finished crossing the distance to her, standing next to her and gazing out at their homeland.

After a moment, Brandon spoke again, “For as honest as Northerners claim to be, it seems even the smallest mystery still prompts widespread gossip.”

Lyanna turned to him, her face an open question.

Her brother just chuckled before responding, “Father informed Robert, who had taken it upon himself to push his suit yet again this morning, that Lord Baratheon is not the only man open to discussions around a marriage with House Stark.”

“I can only imagine how that conversation went.”

Brandon flashed her a smile, “To Baratheon’s credit, he didn’t start ranting until after he had left Father’s solar.”

Lyanna chuckled, shaking her head. Robert wouldn’t win any points with Rickard Stark if he
couldn’t contain his anger at the slightest inconvenience. The man was acting like a petulant child, deprived of something he wanted and thought he deserved.

And if there was one thing that Rickard Stark had had enough of while raising four stubborn Stark children, it was childish petulance.

“In any case,” Brandon continued, “Father refused to say who else has expressed interest, so rumors abound.”

That caught Lyanna’s attention - she was not particularly keen on being the subject of gossip. Though she knew she could easily ask one of the servants, her curiosity pushed her to ask, “And who, pray tell, are the leading contenders?”

Brandon barked out a laugh, “Can you not guess?”

She smiled as she looked back towards the castle, her mind moving through the multitude of names she had made a point to know - if only to find a fault in each man.

“Well, obviously Roose.”

Brandon nodded - they were all aware of the Bolton’s determination to get a hook into the Stark family, and the young Lord Bolton had made a strong case. Before taking over the Dreadfort, he had often visited Winterfell on his father’s behalf, becoming familiar with Lyanna as she grew up. He was a few years older than Brandon and far more quiet, but he was an intelligent sort, and had proven himself a capable strategic thinker. Since his father’s death a few years prior, Roose had brought the topic up of marrying Lyanna numerous times, so it really was more a matter of time before the formal suit arrived.

Despite being several years older than her, Roose represented the best Northern option in truth. Had her father been interested in keeping her in the North, such a marriage would have likely already been arranged. Roose was a thoughtful man, taking every possible scenario into consideration. Lyanna thought she might grow to respect the man had circumstances been different.

There was however the fact that Father didn’t exactly trust Roose Bolton. There were rumors Lord Bolton still enjoyed the old traditions of the Dreadfort, despite the fact that flaying had been outlawed for years. Even without the rumors though, there were times when the man gave Lyanna the creeps, and even Brandon had admitted to being ill-at-ease the last time he had seen him. Such a statement
was not a ringing endorsement in Lyanna’s eyes.

Beyond Roose, the exercise became a bit more difficult. There was William Dustin, who was on the older side, and Ethan Glover, who was on the younger side. Outside of the North, the possibilities were more numerous, but not unlimited - perhaps Elbert Arryn, the heir to the Vale, who had had befriended both Brandon and Ned. If the servants wanted to get really carried away, there was even Jaime Lannister, the heir to Casterly Rock.

“I am certain there are all sorts of options abounding.”

Brandon snorted, “I must say, my personal favorite was old Lord Frey. One of the kitchen wenches was saying that his most recent wife died from the flux not long ago.”

“Others take me, can you imagine?”

“Certainly not. Father knows such an arrangement would only increase the chances of you riding out on your horse and never returning.”

She shook her head, but instead of lightening her mood, the joke only made her melancholy.

“How can I ever leave, Bran? How can I even think about living away from the North? From Winterfell?”

Brandon sighed, “I do not know, Lya. But you will always have a place here.”

She smiled weakly as silence descended upon them, each lost in their thoughts. Flashes of memories from growing up around Winterfell were playing through her mind, her eyes unfocused as she stared into the snowy hills. Her brother was the first to speak again, his voice laced with the slightest amount of desperation.

“I’m not ready for this, Lya. I know I have to do it, to settle down, but I don’t know if I can. You make it look so easy.”

“Brandon, you can do this. We both can do this. We must. We don’t have a choice.”
“We always have a choice, sister. And you’re one to speak, at least you have options.”

Lyanna scoffed, “Like Robert Baratheon is a remotely likable option.”

“I did tell you that Ben compared me to him?” Brandon asked, clearly offended by the comparison.

Lyanna just smiled cheekily, “Well, I wouldn’t choose to marry you either.”

He smacked her playfully in response.

She sighed then, staring woefully into the snowy landscape, as her mind invariably drifted to indigo eyes and silky black hair. “I guess I just hoped for something more than a political match.”

“Well, well, well, Lya, I never took you for a romantic,” Brandon teased.

She blushed, thinking back to her brief little romance at Queensgate. Her silence prompted Brandon to look at her, noticing the flush of her cheeks.

“Wait, is there someone?” he exclaimed.

“What? No!” she responded, a little too quickly, “Of course not!”

Brandon let out a hoot, clearly not believing her denial, “Others take me, is my little sister in love?”

She rolled her eyes, her voice recovering its even tone, “Seven hells, Bran, no, it’s nothing like that.”

“Oh, and what is it like, dearest sister?”

She lifted her chin, her eyebrow lifting stoically, “Please, it was nothing but harmless flirting. I would
never shame my house like some people. Unlike you, brother, I actually have to maintain my innocence till marriage.”

Now it was Brandon’s turn to roll his eyes, “A sham of a rule, if you ask me.”

Lyanna chuckled then, “I don’t think anyone is asking you.”

Her brother shrugged, “Maybe they should. I’d make a brilliant Master of Laws, just so you know.” He smirked, then added, “For when you’re Queen, obviously.”

Lyanna giggled while slapping his shoulder, “You are incorrigible! The Prince may not even like me, considering I’m a, what did you once say, “stubborn, challenging and utterly unladylike beast?””

Brandon laughed before moving to grab her hand as it shot out to slap his shoulder again. He covered her small hand with both of his as he pulled his little sister in close.

His face turned serious as he stared into her eyes.

“Lya, you might be all of those things but you are also beautiful and smart, and far more capable than any of us idiots. The Prince is a fool if he doesn’t fall head over heels in love with you.”

Suddenly, Lyanna felt tears starting to form in her eyes, and she immediately wrapped her arms around her brother, burrowing into his chest as he hugged her tight. He smelled like the North, like home.

“Thank you Bran,” she mumbled into his heavy furs.

They stood there for a moment, enjoying the peace and quiet comfort of each other’s arms.

When they separated, Brandon was smirking, “Who knows, the Silver Prince is said to be handsome and gallant, making all the maidens swoon...”

Lyanna laughed, her tears wiped away, “If you are suggesting that I will join the masses of Southron
maidens swooning over the beloved Prince, you yourself are the fool.”

Brandon slung an arm over her shoulder as they made their way back towards to keep, “Ah yes, my peerless sister, never one to swoon at the sight of a man.”

He chuckled before continuing, “Seven hells, who was this mysterious man who garnered your attention? He must have been the blasted Warrior himself or something.”

Lyanna smiled brightly as they entered the hallway, the cold easing rapidly, “Oh yes, let’s go with that, the Warrior incarnate perhaps.”

She winked at him, then flounced away, calling over her shoulder.

“Good talk brother, alas duty calls!”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed! We'll have a tiny time jump (~3/4 weeks) for next chapter, where we'll be back in King's Landing briefly. Time will be split a bit more between the North and KL going forward.

As always, thank you all for reading and for providing feedback - cannot believe this story hit 1000 kudos! Ya'll are the best!!

I noted this to a few people in the comments, but I do want to say that I'm planning on continuing this story for quite a while (at least another three years in story timeline), contingent on my enduring motivation and time constraints :)

For reference, we are in approximately mid 280 AC - Harrenhal will occur in line with canon, so in 281 AC, i.e. the Year of the False Spring. As a reminder, I have aged the Starks up (one year for Bran and Ned, two years for Lyanna and Ben).
Hi guys!

So quick note for those who have been following this story before this point - I had to make some back edits. A lovely reader (thank you Aemond!) brought to my attention that I had mistaken the ages of Roose and Domeric Bolton, clearly diverting from canon. While this is AU - Canon Divergence, I am trying my best to not change things that don't need to be changed for story purposes. SO, I have chosen to back edit the story. It is not a major shift, but I have adjusted some of the wording given Roose and Domeric have slightly different personalities. I do want to remark that we don't know as much about Roose as a young man, so I have taken a little bit of liberty on that (gotta give me a break!). BUT, I actually think this will be an interesting shift to the story, as it gives some background to a character we see in canon (i.e. some AU background to prompt motivations of later actions). It is unlikely we will see Roose in person in this story (I think, but no promises as the story can go wherever!), so this is more peripheral character movements. It only effected a few chapters, most notably the previous chapter (Ch 22) in the section where Lyanna and Brandon discuss the likely Bolton proposal.

OH and if it wasn't clear - Elia was betrothed then promptly MARRIED to Baelor Hightower in the Prologue. Sorry if there was any confusion around that!

ANYWAYS, enjoy this chapter :)

As always, all ASoIaF worlds belong to GRRM.

Rhaegar

They had arrived just in time for his father's nameday celebrations, much to the relief of the whole party. It had been a grueling journey, and they had often ridden late into the night in an attempt to cut down the travel days. Mercifully, the weather had been better than on their journey to the North, a stroke of luck for which they were all grateful.

It seemed his father had little desire to actually see him, beyond a basic retelling of what he had learned. He himself had little desire to play the courteous Prince to the ladies being paraded in front
of the dais, and a good deal of business and correspondence to see to following his trip to the North. Fortunately, the King was absorbed with being the center of attention, and Rhaegar was able to escape from most of the festivities on account of fatigue from the journey.

Escaping the feast that evening proved none too challenging as Aerys basked in the attention of his subjects, sending his Queen away with Ser Barriston before allowing Rhaegar to retire to his solar as soon as the food had been cleared.

Much to his surprise, the first piece of news he received was from Dorne. Rhaegar had maintained his correspondence with Princess Elia after the betrothal arrangement fell through, though the letters were much briefer, no doubt a result of some lingering resentment and the long delayed response following his Northern sojourn. Princess Elia had given birth to a girl, a blessing after only a year of marriage. However, the lady was on bedrest still after several months, and the recovery was proving exceedingly difficult - the Maester wasn't sure whether she would carry again.

While he wished the woman well - she was intelligent and a kind soul - he couldn't help but feel relieved. They would have had a passionless marriage, and no doubt her poor health would have strained the relationship further. And despite his deep respect for Princess Mariah, Dorne was not the strongest, largest, or richest kingdom in Westeros - the Targaryens were presently at their weakest and an alliance with the region would have been a shallow victory.

Nay, Rhaegar had to admit his father was still perceptive despite his madness - the largest concerns were Tywin Lannister and Rickard Stark. While both men represented a different type of danger, each was proving concerning in his own right.

Tywin was powerful at court - for many years as Hand, Tywin was regarded as the real man behind the throne, not Aerys. Rhaegar had taken on many of his father's duties in the past few years, but Tywin was still widely regarded with both fear and respect.

Not only was his power at court dangerous in itself, Tywin was also the Warden of the richest region of Westeros - the mines surrounding Casterly Rock had made the Lannisters ridiculously wealthy. If it weren't for the credit of the Iron Bank and his father's increasing isolation of the royal family, the Crown might be deep in debt to the Lannisters. This was not a comforting thought, and Rhaegar had already lost many nights to worrying over finances and expenses, ensuring Tywin didn't manage to finagle his way into essentially owning the Crown. Tywin had taken great offense at Aerys' refusal of a betrothal agreement between Rhaegar and Cersei, despite the incident occurring more than five years ago.

Rhaegar had seen the way Tywin and Cersei watched him when they greeted his small party in the courtyard of the Red Keep and at the feast. Rhaegar had no illusions as to who was the driving force behind his recall to Court - while Aerys appreciated his heir's counterbalance against Tywin, it was
Tywin himself who clearly wished for Rhaegar's presence.

*He thinks I'll marry his daughter. In his mind, she is the only remaining viable option, so he hopes to force Aerys' hand. Or mine.*

Cersei was, indisputably, a beautiful girl - with long golden hair and a lovely face, bright green eyes framed by long lashes, a brilliant smile. The Lannister wealth certainly helped her case, as she was always dressed to perfection in elaborate silks and lace. She was tall for her age and well endowed, a fact she shamelessly flaunted with gowns cut quite provocatively across her cleavage. In truth, she embodied much of what the common folk would picture when thinking of a future Queen - Rhaegar imagined that was precisely her goal.

There was something off about her graciousness though, as if her kind words and courtly manners were purely a veneer. Rhaegar couldn't quite place it. It didn't seem particularly malicious, but most of his friends held no love for the girl, which left him thinking he was missing something.

Regardless, Rhaegar would have to at least entertain her for now because, unfortunately, Tywin was not completely wrong - unless he wished to marry into a lesser house, Cersei was one of his only viable options. He could ill-afford to lose the support of the Lannisters, particularly if his father's madness deepened further. Tywin would naturally be a powerful ally in....

*No, it is not yet so critical. There is no need to think of such things.*

Which led him to his next dilemma: Lord Stark and the North. Aside from his personal interest in Lord Stark's daughter - Queensgate and the wild girl he had met there were never far from his thoughts - the North was indeed a more complex concern than they had thought. During their journey south, Myles and Richard had regaled Rhaegar, Arthur, and Oswell with all they had learned about the Starks and their kingdom. Coupled with the knowledge they had picked up from other travelers, the Wall, and Lyanna herself at Queensgate, the Crown Prince had become progressively more wary.

Rhaegar stared at the map of Westeros he had spread on one of his side tables, considering the immensity of the Northern kingdom.

*We have ignored them for too long. They are almost more independent than Dorne.*

The North was essentially self-governed. Larger than any other kingdom in Westeros, the people
were harsher, living simpler and more honest lives. They valued honor and strength, preferring hardened warriors to courtly knights. The Crown had rarely visited past the Neck, and most Northerners viewed the Targaryens the way they viewed the rest of the South - frivolous, corrupt, and deceitful. In fact, very few Targaryens had ever ventured north, and the land had never officially been conquered – Torrhen Stark had bent the knee to Aegon the Conqueror before the Targaryens even attempted the feat.

After spending several moons in the region, Rhaegar was quite certain a war for the North would be all but impossible to win. The region might not field as large of an army as some of the other regions, but few of those held as many natural advantages for the locals. Northerners not only knew the terrain better, but they seemed to be much less hindered by the weather. Natural challenges aside, the Northerners also made for fearsome warriors, big men with thick muscles that managed to move as quickly as wolves. It was something he and Arthur had noted in Brandon Stark even when the man was a squire. Wild and savage as they may seem to the Southern courts, they would plow through many a Southern knight.

Above all, Rhaegar’s primary concerns were questions regarding intention.

Rickard Stark was an intelligent man, well respected as an effective leader. But he was a Stark nonetheless, and Rickard was making political moves that were usually reserved for those in the South. First, the fostering of his three sons, two with bannermen and one with a fellow Lord Paramount, and then the betrothal of his heir to the eldest daughter of another Lord Paramount. Robert Baratheon’s offer of marriage with Stark’s only daughter would tie the North to yet another Lord Paramount. It made for a dizzying and potentially dangerous result – four Lord Paramount’s aligned, covering more than half of the Kingdom. His father could indeed have cause to worry, for such an alliance could easily threaten the Crown.

 Nonetheless, Rickard Stark had yet to accept Baratheon’s proposal, which presented Rhaegar with a unique opportunity – if he could tie down the Starks himself, he would potentially gain the support of three Lord Paramounts, four if no bridges were burned with Robert, through his friendship to Eddard Stark. Rhaegar could potentially turn the alliance into a positive for House Targaryen - particularly if his father’s madness continued to worsen.

He had to admit, though, perhaps this was all rationalization - an attempt at creating new reasons to make his infatuation with Lyanna Stark all the more reasonable.

Those steel grey eyes haunted him, her hair wild and her cheeks flushed from riding in the early morning. It was the image of her at Queensgate, half-wild living at the Wall that wouldn’t leave him alone, a trace of freedom and lively joy so palpable he felt like he could reach out and feel it vibrating off of her person.
His fingers felt the rough texture of the map, tracing over the lines of ink indicating the great fortress of Winterfell and the road leading all the way up to the Wall. His other hand still held the most recently arrived letter.

Lord Stark had written, confirming his formal consent to Rhaegar’s request. The Warden of the North had indicated that Lyanna would herself write to Rhaegar in the coming days.

Finally through his correspondence, he realized it was far too late to go see his mother - he hadn’t been able to speak to her at the feast that evening, and Arthur had told him that Ser Barriston was informed to not allow any guests, even Rhaegar. He briefly considered sneaking through the hidden passageway which connected their rooms. He was worried about her, as she had seemed particularly fragile at the moment. And it would be good to see Viserys, he had missed his little brother and his easy, playful attitude.

_Nay, given the hour, it would be better to go in the morning._

Sighing, Rhaegar moved back into his bed chambers. But it would be hours before he fell asleep, the final wax of the candle on his bedside table burning, a book of Valyrian poetry cradled in his hand.

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**Rhaella**

“You should have told me.”

Rhaella saw the pain shining in her son’s eyes as he gently stroked her hands, the pain he shared with her every time her body rebelled against the life growing within her.
Her beautiful Rhaegar. He had always been a melancholy boy, born in tragedy, raised in the shadows of his father’s degenerating mental health, and thrust into duty far too young. It grieved her all the more to see the guilt resting upon his shoulders as he took on her grief.

“I should have been here.”

“Nay, my dear, there was nothing you could have done. ‘Tis my lot in life to be cursed in such a way. I am feeling better now. Though Viserys did not take your absence well.”

Rhaegar frowned at her change of topic, but his face turned wistful as he turned to glance at where Viserys pranced around as if he were astride a horse. Her second son remained blissfully playful, his youth uninterrupted, as long as he was out of his father’s circle of influence.

“He has grown so much since I was away.”

“He missed you, Rhaegar. Your father has taken a particular interest in spending time with him.”

Her eldest grimaced, clearly understanding the meaning behind her veiled words. “I will be here more now, I promise. The trip to the North was longer than I had initially expected.”

Rhaella reached out a hand, stroking her eldest’s cheek. For so long he had been her only child, her only joy. She had hoped he would return from his trip renewed, but it seemed a different sort of melancholy flashed in his eyes when he spoke of the North.

“You may be here in body, but you are still miles away in mind. What is it that occupies your thoughts, my love?”

Her son sighed, sinking further into the couch. But this was not an unhappy sigh, as she watched a small smile play across his face as he stared into the nothingness in front of him, lost in some memory. It transformed his face into one of youthful innocence. Rhaella had spent so many hours memorizing the movements of her son that the picture of his face thus was perplexing. For she recognized the look, though she had never seen it on Rhaegar’s face.

It was the look of longing.
“Would you believe me if I said the stormy color of a woman’s eyes?”

Rhaella raised an eyebrow and met her son’s gaze as he turned to her. “You met a woman in the North?”

And then her son spoke the words Rhaella had thought she might never hear from her doom-oriented boy.

“Aye, I met the most captivating woman, who has chosen to haunt not only my dreams at night but also my thoughts during the day.”

She too had once been haunted by the eyes of someone she loved but would never have. She had endured the crushing pain of heartbreak, of being forced into a marriage away from the man she loved. She did not wish it on her son.

“Oh my dear boy, such sentiment is a joy but it is often a burden for people like us. For responsibility shall always take precedence.”

“Fret not for me, Mother. All will be fine.”

“Rhaegar, surely you know that any dalliance in the North will be only that? Your father is no longer feeling as generous in relation to your marital status. He intends for you to choose from the remaining maidens of high political standing in the next year.”

Her son flashed her a cheeky smile, causing her to frown. Aerys’ growing anxiety about Rhaegar’s marriage was not something to smile about. It had taken her far more work than she cared to give to soothe her husband in this regard - if Aerys had had his way, Rhaegar might have returned from the North to find himself betrothed already.

“Then it is a good thing that the lady in question makes for a viable Princess.”

“And who, pray, is this lady who has captured your attention?”

Rhaegar smiled before answering simply, “Lyanna Stark.”
The Stark girl - Rhaella could not help but be slightly shocked. Such a choice would surely surprise the Court, for rumors had spread the girl was little more than a savage half-girl, half-wolf. Not that Rhaella had believed such rumors - she thought it likely that Cersei Lannister was the root of their spread - for she had met Rickard and his wife Lyarra on one or two occasions. Both of the elder Stark sons seemed well raised, though a tad reckless. The Starks were known for their justice and harsh, if not somewhat wild, lives— admirable characteristics for their environment perhaps, but not necessarily conducive to Court life. Nonetheless, the match was not altogether a displeasing idea.

“Ah, the daughter of the Warden of the North. A good match politically at least, which is fortunate. Although your father is convinced they are plotting treason.”

“I have already provided the King with assurances as to Lord Stark’s intentions. They are no more hostile than any self-respecting Lord intending to improve his lands. Certainly no worse than any Southern lord.”

“And is Lord Stark amenable to a potential arrangement?”

“I requested a courting period - informally. To allow Lyanna and I to exchange letters, to get to know one another before proceeding with any formal betrothal. Both Lord Stark and Lyanna have agreed to the idea.”

She raised her eyebrows at this. Rhaegar had always been a bit of a shy boy, and coupled with his enduring adherence to Court procedure, she was not surprised by the notion itself. It was rather the context of the offer. “I see. And yet you spoke of her as if you already knew the Lady quite well?”

If Rhaella hadn’t been watching her son the whole time they were speaking, she would have missed the small tinge of pink that stained his cheeks temporarily. Rhaegar, her stoic son, was blushing. It would seem this afternoon was revealing quite a different side to her dear boy.

“We may have met in… complicated circumstances.”

“What in the name of the Mother do “complicated circumstances” entail?”

Over the next few minutes, her son told her the tale of a week spent in an abandoned tower at the Wall with his two best friends and a wild girl with her two direwolves. Rhaella couldn’t help but raise a brow at the impropriety of a noblewoman placing herself in such a situation, but she also saw
the way her son’s face lit up as he described a most unusual girl who rode astride through the snow and wielded a bow.

“Fear not for her, Mother - no man would ever dare risk the ire of her two direwolves. Not that the Lady could not defend herself. I’ve never known a highborn girl to carry so many knives on her person.”

“I do not know how a woman who you describe as nearly a wildling will do at Court.”

“Aye, she is wild but in the most incredible way. And she is still very much duty bound. Myles and Richard swear that no matter how wild she may seem, she is very capable and served ably in Lord Stark’s stead.”

“She was serving for Lord Stark?”

“Aye, for more than six moons. He chose her over his other sons, a notion Brandon Stark assured me was very much deserved.”

“That is impressive. She does not sound like what Court is used to.”

“Not at all, ‘tis surely the best part. She is like a breath of fresh air.”

Rhaella couldn’t help but chuckle at her eager son, who looked like a boy once more as he spoke of the Stark girl, “My my, darling, you certainly are infatuated with this girl, aren’t you.”

Rhaegar blushed again, bowing his head like he used to do when embarrassed. “I feel very fortunate, and but hope that both Lord Stark and the Lady herself accept the idea in time.”

“Well, I can assure you this will be to the utmost disappointment to Lady Cersei. She had so been anticipating your return.”

Rhaegar’s eyebrow raised at the sarcastic tone she employed, but Rhaella couldn’t help it. She had hoped, when Tywin had first proposed Cersei come to Court, that she would prove to be similar to her mother. Joanna had been one of Rhaella’s closest companions during her early years as Crown
Princess and Queen. But the daughter had proven herself to lack the kindness and quick intelligence of the mother - Cersei was beautiful, but proud and overconfident. She thought herself quite clever, clearly blind to the fact that she only operated as Rhaella saw fit to permit.

“In truth, what do you intend to do with regards to Lady Cersei?”

“Lady Cersei is a beautiful girl. I’m certain she will find herself a favorable match.”

“Oh, Rhaegar, it may seem so but do not be naive. You know very well the Lannisters will not take kindly to you spurning her.”

“I am not spurning her, Mother. If you recall, it was Father that refused Tywin’s offer.”

“And yet here she remains, with nary a betrothal in sight. Why do you think Tywin brought her to Court as soon as he could after the Dornish arrangement fell through?”

“If Tywin wishes me to choose his daughter over the King’s command, he is risking more than just his own skin.”

“That is precisely what he thinks you will do.”

“So what do you expect me to do? As I’ve just told you, I intend to pursue another option.”

“I do not expect you to take the Lannister girl at all, Rhaegar - on the contrary, I would much prefer the girl to be gone from Court, yet it does no good to send her away. While she is here, it would simply be better to keep the option open, even if you never intend to exercise it. You do not have to court her, but it would benefit us all if you attempt to appease the Lannisters while still pursuing the Stark girl.”

“I do not want to give false impressions, Mother.”

“You have always been kind to the ladies of Court, Rhaegar. Continue to do just that - she is young and very confident. Likely it will take no more than a few harmless interactions for her to feel as though she has made progress.”
“I am not sure I would like her to think she is making progress.”

“That you can not help. But if you wish to counterbalance the interactions, I am certain Lady Ashara would be willing to pass some afternoons with you.”

Rhaegar lifted his eyebrows, shock plain on his face. “You would have me risk Ashara’s reputation in such a manner?”

“The girl is more than capable of managing her reputation, Rhaegar. I dare say the girl was born to live at Court. The Dayne family has married with the Targaryen line in the past - it does no harm in allowing the Court to speculate that the Lannister maiden is not the only option.”

“Perhaps it is not only Ashara’s reputation I should be concerned about.”

“If the lack of news around her is any indication, Rickard Stark is keen to keep any business related to his daughter out of the mouths of courtiers. If you intend to pursue the Stark girl unofficially, you must appreciate that fact. Given you seem to be truly interested in Lady Lyanna, it only helps to have Court distracted by other gossip.”

Rhaegar sighed, but Rhaella could tell he agreed. He must really like this Lyanna Stark if he is willing to subject himself to increased gossip. Her son had long despised being the topic of discussion among courtiers.

“I shall have to speak with Ashara and Arthur about it.”

“I am certain they will both be happy to assist you, my darling. I can speak with Lady Ashara as well. She has become a bit like a daughter to me.”

Rhaegar reached out to grasp her hand gently.

“I hope you will come to view Lyanna as such in time. I believe you will like her very much.”
“Darling, how could I not when she has so clearly enchanted my eldest son’s heart?”

As her son rose to leave, he flashed her a smile - he seemed to be smiling an awful lot when it came to the Stark girl.

“I shall leave you to rest, Mother. I hope you do not mind if I should borrow Lady Ashara for the afternoon?”

“Of course not, dear.”

Rhaella watched as her eldest son departed, jesting with Ser Arthur as they left. She smiled faintly, happy to have some dose of joy in her family - seeing her son so enamored by a woman he might have a chance of marrying alleviated some of the heartache she felt over her most recently lost babe.

It seemed winter might be lingering around Court for longer than expected.

Ned

Robert slapped the table. The noise echoed around the small chamber as the man chuckled, recalling their early days in the Vale.

“Poor Ned was so shy, but we brought him out of his shell. Not like my brother Stannis - never seen a more sour boy in my life!”
“There is nothing wrong with being shy - I find Ned’s shyness quite refreshing.”

Ned looked at his sister sitting in her seat at the table. This was the first comment she’d made that evening and though it was a pleasant enough thought, her voice lacked it’s typical joyous tone. Father had taken his meal with some visiting guests, so it was only the Stark children and Robert eating the evening meal. Benjen had already scampered off to somewhere and while Ned had not expected Lyanna to be her usual boisterous self around Robert, he had hoped that at least she wouldn’t be antagonistic.

Robert just laughed, “Refreshing, eh? Too bad not all ladies are like you, else I’d have made a man of him yet!”

Ned felt his cheeks flush slightly as Lyanna rolled her eyes. He sent his sister a pleading look, hoping that she’d refrain from any other comments.

He shouldn’t have worried about her though, as it was his older brother who responded with a chuckle and a slap to his shoulder, “Ah, Ned is holding out for that perfect lady. And it’s a good thing, otherwise we’d have some competition on our hands, Lord Baratheon.”

This only prompted Ned to blush harder, while Robert roared with laughter.

Lyanna was not impressed by the display, raising an eyebrow and shaking her head in silent dismissal.

Why is she being so difficult? It was all in jest, and at his expense no less.

His sister stood while his brother and best friend continued to guffaw, “I for one think Ned is the perfect gentleman. What lady wouldn’t appreciate a kind man holding himself to a higher standard of propriety?” her voice was even as she glanced between the two older boys, her steel eyes flashing dangerously, “It shows respect not only for his chosen spouse but also for himself and for his House. It is a shame not all men are like him.”

And then she turned on her heel and walked out of the room, the silence that descended following her rebuke allowing her footsteps to echo off the walls.

Brandon sighed heavily, standing as well. When Ned glanced up, he saw a strange mix of emotions
on his brother’s face, an unusual occurrence given Brandon’s usual mien - amusement remained, but
now there was something of resignation and regret.

“Our sister is a paragon of virtue,” he announced, his voice suddenly sullen. “I should follow her, I
promised I would assist her with the figures for the next timber shipment.”

Ned couldn’t keep the shock off of his face, but Brandon didn’t notice as he walked after Lyanna.

“What did I say?” questioned Robert once the footsteps of Ned’s siblings faded from the hallway.

Ned sighed, “I don’t know, Rob, she’s not normally like this. But Lya has never been fond of the
idea of marriage, and Father has sheltered her from the possibility for many years.”

“I do not understand your sister, Ned. Aren’t all maidens excited to be married to a great lord?”

“Lya isn’t the typical maiden. Just tread carefully, she’s already upset. Maybe it’s best you agree to
the courting period?”

“Isn’t that what this trip is? I’m here to court her, but it’s been weeks and she still won’t even see
me!”

“Just give her some time. Lya is quick to anger but quick to forgive, as is Bran. They’ll come
around, I know they will.”

“Alright, Ned, I guess I need to trust you. You’ve never led me astray before. Perhaps I need to try
another approach, woo her like all other ladies.” His friend chuckled as he took another gulp of ale.
Ned had the sinking feeling wooing Lyanna like any other lady was exactly the wrong idea.

“In any case,” Robert continued, “none of the other suitors can likely match my offer. Do you know
who the other man is?”

“Father has not told me, no. But I imagine one possibility is Roose Bolton.”
“Bolton? Does he even have a chance against my suit? How could he be better than me?”

“I’m not sure, Rob, but Roose and Lyanna have met a few times - Ben says they were quite friendly. And Lord Bolton has made it clear that the match is of interest to him more than once. It would be a strong Northern match.”

“But surely I can offer more than him? I will tell your father that I will do whatever it takes to have her.”

Ned flinched, another set of Brandon’s words echoing in his head.

“He just wants to own her, Ned. He’s willing to pay whatever price to have her. How long until he tosses her aside like a used toy? Believe me, I should know better than most…”

“It is complicated, Rob. I do not know my father's thinking on the matter, but I know he is seriously considering your proposal.”

“As well he should! I expected to have the matter wrapped up by the time we leave next week. Your maester says the contract shan’t be too hard to draft.”

Ned paused, staring at Robert, “You’ve spoken to Maester Walys about it?”

“Aye, he approached me the other day. Said he had some language to discuss, just drafted words. You know me, I’m not one for contracts and legal language. It all sounded fine to me.”

Ned frowned, not pleased with the sound of that, “Does my father know you’ve spoken with the maester?”

“How would I know this? He’s your father’s maester. Wouldn’t he carry the blessing of your father?”

“From what Ben said, Lya has been helping to draft most of father’s contracts. Apparently she wrote the initial terms of Brandon and Lady Tully’s contract.”
“Lya? Why would she draft contracts? And drafting her own marriage contract would be ridiculous! It doesn’t matter - you have to get me some time with her, Ned. I’ll do whatever she wishes. Didn’t you say she was fond of the flowers in the glass gardens?”

“Aye, she loves the winter roses that Mother used to tend to.”

“Perhaps a walk in the glass gardens then? I certainly dare not ride with her if she has those bloody beasts at her side the whole time.”

It was true that familiarity with Tor and Nymeria was required given Lyanna rode with just the two wolves for companions. Ned considered himself fortunate the animals had warmed up to him as he’d worked to spend more time with Lyanna, riding with her on some of the mornings before Robert woke. It was one of the few times Ned could spend time alone with his sister. It wasn’t much, but Lyanna managed to be so busy around the Keep that it was near impossible to find time with her otherwise. As for Robert, even after a few weeks at Winterfell, the direwolves continued to display their distaste for him quite openly whenever he was near, snarling or snapping at him.

“I’ll speak with her about arranging some time for a walk in the gardens - hopefully she has a break in her duties over the next few days.”

Robert nodded before standing from his seat to head to his chambers. Ned made his way towards Lyanna’s solar, hoping to catch his sister before she retired for the night.

Lyanna sat behind a heavy but plain desk, similar to Father’s, surrounded by ledgers, her brow furrowed in concentration as she tapped her quill erratically on the edge of the desk.

The room was chillier than most of the others, the fire roaring in the corner offset by the open window, allowing the winter wind to rush through the room, the candles flickering in their sconces. The room had a hint of disorganization, no doubt from frequent use, books and scrolls strewn on the few available surfaces in the small space.

His sister didn’t seem to notice him enter, so he approached slowly, hoping to not spook her. He glanced at what she was staring at so keenly, noticing a letter with elaborate, sloping lettering.

“Oh, Ned, I didn’t hear you come in.”
Lyanna smiled at him while she re-rolled the letter, placing it to the side, but Ned was able to see the seal briefly before the paper was tucked away.

*Why is Lya reading something from House Targaryen?*

His sister’s words cut through his thoughts, turning him back to the reason for his visit, “I hope you know I find your saving yourself for the right woman admirable, Ned. I’m proud of you. It is incredibly honorable, and I know Father is pleased with your conduct.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Lyanna, but there was no need for the scene.”

Lyanna frowned, “What do you mean? Brandon has heard my thoughts on the matter before, and I dare say Lord Baratheon couldn't care less in this regard.”

Ned shook his head at her nonchalance, “I do not understand you sometimes.”

“I do not know of what you speak, brother.”

“Your treatment of Robert.”

Lyanna leaned back in her seat, her arms resting on the sides of her chair, “What is wrong with my treatment of Lord Baratheon?”

“You are being cruel to him, Lyanna. The man just wishes to get to know you, the least you could do is be courteous.”

“I am being courteous, Ned. Being courteous does not extend to passing my free time with the man.”

“Please, he is my best friend, and you share many interests - I’m certain you will get along once you give him a chance.”
“How can you say that we share interests? I am quite certain I do not share his passion for alcohol or loose women, and he has hitherto shown little sign of a commitment to his own duty. You yourself did not deny he already has a bastard daughter at the Vale.”

“He is no different from our own brother!”

“Aye, and I was no more pleased about Brandon’s little indiscretion, but he is my brother. He has finally bent to the will of Father, Benjen and I and is taking on responsibility - albeit very minor things.”

Ned furrowed his brow, “But he continues to drink and it’s only a matter of time before he returns to his whoring.”

Lyanna scoffed, “Believing him capable of stopping that completely would be ludicrous. I like to think I have more sense than that.”

“What is so wrong with Robert then?”

Lyanna sighed, her eyes flashing with a touch of sadness, “It is that he would own me. He views me as a possession, Ned, not a person. And I am very much a person. You may blame Father if you wish, but I have been respected for my intelligence and strength these past years, and I shan’t marry a man who wishes nothing more than to cage me.”

“Robert will bend to your will. He loves you, he will change for you.”

“Love is sweet, Ned, but it cannot change a man’s nature. Robert is in love with an image of Lyanna Stark that does not exist. He speaks of gowns and jewels he will gift me - of how our daughters will be beautiful little ladies while he teaches our sons to be knights. Even you, after five years away, know I would rather a knife than a necklace, breeches over gowns. And hell, if my child is learning to shoot an arrow, I’ll be the one to teach him.”

“Robert will accept that, Lya. Hell, Robert loves hunting and weapons as much as Brandon and you. He’s seen you with a bow, it is not an unacceptable sight to him. He just wants to know you - you haven’t even given him a chance to know the real you.”

Lyanna frowned but Ned thought he might be making progress given she wasn’t demanding he
leave her presence, so he continued, his voice soft and pleading, “Just give him a chance, for me - he’ll take anything you will grant him. He suggested a walk in the glass gardens perhaps, just a few moments.”

His sister sighed, grimacing but he knew he had broken through, “Very well, but know this—I am doing this for you, Ned, not for Robert.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up, garden walks and raven scrolls!

As always, thank you for the thoughtful comments and questions!! I think I've managed to keep up with most of the comments, but if I've missed one that has burning questions, comment on your comment and I shall try to get to it!

As a note, I'm getting crushed with work at the moment (and was at a conference the last three days), so the next chapter mayyyyy be a little late.
Lyanna

With Nymeria by her side, Lyanna walked slowly away from the din of Winterfell’s business towards the northern part of the castle. She passed the entrance to the Godswood, the leafy tunnel calling to her, and the arch that would lead to the Crypts of Winterfell, where her ancestors lay, even back to the time when the Starks had been Kings of Winter.

When she rounded the corner, the North Gate loomed high in front of her. Her mind briefly fled to the last time she had ridden through the gate, returning from her trek to Queensgate.

Would that I were riding there now.

Instead, she greeted the guards stationed at the Gate briefly, commanded Nymeria to remain in the corridor, and turned left to walk beneath the grey arch and through the simple gate separating her destination from the rest of the Keep.

Like the North Gate structure near which it stood, the Glass Garden was a large building - the structure itself was roughly the same footprint as the Great Hall, but instead of walls of stone, the Glass Garden featured arcing ceilings of glass. It had been part of the layout of Winterfell for as long as one could determine, and while it was unlikely Brandon the Builder himself had built the structure, it had certainly stood the test of time - when the Free Cities were first growing, the then
King of Winter had commissioned a large shipment of the new glass being refined in Lys and Myr to replace the existing panes. This dated the garden as at least older than the Free Cities themselves.

It was a beautiful building to behold, the curved frame of the structure and the manner in which the light reflected off of the glass even in the depths of winter. Hot spring water was piped through several of the walls and even some of the frames connecting the panes of glass. The gardener had once explained to her the ventilation system and the manner in which he maintained the temperature to allow the plants and crops which grew within to thrive. Lyanna herself thought him capable of magic to be able to manage such a feat - it had taken her months at his side to simply learn how to tend the winter roses. She could not imagine the immensity of his task.

Lord Robert Baratheon waited for her patiently by the entrance to the structure, poised and stoic. A smile that she supposed was charming broke onto his face as he saw her approach, and he bowed respectfully when she reached him.

“Lady Lyanna, I’m very pleased you agreed to this outing with me.”

“Of course, Lord Baratheon. You are my brother’s dearest friend - I can hardly deny my older brother a boon when he should ask so kindly.”

“’Tis our Eddard’s way, it would seem - he is ever the perpetual gentleman. Speaking of,” he offered her his arm, “may I escort you within, my Lady? I dare not linger overlong in the cold.”

“Indeed, let us proceed,” she lightly placed her gloved hand on his arm. Even wrapped in thick furs, she could practically feel the muscles of the man. He certainly dwarfed her when they were arranged in such a manner, she tucked into his side while he loomed large above her.

Robert pushed the heavy outer door leading to the main entrance of the garden, holding it open for her as a warm breeze fluttered through her cloak. Her mother had worked with the gardener to add this stone entryway, no more than a small corridor, to allow those entering to hang their cloaks in winter. The design also limited temperature changes from the comings and goings of those making use of the garden.

As Lyanna went to remove her cloak, she felt a light touch on both of her shoulders. Flinching, she turned her head to see a smiling Robert, his hands just barely hovering above her cloak.

“What are you doing?”
Despite her neutral tone, Robert’s smile only got brighter.

“Why, assisting you with your cloak, my Lady.”

“Did I ask for your assistance?” she asked, her voice calm.

“A Lady should not have to ask - a gentleman should know without such prompting.”

She pursed her lips and turned back to the wall, thinking of how smoothly the line had flowed from his lips. How many times had he spoken such words to unsuspecting maidens?

Nonetheless, she loosened the pin holding her cloak and allowed Robert to relieve her of the weight. She straightened her simple dress before clasping her hands in front of her, watching the large man in front of her.

The small space allowed for quite an close inspection of the man who was asking for her hand in marriage. He was tall and muscular, with wide shoulders to accommodate his size. His black hair had a touch of curl to it, the cut closer to his head than Ned’s. She recalled how Brandon had once chopped his curls to such a length - she had thought the look complimentary on him. She wasn’t so sure her thoughts on the style now, with Robert’s bright blue eyes flashing back at her.

Lyanna thought briefly of how being alone with the man in such a context might be considered improper in the South, but before she could say anything, Robert had hung both of their cloaks and was once more offering his arm to her.

The entrance to the garden was a glass door with iron framing, matching much of the rest of the structure’s outline. The iron frame was warm to the touch due to the hot spring water coursing through the interior. No one knew how such ingenuity had been adopted in reality - like the heated water running through the walls of Winterfell’s principal structures, it was an engineering feat little understood but greatly appreciated. And like the warm walls of the Keep, the heated glass gardens had protected the Starks for centuries, providing food when the ground without remained frozen for months.

She noticed Robert’s appraising gaze take in the immensity of the structure as they entered the garden fully. The building was impressive - nearly the size of the Great Hall, the Glass Garden was exactly what its name would suggest, but on a scale far exceeding most expectations. High arching
ceilings of curved glass admitted broad beams of grey light from outside, the warm iron framing preventing snow accumulation and thus optimizing light exposure. The light illuminated the raised crop beds blanketing the majority of the space, plants in various stages of growth in orderly rows spanning the length of the building. On occasion, she thought the name “garden” too mild for what was certainly more like a small farm.

Lyanna had spent many days in her early youth running down the aisles of plants with her mother, sometimes convincing Lyarra to allow her to remove her shoes and run barefoot through an empty soil bed before it was seeded. After her mother’s death, Lyanna had become not only the Lady of Winterfell, but also the patroness of the garden. She’d spent hours learning the various crops grown, their yield and uses, and the time required to grow them. It had been a task her mother had enjoyed, aiding her father in his management of Winterfell’s stores. But the part of the garden that Lyanna loved best was held in the center planter towards the back of the building, placed to benefit from the most light during the day - the winter roses, their blue petals as beautiful as the thorns were dangerous.

Lyanna turned to the man at her right, smirking to herself when she noticed his slightly amazed look as he took in the full extent of the garden. She guided him lightly to one of the stone walkways that led towards the rear of the building, allowing individuals to walk along the rows of crops. She would take the man to see the winter roses, their remarkable color blooming among the muted greens and browns of the crops - surely, such a venture would suffice for today.

“Your brother did not speak much of the Glass Garden. I did not know such structures existed.”

She smiled tightly, her voice calm without the pleasant intonations he was evoking, “There is much that Southrons do not know about the North. Most do not care to learn.”

“I am eager to learn anything that you might teach me, my Lady - and surely Northerners could partake in the life of those down South?”

Lyanna shrugged, maintaining her air of nonchalance.

“What is for us in the South?”

The Storm Lord smiled brightly, his eyes growing animated, “A great many things - warm waters, sunny fields, luxurious feasts, and entertainment a plenty. ‘Tis a land of enjoyment and warmth.”
“I daresay most Northerners would not deem such things necessary.”

Robert looked taken aback briefly before his smile returned, “Are not Northerners men like all men? In need of amusement?”

“Aye, though I believe our definition of enjoyment differs greatly from thine own.”

Robert frowned slightly, his eagerness fading slightly as they passed the first row of crops, the high stalks of wheat giving way to the shorter root vegetables. Lyanna allowed silence to fall between them, by no means eager to continue the conversation herself. If he wished to court her, she would accept it - but that did not mean she need try overmuch.

It did not take long for Robert to re-engage, though his approach surprised her.

“So Ned tells me you usually enjoy the hunt?”

“Indeed, my Lord. As I’m certain you have experienced, the Wolfswood presents quite the adequate location for such activities.”

“I have - it is a different type of experience from in the South. We hunt a great deal around Storm’s End, where the boars run free, but there is not much to be found in the Eyrie. ‘Tis a shame you have not been able to join us on our ventures into the Wolfswood while we have been at Winterfell.”

“Alas, I have my duties here. I daresay my Lord Father would not be pleased should I choose to traipse in the Wolfswood while my duties remain unfinished.”

“Lord Stark trusts you a great deal with such duties. It is an impressive feat for a Lady of so few namedays.”

“My Lord Father has educated me himself on the running of Winterfell. Namedays passed has little to do with capability.”

“Aye, any Lord would be lucky to have such a capable Lady at his side.”
“I do believe my Lord Father is quite content.”

“How could he not be? He is certainly the envy of many Lords throughout the Seven Kingdoms!”

“My Lord, you do flatter. If my Lord Father is the envy of others, ‘tis for his own deeds, not mine.”

“I believe you are mistaken. My own father once told me a parent measures his success by the success of his children.”

“Then I am unsure whether my Lord Father should be the envy of the Seven Kingdoms, for certainly he has the most wild children of the bunch.”

Robert chuckled, “I daresay Ned does not share in such wildness, though it would seem his siblings more than make up for what he lacks.”

“My Lord Father has said on more than one occasion how he feels lucky that Ned did not inherit the wolf’s blood.”

“Aye, yes, the “wolf’s blood”, that’s what Ned called it. He said you have a touch, while Brandon has more than a touch.”

“I do believe that is a matter of interpretation, my Lord.”

“I shall take your word for it, my Lady. If I may, Lord Brandon mention that we would have enjoyed the hunt a great deal less with you in attendance - is that due to the “wolf’s blood” as well?”

“Nay, that is simply because there would be fewer opportunities for you to hunt.”

Robert chuckled, “Is that so? I certainly would be distracted by your beauty far more than that of the Stark guards.”
Lyanna shrugged, allowing the compliment to pass her without a thought, “‘Tis not my beauty that would take away your hunting opportunities.”

“Then what would?”

Lyanna looked at him briefly before facing forward. Her voice remained neutral as she responded.

“My arrows.”

Robert faltered slightly before he laughed, the sound echoing around the massive glass structure. It took a few moments for Robert’s mirth to fade, but she could sense his smiling eyes on her. The pause gave her a moment to take a deep breath and check on their location.

“I had forgotten that moment in the yard - so it was not just an amusement of you and your brothers?”


“My apologies, Lady Lyanna, I did not mean to imply weapons were playthings. It is merely unusual to see a woman wielding a bow.”

“Is it an unacceptable sight to you, my Lord?”

“On the contrary, I believe I quite enjoyed the image. I should very much like to see it again.”

Lyanna nodded, not knowing what else to answer to such a statement. She had not expected him to be pleased by the concept of her arming herself - Jay had certainly liked the fact, but everyone had always told her Southern men expected their women docile. Jay had seemed the exception.

Shaking her head, she silently thanked the gods for the appearance of Garen near the bench in front of the bed holding the pride of the glass garden, the winter roses.
“Garen, ‘tis good to see you.”

“It is a pleasure, Lady Lyanna, as always. Lord Baratheon, we are pleased to welcome you to the Glass Garden. I am Garen, Winterfell’s gardener.”

Robert offered his hand in greeting, shaking the older man’s weathered one with a smile on his face.

“Well met, Garen. I am grateful for the opportunity to see this magnificent sight - many down south have long speculated as to how the Starks have survived winters over the centuries, and it appears I have found the answer to the mystery.”

Lyanna grimaced but schooled her face - it made no matter, for the Storm Lord still gazed at the old man in front of him.

“Indeed, my Lord. I am blessed to have been charged with maintaining this wonderful structure for the last twenty years. To be part of a legacy such as the Starks have built at Winterfell is truly a boon from the old gods.”

“How fare the plants today, Garen?” Lyanna interjected, hoping to stymie any further ridiculous comments from Robert.

“Very well, my Lady. We have been blessed this winter with fruitful yields. And of course, the roses ever blossom under your care.”

“So these are the roses you are so fond of, Lady Lyanna?” asked Robert, walking closer to the rose bushes in front of them, his hand reaching to stroke the vivid blue petals.

“My Lord,” Garen flinched as the large man was about to touch the flowers, “perhaps I may cut one for you to examine at your leisure?”

Robert paused, his hand mere inches from the flowers before pulling back.

“Won’t that kill them?”
“One bloom will hardly harm the rest of the bush.”

And you touching all of them will certainly do more harm.

Lyanna did not voice her thoughts, as the Storm Lord shrugged at the old man, returning promptly to her side with a smile on his face. Garen carefully cut the rose Robert been had about to touch, gingerly handling the stem to avoid the thorns. The flower was then held up for Robert’s examination.

“They are truly beautiful, my Lady. Near as beautiful as the mistress who cares for them.”

He went to grasp the cut flower from Garen’s hand, but hissed as his skin caught upon the thorns.

Garen chuckled, his husky Northern accent filtering through his words heavily once more, “They are almost as dangerous as their mistress as well, my Lord. One should be cautious to not become caught by their deceptive beauty.”

“I suppose I shall have to heed such caution.”

“It is easy to be blinded by a pretty exterior, my Lord,” added Lyanna, reaching out to take the flower from Garen, used to handling the roses and their dangerous thorns. Her words held a tinge of warning the Storm Lord did not seem to notice, for he chuckled.

“Such beauty can make a tad of pain worthwhile.”

“We should return without my Lord,” Lyanna noted, “I shall likely be required in the Keep shortly.”

They turned to walk down the other side of the building, Garen bidding them a good day. It didn’t take long for Robert to attempt conversation once more.

“So do you train with your brothers as well?”
“Brandon does not enjoy the bow, but he is skilled with knives. Benjen, however, will spend hours with me shooting at targets.”

“Ned and I used to spend many hours in the training yard trying every weapon in the armory when we were younger, attempting to determine the best one for our size. As we grew, it became easier to determine based on our fighting styles. That is how I ended up with the warhammer.”

“Warhammers are grossly unwieldy and cumbersome.”

“Ah, of course for a quick and nimble Lady like yourself, no doubt. But I am big and burly - slight maneuvers have never been my forte. ‘Tis better to rely on strength and efficiency.”

“I suppose we must all cater to our strengths and mitigate our weaknesses”

“Exactly so, my Lady. Though I daresay having those wolves at your side is quite the advantage. It shall certainly deter a man from harming you.”

“Aye, they will gladly warn off anything deemed a threat to my person.”

He smiled at her, “I do hope they don’t view me as such - I have only the fondest of intentions towards their mistress!

Lyanna did not return the smile. With a slightly cool tone, she added, “Nym and Tor are my closest companions. ‘Tis only a shame they may not follow me wherever I go any longer.”

“While I am not displeased by such a fact, as they do not seem fond of strangers, is there a reason for such restrictions?”

“Size, my Lord. We do not allow our horses within the castle corridors. The direwolves are near the size of a small pony. ‘Tis only on rare occasions when we allow them to roam the halls. It is better, though, for they prefer the outdoors. When they were pups, they would sleep in my chambers, but now they prefer to hunt at night.”

“I can only imagine they make ferocious hunting companions.”
“They are certainly more effective than the dogs, though my brother claims it defeats the sporting purpose of the outing.”

“And you disagree?”

“Just as I do not find weapons as amusement, I do not view hunting as sport. What one man views as pleasure, I view as something only to be done out of need. What enjoyment can be sourced from the killing of innocent animals for no purpose?”

To her relief, they had reached the entrance once more. Lyanna unlaced her hand from Robert’s arm, pushing her way into the entry corridor. Even more to her relief, Sella stood within the corridor to request her presence, as Lyanna had instructed.

“Lady Lyanna,” Sella curtsied, though the motion was purely due to Robert’s presence, and for his benefit, “I must apologize for interrupting, but your presence is required.”

Lyanna turned to Robert, noting the displeased look on his face, “Lord Baratheon, I hope this has proven to be an informative visit-”

It quickly became clear that, informative or not, Lord Baratheon was not about to have his visit with Lyanna cut short by a servant’s request; his voice was suddenly harsh as he addressed Sella.

“Certainly Lady Lyanna is allowed some time with her potential betrothed? There must be others available to address the concerns of the household.”

Anger surged in Lyanna, the wolf’s blood rising as Robert spoke down to the woman Lyanna had viewed as a mother-figure.

“My Lord,” she could practically feel the ice lacing her tongue as the words issued from her mouth, “my duty to Winterfell comes before any personal boon you may deem owed to you. No agreement has been made between our Houses and until such a time, you will be granted no more than any other guest of House Stark. Now, if you will excuse me.”

Before he could reply, Lyanna dipped into a shallow curtsy and grabbed her cloak from the hook.
She pulled the material across her shoulders as Sella pushed the door open, the two women leaving a fuming Robert Baratheon in the narrow corridor.

Sella knew Lyanna well enough to not linger upon the encounter, so the older woman smoothly launched into a brief overview of the agenda for the day. Lyanna gave her a grateful look before attempting to clear the interaction from her mind, breathing the cool winter air in through her nose in order to slow the pounding beat of the wolf’s blood in her veins.

In view of the Keep, Brandon took Sella’s place at her side, his furrowed brow silently questioning her on where she had just come from. Lyanna merely shrugged, thoughts of duty already dulling the edge of anger she had felt in the entrance of the Glass Garden.

“He asked me about my interest in hunting and weapons. ‘Twas fine until he spoke down to Sella and overstepped his bounds.”

Brandon chuckled, though there was a hint of displeasure mixed with his mirth.

“Dear sister, be cautious - you may make the man fall more in love with you than ever if you cater to his interests.”

She smacked his arm and rolled her eyes, but in her head she could not help but worry that his words held an ounce of truth. It would be just like Robert to decide he liked her all the more for her eccentricities. He likely thought they were endearing from a distance. A new and different challenge to conquer.

Robert Baratheon had the bearing of an easily disillusioned conqueror, a man who would fight for something only to find out it did not fulfill him as he had thought it would. How long would it take for him to realize she was not the woman he thought she was? How many fights would it require for him to finally understand what “the wolf’s blood” really meant?

Brandon split off to return to the training yard and, as Lyanna walked back to her solar, she longed for the days before her sixteenth nameday - how had so much changed in a year? All she wished for was peace, the opportunity to serve her people and be in the land she loved. Was that truly too much to ask?

Her answer was blatantly clear upon entering her solar, the door closed behind her.
That damned letter from the Crown Prince was still laying where she’d left it, nestled among the ledger she had been working on earlier.

She had read the words near a hundred times in the weeks since the Crown Prince’s proposal arrived in the hands of his two former squires, yet she had gleaned no more certainty from the words since then. In fact, the more she read, the more questions seemed to arise within her mind, with one chief among them.

*Why me?*

Lyanna had never grown up with images of the grandeur of Court dancing in her head - in fact, her parents had been only once or twice in their lifetimes, and her mother had had little interest in encouraging the flightiness she had witnessed there in her only daughter.

Gods, she had never wished to be a princess. In fact, she had never really yearned to go to Court - she had no love for face painting or elaborate dresses with wicked corsets. Any interest she had in King’s Landing had been borne out of a curiosity, of a love for adventure. She wished to run through the winding streets, see the tilting buildings and the markets full of goods from far-off lands. The only things that ever really drew her to the Red Keep were the infrastructure of the building, the white knights of the Kingsguard, and the dragon skulls which were said to line the Throne Room.

Yet here she was, gazing down at this damned letter, finally realizing what it was she had agreed to when accepting the Crown Prince’s proposal of an informal courting period.

Robert Baratheon was certainly not the ideal suitor - but had she been blinded by his proximity in not considering the alternative? The Crown Prince might be lauded across the Kingdoms as a kind, intelligent man, but he was a Targaryen nonetheless. The same blood flowed through his veins as through the veins of his father, and even those in the North had heard the stories of what King Aerys had become, in spite of the promise his early reign had held.

And even if the man himself proved to be sane, becoming Rhaegar Targaryen’s wife would surely keep her in King’s Landing, trapped at the side of a mad King whose fondness for wildfire was prompting many to question his capability to rule.

Lyanna collapsed into her chair, picking up the letter once more, allowing her eyes to trace over the beautiful curving letters yet again.
At least his handwriting is pretty.

Sighing, she tucked away the worries of what a future with the Royal Family might entail in favor of pulling a fresh piece of parchment out. There were no guarantees that the Prince would choose her after all. At least she could develop a relationship with the man for the good of House Stark - one never knew when such relationships could come in handy.

But her mind remained blank of substance to share and Lyanna found herself sitting at her desk, quill poised above the paper, the ink dripping slowly onto the blank page.

She barely noticed. Her vision blurred as she stared across the room at the flames licking the fresh pieces of wood a servant had placed on the dying fire. For a moment, Lyanna was no longer in her solar in Winterfell, but further north, in a different room watching a different fire crackle and pop to life. Instead of a quill and paper pressed beneath her hand, her fingers were interlaced in his, smooth skin peppered with calluses, the rough patches sending tingles through her as they made small circles.

She shivered, imagining his indigo eyes gazing into her soul. If only Jay had….

No, you told yourself to stop. Those thoughts will lead nowhere. The Crown Prince is your priority now.

Sighing, Lyanna finally put quill to parchment, tucking away impossible thoughts of a mystery man in favor of formal words for a stranger many leagues away.

Raven from Winterfell
Prince Rhaegar,

I pray this letter finds you well.

Thank you for your generous words in the correspondance delivered by Sers Mooten and Lonmouth. Lord Stark and I greatly appreciate your proposed arrangement, as House Stark is not accustomed to affairs wherein uninvolved parties participate.

I admit to ignorance in the ways of Southern courting customs, and therefore am uncertain as to what information you may wish to obtain from me. On the other hand, if appropriate, I would greatly enjoy your thoughts on King’s Landing and the Southern kingdoms - I have never ventured past the Neck, and I find myself curious for news of the rest of Westeros.

I shall apologize in advance for the brevity of this or any future letters. I have never been one for lengthy or extraneous correspondence.

Sincerely,

Lady Lyanna Stark

Cersei

Cersei slowed her step as she entered the hallway leading to the library, careful of any watching eyes. Of course, unlike most, Cersei was hoping to attract their attention.
For three weeks, she had walked this path every day, ensuring it became a regular sight to be seen. Cersei has never cared much for the written word, that had long been her horrible little brother’s realm. But being a Court lady wasn’t about being who you were - it was being who people wanted you to be. At least to their faces.

And Cersei had a very special pair of eyes for which she wished to shine.

It was oft joked that Queen Rhaella must have swallowed several books when pregnant with her first born, for Prince Rhaegar had shown such quick progress in reading when he was young. It was rumored he had devoured almost the entirety of the Red Keep’s library, to the point where he had begun to travel to other Keeps in search of knowledge.

Cersei did not know what he read or for what he searched. What she did know was that Rhaegar appreciated knowledge and intellectual curiosity. ‘Twas the only way he could have ever entertained the Dornish Princess’ hand in marriage. And Father had told her many times when she dismissed the Queen as nothing but a pretty ornament on her mad husband’s arm that Rhaegar himself viewed Rhaella as one of his closest confidants. He went to his mother and heeded her advice. This was one of the things that made Cersei want him, something so many other maidens overlooked when fawning over the beautiful prince.

Aye, he was handsome, but he carried power. And he wished to share that power with those closest to him.

Cersei had to ensure he thought her capable of knowledge worth sharing. And while she did not think books to be the most informative method, they seemed his favorite, thus they would become Cersei’s.

As she slowly pushed the large door to enter the library, she fought to hide her smirk.

The space was pin drop quiet, only the sound of a sole quill scratching on parchment wielded by the acolyte to the Maester of the Library.

Few frequented the library, particularly at such an early hour. But in the last few days, she had learned that one man made sure to spend an hour with a book after training and before the Small Council meeting.
“Lady Cersei,” murmured the acolyte, bowing his head in greeting, “good morning. I did not expect you at such an early hour.”

She smiled sweetly, knowing that this man would be far easier to handle with courtesy.

“I found I was in need of a schedule change, Acolyte Maryn. I figured no other souls would venture here so early in the morning.”

The boy nodded solemnly, his face calm as always.

“I’m afraid you are not to be alone, but I’m certain his Grace will not mind your presence as long as you remain in your usual section.”

“His Grace is here? I would not have thought he would be up so early after such a long journey.”

“Alas, his Grace has always been a dedicated scholar. ‘Tis an honor to serve such a man with such love and care for learning.”

Cersei fought to not roll her eyes at the pitiful hero worship. She ought to forgive the boy - who could not adore the Crown Prince?

“Tis certainly virtuous for the Crown Prince to make such efforts in knowledge while still carrying the burdens of the kingdom. Pray what section does he frequent, so I may be certain to not disturb his studying overmuch.”

“I believe he is on the other side from the section you frequent, in the south east chamber, where the Valyrian mythology may be found.”

“Very well, thank you Acolyte Meryn. As always, you have my sincerest gratitude.”

Cersei made her way in the direction of her usual reading space, making it almost all of the way down the main chamber’s length before checking to see if Meryn could still see her.
He could not.

Quickly, she took the next opportunity to shift from her usual path to that which would lead her to her Dragon Prince, gliding across the stone floor silently thanks to her silk slippers. To be alone with him in such a quiet space...

Just before she would enter the final row of books leading into the sitting area for the back room, Cersei paused, momentarily protected from sight by the looming shelves of scrolls under lock and key. It took only a moment to loosen the top two buttons of her overdress, revealing a slightly deeper view of her developing cleavage. Acolyte Meryn, she’d found, had difficulty speaking straight with too much distraction in his face, but Cersei was confident that Rhaegar Targaryen could appreciate physical beauty. The man was rumored to have preferred buxom girls on the few occasions he had ventured into town to understand the joining of man and woman. Why not play to the man’s tastes?

Cersei had been blessed with a figure - it would be a waste to not flaunt one’s assets.

As she moved out into the main sitting area at the back of the room, she knew she was finally visible to the only other inhabitant, but she purposefully stared at the books lining the walls, her eyes glazed over as they traced the bindings of old books colored an ugly greyish brown.

“Lady Cersei?”

Ah, the voice she had been dreaming of felt so much better when gracing her ears alone. She quickly turned to face the man of her dreams, a beam of early morning light illuminating his silver hair, making it look as though he wore a crown of light upon his head. He was bent over a book, a quill poised over parchment at his side. He looked a tad disheveled, but Cersei could forgive that - he had no wife to take care of him.

“Oh, your Grace!” She dipped into a deep curtsy, feigning surprise, the silks flaring our across the floor. When she rose, he was still seated to her displeasure, but joy spread through her at his voice once more directed at her.

“What are you doing here, my Lady?”

“Why, for what other reason than to find myself a book to enjoy?”
“But of course,” the Prince almost chuckled, a smile brightening his face, “I must admit I did not expect you to frequent the library. Particularly not the sections dedicated to the mystical tales of ancient Valyria.”

She smiled innocently, “I daresay there is often more to people than the exterior presented to others.”

The Prince paused in thought, giving her an appraising look. Cersei straightened slightly, fighting the return of a smirk as his eyes travelled her figure.

“This is true. I apologize if my statement came across as impolite, I am simply unaccustomed to seeing others in this space unless forced.”

“Thank you for the apology your Grace, though it is unwarranted. I have done my best to hide this interest of mine in books, for ‘tis not typically valued in a Lady.”

The Crown Prince frowned, though his gaze turned to stare at the books around them as he responded, “I am saddened to hear that, Lady Cersei, for I myself find it a great virtue for a Lady to engage her mind. The knowledge contained within these walls carries the wisdom of all those who came before us - who better to counsel us in our actions?”

“Your Grace has the right of it. I am gladdened that my standing in your eyes has not been lessened by my interest in the written word.”

Finally, his stare returned to her, his face neutral, “Not at all. On the contrary, such a fact only increases my esteem in those who pursue such interests.”

Cersei smiled sweetly, “Then I am satisfied.”

The Prince smiled at her, before gesturing to the shelves of books, “Pray, my Lady, continue on your search. I shall not disturb you any longer.”

In the next moment, he turned back to the large tome settled in front of him, his hand picking up the quill he had discarded. Cersei dipped into a curtsy, but he seemed to have quickly returned his interest upon the lines of text.
Cersei cursed in her mind, knowing she must find some books to pass the time before he departed. She would have to feign interest, but already this conversation had proven fruitful. ‘Twas a small burden to continue on.

She wandered along the bookcases, swinging her hips a bit more than necessary. Jaime had on more than one occasion cursed her for the attractive swing of her hips, the silk of her dress gliding across the floor. Surely Rhaegar was not immune to the motion that drew the eyes of so many men?

Cersei finally settled for a small book of Valyrian poetry, one of the only books with a Common Tongue title in the room. Cersei found old poetry dull and meaningless, the verses steeped in history that she neither knew nor cared for, but it was easy enough to feign interest in the lines of Common words strung together in odd patterns.

She sat at the edge of the Princes’ vision, an attempt at subtly attracting his attention without sitting at the same table - there were far too many open chairs within the room to warrant such action. In any case, didn’t men love the chase?

She knew the Prince had a Small Council meeting in about an hours time - somehow she’d have to stare at the lines of poetry until another opportunity to speak arose. She had committed to this farce of a plan and she would see it through, even as the tiny letters swam beneath her eyes.

Seven hells, how can people enjoy this shit.

After what felt like an eternity and when Cersei thought her eyes might fall out of her head, a savior arrived on the form of a white knight. Shame it had to be the one Kingsguard who seemed entirely opposed to her presence.

Ser Arthur was awfully handsome, almost on par with the Silver Prince himself - the men could practically be brothers. Jaime hero worshipped Arthur Dayne and spoke glowingly about the man’s humor and smile. Cersei didn’t see a single humorous thing about him though, for it seemed to her that he had only emotionless skepticism for her. It was an odd feeling for a girl used to men falling over themselves for her, but he had never been keen on her company when she visited Court when she was younger. If the few days since Arthur returned with the Prince were any indication, his feelings had not changed.

He nodded at her from across the room while crossing to where Rhaegar remained glued to the book. To her disappointment, the man had barely looked up since their initial conversation. But it seemed that she was not the only person thus ignored, as the Prince failed to notice his friend’s approach.
“Your Grace,” Ser Arthur announced when just next to him. Rhaegar’s head shot up, his eyes wild for a moment before they noticed it was Arthur at his side.

“Ah Dayne, I did not notice you come in,” he said, his voice light as he smiled lazily before his eyes roamed the room. He seemed to stiffen when he noticed her watching, as if realizing he was not alone with Ser Arthur. “My Lady, I did not know you were still here.”

“Aye, your Grace, I could not seem to drag my eyes away.”

That it had been his image instead of the page of text before her was not necessary information to share.

Rhaegar nodded before turning back to Arthur.

“What is the time, Ser Arthur?”

“Tis almost noon. The Small Council awaits your attendance.”

Dear gods, it had been an eternity! She had floundered in this bloody room for near two hours!

“Seven hells, I completely lost track of time. I assume you were sent to escort me there?”

“Indeed your Grace. Jaime Lannister also waits without, he said he has a few things to discuss with Ser Barristan and asked to walk with me.”

“Very well,” Rhaegar closed the massive book, the cover landing with a thud, “we should not linger then.”

He stood to return the book to the shelf behind his table and she took the opportunity to rise as well.

“Ser Arthur, did you say it was near noontime?”
“Aye, my Lady.”

She gasped, despite the knight’s words not coming as a surprise, “My goodness, how time has flown. I do believe I have near missed an appointment.”

“Tis an occurrence I know well, my Lady,” added the Prince. She smiled genuinely, happy to have him speaking to her again.

“How do you make for the Small Council chamber, your Grace?”

“I do, Lady Cersei.”

She was a little disappointed he did not offer to escort her out upfront, but Cersei had not lingered in this blasted room to lose this opportunity.

“Perhaps I could join you on the walk, my Prince? I am for the gardens just beyond the Small Council chambers as it were.”

She offered him another sweet smile, ignoring the way Ser Arthur’s eyes watched her. She only cared for one set of indigo eyes.

“I do not see why not, my Lady. Perhaps on the way you could tell me what you found in your studies to have you so lost in thought?”

Cersei almost flinched, thinking he had found her out, but his interest seemed genuine as he offered her his arm like a true gentleman. Damn, she would have to find something to say about the bloody poetry that she had barely skimmed.

“I would be pleased to do so, though I’m sure whatever you were so swept up in was far more interesting.”

“Normally, I would say that few find such content interesting, but given your own interest in
Valyrian myths, perhaps I need not with you.”

“As I said earlier, your Grace, not everything is what it seems at first.”

Cersei thought she felt Rhaegar flinch momentarily, but he responded nonetheless, a smile resting on his face.

“Wise words, my Lady. They remind me of words once spoken to me during a conversation I had with a fellow traveler. They also believed in the mystical and in the inherent blindness we have towards what actually lies within a person or a thing.”

He paused, looking at her briefly before returning his gaze to the path through rows of parchment.

“Well, if you are interested in the material as you say, I was reading of the scattered remains of the First Men’s writings - they wrote of many mystical happenings, tales which seem strange by our standards…”

As the Crown Prince launched into a detailed account of what he must have read over the past hours, Cersei zoned out, her mind focusing on the timbre of his voice and the way the words formed in his perfect mouth. She could listen to him for hours, no matter if he spoke words which bored her near to death. Who cared for the substance when one could have a man such as this?

Finally, they made their way without the library where her brother stood shifting his weight from side to side, flexing his sword hand. Jaime turned and bowed respectfully to the Prince and Arthur, his eyes shining with a hint of reverence, before raising his eyebrow at her.

“Your Grace, it seems you have found my sister’s newest hiding place.”

Rhaegar maintained his smile, her hand still firmly ensconced in his arm. “I can appreciate such a thing as it is a place I hide with frequency. Lady Cersei and I were just discussing the fascinating material that kept us away from the real world, lost in mystical tales.”

“Ah,” intoned Jaime, his eyes flickering to her with unspoken questions, “I am certain it was a most enlightening conversation.”
“Indeed, though I’m afraid I spoke far more than was proper. Lady Cersei, perhaps you could indulge me in sharing what Valyrian poetry had you so enthralled?”

“Aye, darling sister,” voiced Jaime, his tone mocking and a smirk plastered on his face, “I’d love to hear such sweet words as well. ‘Tis always a treat to hear tell of your reading.”

Cersei barely held herself back from slapping her twin across the face - Jaime knew that when growing up, Cersei would have rather been caught dead than be forced to read much of anything. But it would not serve to act so inappropriately in front of her future husband - it was not Queenly behavior after all.

Instead, she coated her voice in as much sweetness as she could, turning the conversation to some other less odious topic as she gently nudged the Prince in the direction of the Small Council, “Nonsense, your Grace, I find I much prefer your explanations to mine own - while I do love the flow of Valyrian poetry, I so often find it difficult to form a logical understanding of the poems’ meaning.”

Rhaegar nodded, quickening their steps modestly as if remembering the purpose of the walk, “I can understand your difficulty, my Lady, for it is often difficult to form a proper opinion without a firm grasp of the historical context. In addition, the translations are often not perfect, which can create difficulties in interpretation. Perhaps I can recommend some of the books I used to read in an attempt at gaining such knowledge.”

Much to Cersei’s horror, the Prince began listing the many ancient texts he had studied to understand the context and translation of Valyrian poetry. Not even the iron tones of his voice could provide her comfort, as his speech remained monotone as if he was a maester instructing her on her lacking intelligence. The only possible benefit was that he seemed so absorbed in his listing that he forgot to inquire about the poems she had merely stared at without reading.

Making matters worse, they were very nearly at their destination, indicating that Cersei had only a limited time to make another play at flirtation.

Her opportunity came by luck when Rhaegar mentioned a book which recorded the looks and physical details of every noble of Valyrian blood carried by the Targaryens upon their departure from Valyria.

“And has such a record been maintained since the Conquest?” she inquired, staring at him up through her lashes.
“Aye, my Lady, though with not so much detail. At least every noble individual of Targaryen blood has been said to be recorded.”

“That reminds me - I would be remiss if I did not inform your Grace that many of the ladies of Court were devastated by your decision to cut your hair.”

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow, a tinge of disbelief reflecting from his deep indigo eyes, “Is that so, my Lady?”

“Aye,” she sighed, smiling prettily at him, “but I find it quite becoming - it allows more appreciation of the face that once fell beneath the hair.”

The Prince nodded, his face remaining stoic, “That is very kind of you to say, Lady Cersei.”

Her smile widened, “‘Tis nothing but the truth, your Grace.”

As they turned the final corner, no Kingsguard stood at the entrance of the Small Council chambers, which made Cersei grin even wider - not only would Father be in a far better mood without the King’s nuisance in the Small Council, Ser Barristan’s absence meant Cersei could steal Jaime for some time. Certainly her twin would make some time to care for her physical needs?

This day was proving to be exceedingly pleasant, in spite of the tiresome two hours staring at Valyrian poetry in the stuffy library.

“It would appear, Lord Jaime, that my father did not choose to attend the Small Council this afternoon. I imagine you shall find Ser Barristan guarding the King’s chambers.”

“Very well, your Grace, I shall seek him there. Have a pleasant meeting.”

“Thank you. Lady Cersei, it has been a pleasure.”

She sunk into a low curtsy, murmuring her thanks as her golden curls fell like curtains around her
“The pleasure has been all mine, my Prince.”

The Prince nodded before entering the Small Council chambers. Cersei’s heart soared, treasuring his words and imagining the day when, instead of entering alone, he would escort her within to sit at his side and lend him her counsel.

Ser Arthur took his place at the door, nodding to the twins before his gaze turned in front of him.

Jaime offered her his arm, “Dear sister, allow me to escort you out to the gardens. Tis not overly out of my way.”

Cersei smiled brightly, knowing a longer detour wouldn’t bother her lover either, “Thank you Jaime.”

They walked gracefully down the hall away from the solemn Ser Arthur, meandering the halls as they used to as children at Casterly Rock. It wasn’t until they were most assuredly out of earshot that Jaime spoke.

“What was that about, Cersei?”

Cersei gazed at her brother, her brow furrowing at his insolent tone of voice, “Whatever do you mean?”

“How did it come to pass that you were in the library with the Crown Prince?”

She shrugged nonchalantly - Jaime would never understand such maneuvers. Subtle relationships were not his forte.

“‘Twas simply a coincidence that his Grace was within the library when I went to read before my afternoon appointments. Do not take on so, it is not unusual for a Lady to speak with the Prince when they happen to be in the same space.”
“It was more the space you happened to meet which I find curious. Since when have you frequented the library?”

“You have not been at Court long, Jaime, so you know not my habits. I must admit I have found great solace in the walls of the library.”

“In what form, might I ask? Certainly not within books, for I know you leave such endeavours to Tyrion.”

She grimaced at the mention of their monster younger brother, but chose to not allow such an image to ruin her day.

“Must you carry on so, Jaime? What is the problem with me frequenting the library? I do not see anything to be upset by.”

“It’s the motivation behind such visits that concerns me.”

“Jaime, you know very well that the Crown Prince and I are to be wed. ‘Tis simply good to spend time with the man whenever I can. He is terribly hard to find alone, though that does make it all the more rewarding.”

Jaime shook his head, “Do you seriously think he is interested in you?”

“Brother, did you not see the manner in which he was acting?”

“Cersei, he acts that way with all the ladies of Court. You are not unique in this. If anything, it’s the King’s eyes that you should be worried about.”

“Oh Jaime, you always were the dense twin. Of course, Rhaegar has to act normal around me. He’s the Prince, he can’t just flirt publically. And the King is likely aware of the Prince’s lingering glances - he knows what a powerful couple we would be. Now, you just focus on your sword and I’ll focus on the politics. We must find a way to keep you here in King’s Landing away from that Tully girl.”
Jaime frowned, his handsome face thoughtful, “I may be dense, but I’m still a man. I’ve seen a man who is interested in a woman above all others, and that is not Prince Rhaegar. At least not towards you.”

Cersei whipped around, staring at her brother, “And what do you mean by that? Who else could he be interested in? That slut Ashara Dayne?”

Jaime glared at her and pulled her into a nook along the wall, “Keep your voice down Cers!”

“What do you mean by that statement, brother?” she spat, bringing her voice down only a breath.

“Only that a few of the Kingsguard were talking about how the Prince has been distracted-”

“Of course he’s distracted,” Cersei scoffed, “he’s practically ruling the Seven Kingdoms with Father.”

“Will you let me finish?” She just rolled her eyes, but nodded. “Ser Oswell was joking that the Prince left his heart to freeze on their trip. I didn’t think anything of it until I saw Ser Arthur glare at him, which shut him up.”

Cersei looked at Jaime with doubt and distaste clear on her beautiful face, “The only girl even remotely worthy in the North is that Stark girl, and she’s a savage. Did you know the old Maester of Winterfell wanted you to marry her? Can you imagine?”

“Cersei, I’m pretty certain you’ve never seen Lyanna Stark in your life.”

“No, and I pray I never do. I wouldn’t be surprised if the girl lay with wolves herself. Those Northerners are practically beasts.”

Jaime sighed, “If I recall, you once thought Brandon Stark to be wildly attractive.” Cersei scowled at him at the reminder of her attraction to the Wild Wolf when she was but a girl, “All I’m saying, sweet sister, is that I would be cautious - your marriage to the Prince is by no means secure.”

And then he turned and walked away from her, no doubt to find Ser Barristan. She continued to
scowl at his retreating form, her annoyance from his words overpowering.

How could he say that? I'm to be Queen! Father will ensure it is so. The Silver King and his Golden Queen....

She realized she was all alone, with no plans for the remainder of the day - the appointment in the gardens were with those tittering gossips who called themselves her ladies. Ridiculous girls, thinking they’d gain something from her - Cersei only sought their company when she needed something. And right now, she needed to hear the iron tones of her future husband’s voice to reassure her.

Knowing both her father and her Prince would be in session with the Small Council for some time, she decided she might as well listen in on the issues of the realm. Outside of their interaction that day, she had barely seen Rhaegar since he had returned, as he had been so busy. She wouldn’t mind watching him from afar.

Discreetly making her way to the secret passage she had discovered last year, she quietly slipped down the steps to the little hideout behind the walls of the Small Council chamber.

Cersei imagined this was one of the secret passageways Varys made use of - the Master of Whispers somehow knew more about people than they even knew themselves. She had stumbled upon it by chance, though she dared not risk exploring further down the dark passageways. They were said to lead to almost anywhere in the Red Keep, with the exception of Maegor’s, though rumors spoke of dead ends and traps which could kill the unsuspecting wanderer.

Cersei had no intention of dying anytime soon.

Settled into the small nook, Cersei tried to ignore the oppressiveness of the dark and dank space, focusing instead on pressing her cheek to the cold stone and gazing through the look-hole. Indeed, the view was much superior to any other within the Keep.

Prince Rhaegar sat at the head of the table, his short silver hair lightly tousled as if he had been running his hand through it. He sat straight in his seat next to his father’s empty chair, though his posture seemed relaxed, his face neutral. Cersei watched the beautiful serenity of his face as the meeting dragged on, no motion in his muscles betraying his thoughts on the tragically boring subject matters. She did notice the weariness in the subtle lines of his forehead, but undoubtedly he was still tired from his journey to the savage North.
As if reading her mind, the smooth sound of the Master of Whisperer’s voice floated through the air.

“Your Grace, we haven’t heard anything about your trip to the North. ‘Twas no short time you were tucked away in the snow. Perhaps you’d like to share the significant news of your venture?”

Rhaegar kept a neutral mien as he nodded before starting his response, “As far as I know, there was not much that would interest the Small Council at this time beyond a few minor things. To start, Lord Rickard was not in residence much of the time we were in the region - he was visiting bannermen, as well as Lord Hoster Tully. It seems the betrothal between Brandon Stark and Catelyn Tully has been finalized, with Lord Tully providing a hefty dowry to House Stark upon their marriage, which will take place after Lady Catelyn’s eighteenth nameday.”

“I assume Brandon Stark was acting for his father?” asked her father, somewhat dismissively. Tywin Lannister didn’t think the Starks represented much of a threat, despite some of the Small Council’s concerns. They hardly left the North and had little influence in Court - in fact, they had little to add at Court, so their absence was barely felt.

To Cersei’s surprise, and it seemed most of the Council members as well, Rhaegar paused and shook his head. It almost looked like he was fighting a smile, but the moment passed and his face returned to his usual calm mask.

His words were even more surprising than the faded smile.

“No. Lord Stark left his daughter as the acting Lady of Winterfell in his stead. Even with two of his sons in residence.”

There was silence in the room for a moment, accompanied by more than a few raised or furrowed eyebrows. Only Varys seemed unaffected by the news, his lips twisted into a knowing smile. Cersei herself wasn’t sure she understood.

“Lord Stark left his daughter in charge instead of his heir or younger son?” questioned Maester Pycelle, his gravelly voice making Cersei cringe. The man was in her father’s pocket, but that didn’t mean Cersei liked him at all - the Maester was a serious lech.

“Indeed,” confirmed the Prince, “it appears Lady Lyanna has become proficient in the management of the North while her brothers were fostering.” The Prince shrugged, “Apparently Lord Stark trusts her enough to serve in his stead for more than six moons.”
Finally, Cersei processed the information.

_That wolf bitch. How did she convince her father to leave her in charge? Father would have never let me run Casterly Rock. He doesn’t even let Jaime run it alone!_

Cersei had always wished for Father to include her in his business. She was certainly much smarter than Jaime - bless his soul, her brother had a horrible head for politics. It was good he was excellent with his sword, else there wouldn’t have been much to recommend him besides his good looks and dry humor.

Indeed, Cersei had often thought it quite a shame that she hadn’t been born with a cock between her legs, for she knew she would be much better at running Casterly Rock than her dearest twin. Jaime was a lot of things, but he was much better at following the plans of others than creating them himself.

All she had ever wanted was for her father to treat her like an equal. Well, and to be queen. But they were one and the same - becoming queen would grant her the power she had craved. Targaryens had been known to view their queens as partners in ruling - the present King an exception - and Rhaegar was a good man. Everyone said so. He was kind to his mother and doting on his brother, caring for the smallfolk who loved their silver prince. Cersei knew he would see her worth; he would understand how intelligent she was.

That the wolf-girl of the North had been appointed to act in Lord Rickard’s stead for more than six moons shot spears of jealousy through Cersei’s heart. She had thought nothing about the savage girl would ever warrant such a reaction, but she could not help the emotion - Cersei was used to getting all she wanted. That the horrid girl had gotten something she had always wished for but had never been granted made the pain all the worse.

It seemed the Small Council also found this development peculiar, which was not surprising - so little was known about the Warden of the North’s daughter that even rumors could not satisfy the interested individual.

“Lord Stark would entrust his daughter with so much?”

“That is most unusual,” her father noted, his voice harsh. Cersei frowned deeper at the implication of her father’s disapproval of such an arrangement. “There is very little information on the Warden of the North’s younger children, yet that could not have been expected.”
“Yet it appears to have been well accepted by the people and other Northern lords. As you recall, we were not to make our presence known, though Ser Mooten and Ser Lonmouth spent some time in Winterfell with the Stark siblings. While the Stark siblings kept the running of the Keep to themselves, the two knights were able to gather quite a good understanding of the workings of Winterfell and said the lands are run well. The Starks are a close-knit family and highly respected by their bannermen.”

The Crown Prince paused, looking around the table once more, taking in the various reactions of the Council members.

“The North is not as weak as we perceive. I do not think they plan treason, but I think it important the Council maintain an eye on any developments.”

“We hardly get any information from the region,” offered the Grand Maester, his wrinkly hands fumbling with the heavy chain around his neck.

“Lord Stark has done an admirable job preventing any information from passing the Neck. I have discussed the subject with my father and I intend to maintain a correspondence with the Warden of the North. Hopefully this will allow for at least a more consistent, if not entirely complete, stream of information.”

“A good course of action, you Grace,” confirmed Varys, “for there are so many isolated places in the North - the Starks are certainly a more reliable source of information.”

“Perhaps we should engage with another Northern lord as a means of information?”

Cersei understood the implicit suggestion within her father’s question - did they trust the Warden of the North to tell the truth or should they use another Northern lord as a spy?

The Crown Prince also clearly understood the suggestion, and though his face remained neutral, Cersei thought she could see his eyes narrow.

“I do not think such a course necessary now, Lord Hand. From what I gathered from Myles and Richard, as well as from the Lord Commander and Maester Aemon, Lord Stark is well respected by his lords. Any attempt at infiltrating and corrupting his bannermen would be taken as a slight. I do not perceive it would be overly successful, nor do I think it would garner high enough returns to risk
the North’s displeasure.”

Her father did not look pleased at that, but nodded his agreement, “Very well, your Grace.”

Rhaegar glanced around the table, looking each man in the eye before choosing to close the meeting.

“I believe that will be all for today, my Lords,” the men all stood and bowed as the Prince rose, “As mentioned at the beginning of the meeting, we shall reconvene a day after tomorrow, but please update me on any progress as necessary.”

The men all nodded respectfully as the Crown Prince left the room, his short silver hair rustling as he walked. Cersei sighed, her hands itching to run through the silky locks. Jaime loved when she played with his hair, claiming it to be calming - Cersei could already imagine laying in bed with the sleeping Prince, her hands stroking through his silver locks.

Satisfied with her accomplishments for the day, Cersei quickly made her way out of the dark passageway, meandering towards the practice yards.

While she might not be able to lay beside her Prince quite yet, no doubt Jaime would be eager to make up for his ridiculous words earlier.

_Soon the Silver Prince will be mine, but in the meantime, golden blonde shall more than suffice._

For who could resist gold?

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_Raven from King’s Landing_
Lady Lyanna,

It brings me great joy to receive your kind words accepting this arrangement. I am looking forward to us familiarizing ourselves, even if it must be via written correspondence for the time being. And please, do not apologize - I do not find brevity a fault in such regards. On the contrary, many might consider such a characteristic a virtue, for we often do not have the good fortune of excess time.

As to the content of these letters, please feel free to share whatever content you might wish. Of course, I would very much like to know your person - how such information is divulged is your own choice. Given the inquiries regarding the South and King’s Landing, perhaps you would be so kind as to write of the North? I’m certain the descriptions of a member of House Stark will do the land much better justice than mere words in an ancient book written by maesters long dead.

In exchange, I shall tell you of the South - I have been fortunate to see much of the Seven Kingdoms, from the western shores of Lannisport to the sandy dunes of Dorne. There is something irrevocably beautiful about traveling Westeros and meeting its varied peoples. It is certainly one of the things I enjoy most as Crown Prince, that I am blessed to know such interesting places that fit within one nation.

The Crownlands are primarily situated around Blackwater Bay, with the main attraction remaining King’s Landing. The countryside is pleasant forests, well maintained orchards, and plowed farms. But within the city which many call home, there is any and all sorts of crafts and people of every region and many of the lands beyond the sea. It is a city with many facets and far more than what one might see at first glance. Shall I tell you of anything in particular in the city? It would take many sheets of parchment to lay down a description of every nook and cranny, and I fear I would bore you far too early in our correspondence.

Fondest regards,

Prince Rhaegar Targaryen
I know there are a number of stories where Cersei watches something through a lookhole and does not approve, but I thought it fit perfectly with her character in this story - she's so blissfully unaware of how her actions come across, but she's only 14 so you have to give her a bit of leeway!

Next chapter will hopefully be posted sooner than you expect :)
Lyanna

The dusk light streamed into her room from the closed window, blanketing the room in a soft glow. It had been a sparkling clear day, pale blue sky with not a single cloud for leagues, the temperature frigid despite the deceptive sun shining. The rarest of days during Northern winters, and not like to appear again on the morrow - already, dark storm clouds drew closer, descending from the mountains to the North.

Lyanna sat at her vanity, staring into the looking glass, considering the evening at hand.

It was after all, the night before Robert and Ned would be departing to return to the Eyrie.

Lyanna was sad to see her brother depart, as her stubbornness had prevented her from spending much time with him, but her relief over Robert’s departure far outweighed any disappointment. The pair had been at Winterfell almost two moons, and she had managed to spend most of that time busy around the keep, with Bran or Ben, or out riding. Fortunately, Ned had kept Robert occupied, taking him hunting or plying him with wine, and outside of their brief walk in the Glass Garden the other day, she had been blessedly free of the Storm Lord’s presence. The man had indiscreetly visited the taverns in town on a few occasions, and Lyanna was certain her potential betrothed was not sleeping alone those evenings.
To her pleasure, her father had not even agreed to open discussions on Robert’s suit and largely avoided the Lord of Storm’s End himself. Lyanna could not help but give thanks to the the Crown Prince – she still didn’t understand the Prince’s interest in her, nor Brandon’s apparent approval of the idea, but if it prevented her father from agreeing outright to Robert Baratheon’s marriage proposal, she would gladly entertain the Prince’s interest.

From the stories, Rhaegar Targaryen was respectful and accomplished - in fact, the man seemed to have little fault. While the concept of marrying still sat poorly with her, she had plenty of time to gauge whether the Crown Prince was a reasonable man. A response to her first letter had arrived that morning, and he seemed far more measured than Robert, his words flowing across the page.

She knew her father would wait on any plans, as a royal marriage was too good of a prospect to settle for another engagement. She still remembered how red Robert’s face was the night after her father had told him that he had another potential suitor and would have to make a decision after speaking with him further. That Roose Bolton had finally sent his own offer only fed the Storm Lord’s fury and inflamed speculation about the third suitor. Rumors still abounded through the castle, but Lyanna was quite content to allow gossip to run rampant as long as she didn’t have to marry the damn oaf.

With these thoughts in mind, she had decided to be courteous this evening and attend the small feast held in honor of Ned and Robert’s departure. After all, she had organized the whole affair, she should at least make an appearance.

“Marsia, would you mind getting the hot irons from Melly? I suppose we ought to do something with my unruly hair this evening.”

Her handmaiden and oldest female friend smiled before turning to accomplish her task. Lyanna beckoned to her other handmaiden. Eleana was still relatively new, the youngest daughter of one of her father’s bannermen. She was a pretty thing, with light brown hair and blue doe eyes. She had been quite shy when she first arrived two years ago, but had become a wonderful companion after only a few moons.

Lyanna didn’t have many female friends, particularly not her age, other than Marsia who was a distant cousin on her mother’s side. Since Lyarra’s death, Lyanna had spent most of her time with men, both noble and servant. Outside of Marsia and Old Nan who had been her father’s wet nurse, for years the only women Lyanna had encountered were the servants who assisted her in the running of Winterfell – the lead woman, Sella, had been a mother of sorts alongside Nan, helping Lyanna learn her responsibilities as Lady of Winterfell, and Lyanna’s maid Melly had been with her since childhood. Having Eleana beside her had been a nice change.
Eleana helped Lyanna go through her wardrobe, pulling out formal dresses until they settled on a quarter-sleeved overdress in velvet, the color a deep blue. The dress required a corset, which Lyanna usually loathed, but she loved the rich color of the dress, a nice contrast to the grays of the majority of her wardrobe. It was modeled on a dress her mother used to wear, though Lyanna hadn’t the patience to embroider silver flowers along the edges as Lyarra had done.

As she sat, allowing Marsia and Eleana to carefully curl and twist her hair into submission, Lyanna allowed her thoughts to drift to nights spent conversing with strange men, gentle kisses by a fire, and days spent laughing and watching playful sparring matches. She hadn’t allowed herself to think back to that week at Queensgate much – the weeks following her return had been filled with so many responsibilities and marriage drama that she hadn’t had the time. Only in her dreams did she allow herself to remember, and then it was usually memories of hot water, touches that set her skin on fire, and passion that burned straight through her. The mornings after those dreams, she would wake with a blush flaming her cheeks, simultaneously pleased and ashamed of the direction of her thoughts.

In any case, hadn’t she told herself on that long ride home, alone other than Tor and Nym, that she would move on? That she would carry the memories with her, but that they wouldn’t hold her back from her duty? As she had told Jay, they weren’t likely to ever meet again. The best part of the week had been the fact that they could all be whomever they wished to be, their true selves, devoid of duty and title. She imagined they must have titles and duties to shed somewhere in the South, seeing as they had enjoyed that aspect of the stay themselves, and had certainly been well off – their speech and training hinting at nobility.

Alas, is one ever truly oneself without the burden of duty and title?

It made no matter, she would soon be married off, likely sequestered away in some dreary castle, removing much chance of follow-up encounters. She had ridden out to see if they were still at the inn where she had seen them briefly, but had turned around before arriving. Such actions would only hurt her in the long term. Besides, who is to say any of them would like each other once the mantle of responsibility and title was re-placed upon their shoulders?

She had no illusions that the Crown Prince would permit her the freedom that she had at Winterfell – Robert certainly wouldn’t. Her father was a lenient man, willing to dote on his only daughter, and serving as an effective Lady of Winterfell had granted her far more negotiating power. The only thing she’d ever been truly denied was sword lessons, her father arguing that it wasn’t lady-like. But even then, she’d managed a compromise, earning archery and knife lessons instead.

The Crown Prince, or any other Lord for that matter, probably wanted a real Lady, who spent her days with needlework and idle chatter. She grimaced, thinking of the horrifying amount of blood she had shed from her fingers over the years in an attempt to learn the fine art of needlework. Patience was not one of her defining characteristics, and she found sitting for so many hours excruciatingly
boring. She dearly hoped whoever her husband was in the future would not wish for elaborate embroidery from his wife’s hand.

Roused from her meandering mind by a tap on her arm, Lyanna smiled at Marsia and Eleana in the looking glass, examining their fine work. Half of her hair had been twisted up in the back, curls tamed with several delicate pins adorned with blue and white crystals. The rest had been curled into submission, falling down her back in an orderly wave of dark brown. As she preferred, it was blessedly simple.

Sliding her feet into her short fur-lined boots, she stood, offering an arm to each girl – they would be joining the feast tonight at her request.

“Shall we?”

And into the wolf’s den they went.

The feast was largely uneventful – Father had retired to his solar to handle business, Brandon had taken himself off to drink with some of the visiting bannermen, Ned was trying his best to slow Robert’s vigorous consumption of wine - and failing miserably - and Benjen had sat with Lyanna as they traded stories of recent adventures. She had excused Marsia and Eleana after the food had been served, noticing the fatigue in both girls’ eyes. The only unusual occurrence had been early in the evening, when Maester Walys had spoken quietly with Robert for several minutes. Lyanna was not at all at ease with the interaction, considering the men had glanced her way multiple times during the conversation – she had not yet forgotten Walys’ insinuations three years ago about selling her to the highest bidder.

After realizing the late hour, and remarking upon the degenerating state of most of the men still in attendance, Lyanna excused herself. She stopped by the kitchens quickly, to ensure all the staff had eaten and that any leftovers had been saved or sent to Wintertown to be distributed among the poorhouses. Finding everything in order and after sending the majority of staff to their beds, Lyanna made to find her own. The keep was relatively quiet, most everyone in their rooms or lingering in the
Great Hall – she imagined Bran might have even snuck out into town with friends to find a few women to warm them.

Rounding a corner into the hallway that separated the Stark family quarters from the guest quarters, she ran into a large mass, reeking of alcohol.

The collision almost knocked her over. Having she barely caught onto a nook in the wall to balance herself, she looked up to discover her companion in the corridor was a very drunk Robert Baratheon. Off-balance himself, he stumbled towards her.

The corridor was quite dark, but something shining in Robert’s eyes put her ill at ease. Hoping to make quick work of the situation and remembering her goal of being courteous, Lyanna dipped into a shallow curtsy, “Lord Baratheon, I wish you a good night.”

As she moved to step around his large frame, his hand shot out to grasp her elbow, stopping her in her place. A smirk appeared on his face, “Is that what you wish? For me to have a good night?”

A shiver shot down her spine at his taunting tone, and she tried to keep her voice steady as he took a step towards her, “My Lord, please unhand me. It is not proper, and it is high time for me to return to my chambers.”

She took a step back as he moved forward again, noticing the chill emanating from the wall behind her. Given no living quarters were directly off of this corridor, the walls weren’t heated by warm water from the hot springs under Winterfell. The cool bite skimming across her back only heightened her senses – she was quite close to being trapped against the wall.

“Why don’t I accompany you back to your chambers? Or would you prefer mine?” Robert took another step and she felt the stone against her back. His grip on her arm tightened and she glanced down at it before returning her eyes to his face. Even covered in shadows, the hunger in Robert’s eyes was barely concealed, and there was something else there, something feral mixed with the drunkenness. It made her blood run cold.

She couldn’t help the tremble in her voice, “Neither, my Lord.”

“But we’re to share chambers soon enough.”
Lyanna attempted to pull her arm away, glancing down the corridor.

Robert chuckled as he pushed closer to her, “Ah, shall I take you here, in the hallway? I should have known you’d like it in public.”

She realized that he was deadly serious and she dropped all pretense of formality, “What? No! Robert, let me go.” She didn’t have any knives on her – she was in her own home, for gods’ sake – so she had to resort to pushing him.

But he was so much stronger and bigger than her.

Robert grabbed her hard as she attempted to push him off of her, one of his enormous hands wrapping around both of her small wrists in a vice-like grip. He towered over her, using his grip on her wrists to slam her harder against the wall, forcing the air from her lungs. She was temporarily suspended in space, the breath knocked from her and her mind struggling to fully comprehend what was going on. His free hand moved to slide up her leg, clenching the velvet folds of her dress. She longed to scream but her labored breathing prevented any sound. She finally found the strength to fight back again, her nails scratching any exposed skin, wriggling her shoulders and trying to kick the lumbering man, but he had her trapped, pinned to the wall.

She heard the sound of ripping fabric and the rush of cool air brushing her legs through her shift. Suddenly, his hand was palming her between her legs, touching her intimate parts with rough brusqueness. It was nothing like Jay’s gentle pleasure – this was unwanted and unwarranted. So shocked by the sudden intrusion, she froze for an instant, her hands no longer fighting.

It was a mistake, as Robert took it as a sign of approval, smiling viciously.

“I knew you’d like it once I touched you. All women give it up, peasant or noble.”

Something cracked inside her and she finally found her voice, screaming and yelling, telling him “No. No. No. Robert, please, no.”

“You’re a feisty one, eh?” he asked, as he pressed closer into her, “You just don’t know what you want. Don’t worry,” he pushed her wrists to her shoulder, bringing his forearm to cover her mouth and muting her screams, “I’ll have you screaming in pleasure soon enough.”
Lyanna saw her chance as his arm pressed against her mouth. He was temporarily distracted, his eyes shifted downwards to watch as his free hand started to lift her shift.

_I am a direwolf._

Summoning all of her strength, she bit into the exposed skin of his arm, feeling the skin break beneath her teeth. His reaction was immediate as he howled in pain, releasing her to slump slightly against the wall. For a moment, she relished the sweet tang of his blood in her mouth, her tongue swiping across her teeth, reminiscent of the blood she tasted when she ran in Nymeria’s mind.

_The blood of the stag._

Outside a direwolf howled.

The moment was over in a second, as Robert lashed out, his right hand crashing across her face, “You bitch!”

The impact sent her sprawling and everything went black as she crashed to the floor with a whimper.

“Lya? Is that you?”

Never had a sound been sweeter than her brother’s voice echoing down the hall as if in a dream and she grasped for it. “Ned, help… please…” was all she could muster as her vision remained foggy, spots of color flashing before her eyes.

And then his footsteps were approaching.
“Rob? What is the meaning of this?!” Ned’s voice rose in anger as he ran the rest of the distance, kneeling by his sister’s side. He’d heard her screams all the way from his room.

Robert responded gruffly, “It’s nothing, Ned, just business between my future wife and I.”

“What business would possibly warrant hitting her across the face? She’s my sister, Rob, and the acting Lady of Winterfell! It was by her hand that you received guest right!” Ned’s voice was full of fury and desperation by this point, but the words did not seem to move Robert.

Lyanna struggled to sit up, using Ned as a source of balance.

“The ungrateful bitch bit me!” Robert continued indignantly, but Ned could see him swaying where he stood,

Her throat raw from screaming, Lyanna managed to voice a raspy response, “Because you were assaulting me.”

“You are to be my wife, you are mine!”

“Rob, you know it’s not final.” Ned began, but Lyanna cut him off, her voice trembling as she clambered fully to her feet, “I will never be yours! I will not marry a man willing to rape a maiden in her own home!”

Ned was too stunned by her statement that he was rendered speechless. Robert also looked stunned by the accusation. Robert was not a gentle man but he had never been violent with women - in fact, the Storm Lord had never had much difficulty finding women who were more than willing to indulge him. Yet Ned could not ignore the truth of his little sister’s ripped dress or the bruise already blooming on her face.

Such were not the signs of a willing woman.
“Rape? Nay, you know not of what you speak. You would have enjoyed it.” Robert stumbled towards them, his words slurring, “Every woman has enjoyed it.”

Finding his voice and trying his best to salvage any semblance of order, Ned sharply addressed his friend while stepping in front of his sister, “Robert, I recommend you return to your chambers immediately. You are lucky it was me who found you and not Brandon, for surely you would be dead already.” Robert just glowered at him, his eyes losing focus temporarily into a drunken stupor, prompting Ned to yell, “Leave, now!”

Robert’s face was lit with fury and confusion as he refocused. Nevertheless, he did leave, stumbling into the wall of the corridor as he moved towards his chambers. He was completely intoxicated, more so than Ned had thought at the feast. A frightened servant cowered in a small sconce, cringing into the wall as the Lord of Storm’s End passed.

*I’ll have to speak to the poor boy – he may have seen or heard what happened…*

Turning to his sister, who had slumped back into the wall, her breathing ragged, Ned tried to soften his tone, “Lya, allow me to escort you to your room – I’ll send for the Maester to see to your injuries…”

He saw fire burning in her eyes, and beneath it all, lingering fear, "If you think for one moment that you will not be bringing me directly to Father, you are sorely mistaken dearest brother. He may be your friend, but that despicable man will pay for this.” She pushed herself gingerly off of the wall, staggering a little. He reached out to steady her, and he noticed the way she flinched at his touch. “As for Maester Walys, the old man will never touch me again. I have no doubt it was his idea to encourage Robert to take what he thought was his by right.”

Ned just nodded, remembering the few times Robert had mentioned speaking to Maester Walys - he had thought it unusual, but he would have never been able to foresee this.

He offered his hand to Lyanna before turning quickly to gesture for the servant boy to follow them. As his sister grasped his arm he saw the thick bruise developing around her wrist, another sign of Robert’s “love” already clear.

*Dear Gods, how did we get here? What have I done?*
Rickard Stark heaved a sigh as he dropped the elaborate plans back onto his desk, rubbing his temples with his thumbs, the gentle crack of joints strangely reassuring.

Who would have guessed the signs of aging would provide succor at such times?

Rickard thought it ironic that the past moon had been no less strenuous than his more than six moons traveling around the northern territories. With guests and ever evolving political machinations, he had barely had a moment to sit and work on any of the critical projects he wished to complete. Hopefully, with Robert Baratheon departing with Ned in the morning, he could return his attention to these matters.

Not wishing to linger within the Great Hall, Rickard had retired from the farewell feast to finish reviewing the new plans Acolyte Brynden had completed for one such project — Moat Cailin. Brynden had spent the last few years refining the restoration plans while Rickard had begun gathering the required funds. It was one of the reasons for his extended journey — in addition to the full dowry of Catelyn Tully, he had finally secured trade through the Manderly’s with Lyanna’s assistance, ensuring additional capital flowing to the North. These successful negotiations allowed him to begin the slow process of fully clearing the rubble and overgrowth of the existing Moat Cailin structure. Brynden had assured him that a decent amount of the existing foundation could be used, though the work would be slow and the keep would need to be completely rebuilt.

A sign of my enduring legacy. Restoring the ancient stronghold at Moat Cailin...

In a few moons, Rickard intended to send Lyanna with Brynden to oversee the start of restoration on the three remaining towers, which were in the best shape. Giving Lyanna such a role would achieve a number of purposes. It could be seen as a small reward for the responsibilities his daughter had taken on in his absence—a belated gift of sorts, as he knew she had enjoyed assisting Brynden with
the plans. Rickard knew the execution of the Night’s Watchman still weighed heavily on her soul and this might allow her a reprieve from her duties. And, it would also force Brandon to step into her place for at least a time. Besides, Lyanna had some experience restoring castles.

His stubborn daughter… just thinking about the way she fought him to get his approval to visit and subsequently restore the main tower of that damn Queensgate outpost on the Wall made his head pound. She was certainly going to be a handful for whatever Lord ended up marrying her.

Her future betrothal, another thing that made his head hurt. On one of her last days alive, Rickard had promised his sweet wife, Lyarra, he would wait to commit to any betrothal for Lyanna until she was sixteen. And while there had been a moment or two when he had struggled to uphold his promise, now that she had achieved her majority, Rickard found it hard to discuss letting her go.

His reasons went well beyond the personal – he loved his daughter, but had always known she would be married off. Instead, he found himself loath to lose such a capable Lady of Winterfell. In many ways, Lyanna had compensated for Brandon’s poor grasp of the full extent of his responsibilities, whether from incompetence or pure lack of will, and she’d made herself virtually irreplaceable. She had a hand in the running of every aspect of Winterfell, had assisted in handling matters with his bannermen, both high nobility and common people, and had earned the respect of much of the North with her wit and quick intelligence. While Southerners might not appreciate her more impulsive whims, all Northerners admired her wildness and deep love for the North.

Unfortunately, Rickard wasn’t certain any of the current suitors would appreciate her for who she was - for all her strengths, Lyanna had her fair share of weaknesses. If anything, her wildness might have been best appreciated by Lord Baratheon; certainly the Crown Prince would not be expecting the rough edges and impulsivity Lyanna was prone to display. Yet Rickard knew Lyanna would never forgive him for agreeing to Robert’s suit. His stubborn daughter had made a judgement on the Storm Lord’s character, focusing exclusively on his faults, and would not be swayed in her opinion. It placed Rickard in the uncomfortable position of disappointing his daughter or placing her in danger - Rickard had no illusions about King’s Landing, and the Dreadfort provided little comfort.

As if the direction of his thoughts summoned her to him, a harsh series of knocks sounded on his door just before his daughter barged into the solar, Ned hot on her heels. The sudden entry forced Rickard to his feet.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded, even as he took in Lyanna’s appearance.

It took a moment to comprehend her state of dress, or undress for that matter, but he quickly noted the bright red mark that bloomed across her face, the blood pooling under her left eye already. Stepping around his desk, he yelled to the guard outside to send for Acolyte Brynden and Maester Walys immediately. Glancing only briefly at his son and the servant cowering in the hallway, he
turned back to his daughter, who swayed but held her head up defiantly.

“Lyanna,” he asked again, trying to keep the gruffness out of his voice, “who did this?”

Her voice was gravelly as she responded, “Robert Baratheon.”

Had he been a more emotional man, he certainly would have flinched before roaring into a blaring fury, for Rickard Stark was not an easy man to shock and, unlike Brandon and Lyanna, he was not quick to anger. Indeed, his temperament more closely resembled Eddard’s. Rickard’s anger was difficult to rouse, but once present, could prove most difficult to extinguish, an unstoppable roiling wave of ire.

The state he found his daughter in at the hand of a guest staying beneath his roof proved sufficient cause.

In the subsequent hours, a number of things came to light, each one more disturbing than the last. Yet the message rang clear - alcohol, power, and desire were a dangerous combination.

Robert barely remembered the incident, so intoxicated was he, but the bruises and state of Lyanna’s dress spoke volumes. The testimony of the servant, who had witnessed almost all of the incident, was further proof of the crime. But as Rickard found out, the Lord’s actions were not purely driven by lust.

Apparently, Robert had been working with Maester Walys behind Rickard’s back, drafting a marriage contract that would sell Lyanna to the Lord of Storm’s End, the marriage to be held shortly after Brandon’s marriage to Catelyn Tully. While the contract was most favorable to Winterfell - Robert was practically clearing his House’s current holdings to buy Lyanna - not a single word of it had been approved by Rickard. In fact, he had yet to even consider drafting language for a betrothal, let alone a full marriage contract. The decision to grant Robert the hand of his daughter was far from made.

It seemed Walys believed Rickard’s silence to be consent, and the Maester had encouraged the rough Lord Baratheon to pursue Lyanna as he saw fit. The Maester had even gone so far to tell Robert that there was no competition that could represent a better arrangement for their houses.

It was all a mess, a conflagration of miscommunication and false assumptions.
Though Rickard had become increasingly concerned with Walys’ ambitions, the man had given him strong council for years after Lyarra’s death. Nevertheless, apparently Lyanna’s concerns had been valid after all, and it was his daughter who took the brunt of the punishment for Rickard’s dismissal of her words.

When questioned, Walys claimed he could never imagine Robert would go so far as to take his husbandly rights within the corridors of Winterfell before any arrangement was finalized, and that he would never encourage such behavior. Rickard knew Walys was neither stupid nor violent; though he and Lyanna did not have a good relationship, the Southerner knew how the North dealt with violence against their own, and above all else, Rickard knew that Walys Flowers would never purposefully do something to endanger his person.

Unfortunately, Walys also revealed that he had known of Rickard’s request for information on a new maester, and Brandon found the Citadel’s response hidden in Walys’ chambers. It was clear that sometime in the last years, their views for the future of the North had diverged.

Rickard’s face remained cold as he dismissed a man he had long considered a friend and confidant. Walys was to be held in the dungeons until a response from the Citadel was received – Rickard planned to send the man to the Wall for his betrayal of the North, though he had half a mind to execute the man himself for treason against the North.

Alas, the actual incident between Robert and Lyanna was his biggest concern.

Rickard understood his eldest son’s desire for blood – the call of the wolf’s blood had never been particularly strong in Rickard, but the fact that his dearest daughter had been assaulted, her virtue nearly stolen, under his roof, caused his blood to boil. Robert’s actions were an insult to his daughter, to him, to his house—and to the North. Robert had taken advantage of guest right, something the North held sacred. Had Robert been anyone else, Rickard would have allowed Brandon to do as he wished. In fact, Rickard would have willingly swung the sword himself.

But Robert was not just an ordinary man, nor even a simple nobleman. As the Lord of Storm’s End and a Lord Paramount, Robert Baratheon was Rickard’s equal in the eyes of the Crown. Lyanna was herself of lesser importance, being only the daughter of the Warden of the North, and thus seen as Rickard’s property. In the eyes of the law, Robert’s actions that night were more an insult to House Stark and Rickard than to Lyanna herself. The word of the woman always carried less weight in these matters.

Robert himself had been relegated to house arrest, remaining in his chambers under heavy guard. In addition, Rickard had requested both Jon Arryn and Hoster Tully’s presence and counsel in any decision following the brief trial. The word of three Lord Paramount’s would likely be enough to sway any Crown approval.
Rickard could only demand so much as compensation to House Stark, and even that may have political ramifications. He would have more cause for higher compensation given Robert’s attempt at going behind Rickard’s back to buy his daughter without his consent, but the physical assault would largely have to go unpunished, aside from hefty monetary compensation and disallowing any further contact between the man and Lyanna.

And yet, the punishment would have to be hefty enough to appease the Northern Lords. The North respected strength, and would expect vengeance to be swift for such an insult, particularly given Lyanna’s high esteem in their eyes. Violations of guest right were grounds for death in the North, and while such punishment was not realistic given the circumstances, Rickard would appear weak to his bannermen should they view him as too lenient.

The affair would also have to remain private – he had spent years protecting Lyanna and her image from the South. He knew that knowledge of his daughter was incredibly limited, but it would not bode well for her prospects should her virtue come into question. The story would have to be established and kept mum. His poor daughter didn’t deserve to be punished further because of the foolish actions of Lord Baratheon.

Rickard had already written to the Crown Prince, in hopes of keeping the affair as lawfully proper as possible. Given the Prince’s possible interest in his daughter, Rickard had found it necessary to confirm the intact nature of Lyanna’s virtue. Rickard didn’t know how serious the Prince was – not so interested as to propose a formal arrangement, at least – but the Lord of Winterfell wished to preserve any potential engagement by ensuring the Prince heard of the incident from him, instead of false rumors.

Rickard barely managed to calm Brandon when his son heard of the incident. With Brandon calling for Robert’s head, Rickard asked him to escort Lyanna on an extended hunting trip in the Wolfswood. Though Rickard had not wished to part with her, particularly when she was injured, he knew she had little interest in remaining within the keep while Robert was still around, and Rickard hoped the absence of his two wild children would prevent further conflict.

Finally, Rickard had requested Maester Aemon to travel to Winterfell from Castle Black until the new maester, Maester Luwin, arrived from the Citadel. The request was couched in an offer to field new recruits and allow Aemon unlimited access to the Winterfell library, so Rickard hoped the man accepted. Lyanna had been fond of the old maester when they had visited the Wall when she was younger, and the man had always provided sound council. Hopefully, Aemon could provide Lyanna some comfort and Rickard some advice.

No matter the eventual judgement, one thing was clear - Robert Baratheon would not be welcome in the North for a long time.
After all, the North Remembers.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to provide a few contextual comments on this chapter, given some of the sensitive material. As a reminder though, this story is canon divergent - I am doing my best to keep to the characterizations of the various protagonists, but I have also made several plot line and interpretation adjustments. I am providing the below context in the hope that this helps give some sense of how I came to write the chapter as it is presented.

First, this is A Song of Ice and Fire - none of these themes are new to the story. The world that GRRM bases most of his material on was an incredibly violent and masochistic society - it is recorded that such occurrences happened among noble men. The repercussions for them were modest at best.

Second, I do NOT think that Robert is a bad man. I know it may seem that way in this story, but these chapters are from each character's point of view. His characteristics may be seen as less than savory (particularly in the context of our society) but they do not make him evil. I think he was a man who did not feel much familial closeness with many people (having been sent away to foster young and then losing his parents) and struggled to find meaning in his life. He fought a war for a woman he thought he loved and found himself in position he did not actually want, married to a woman he did not love. Then again, he is known to have hit and raped Cersei, his wife. That is one thing from canon we know. Does that mean he assaulted women in his youth? No, but it does show that it was something he was capable of when he thought he had the right to take his pleasure in a woman (and while he was under the influence). Robert was a rich, powerful, and big man. He was said to be a successful womanizer, but that does not mean that every woman he slept with went 100% willingly.

Third, alcohol is a dangerous substance. Many people today do things that they would not do while not intoxicated. Does that make what Robert did okay? No, but the idea of not taking responsibility because one was intoxicated is not foreign today, and it certainly would have not been in the Middle Ages (when nobles often drank wine or beer of varying alcohol content instead of water, due to health reasons!).

In any case, I hope you all enjoyed the chapter! Things will hopefully move faster from here - can't wait to share the rest of the story with you all! Thank you as always for reading and commenting!! xx
A cool breeze blew across his face, the winter wind icy. All around were gradients of grey, brown and white snowy landscapes for leagues, shadowed by mountains in the distance. Moisture still shimmered in the air despite the clear skies, the weak sun glimmering where its rays touched the snowflakes. There was movement in the distance above the mountains, flying figures indistinguishable due to the dark clouds harkening the coming storm.

Suddenly, a peel of laughter sounded out beside him. He knew that laugh, had heard it in his dreams, the rich sound ringing through the icy air as clear as a bell.

“Rhaegar-”

He closed his eyes, savoring the sound of his name in husky Northern tones. The Ice from the Prophecy, the woman fated to bear the Prince That Was Promised, to carry the next generation of Targaryens, Aegon, Visenya, and Rhaenys come again...

The dragon has three heads.

“Rhaegar!”

His head jerked up, his gaze meeting violet eyes with a touch of insolence. For a moment, he was confused - shouldn’t the eyes be grey, the color of a Northern storm or a freshly forged sword?

“Are you even paying attention?”
Rhaegar straightened, glancing around the familiar room as the remnants of the daydream faded, greys, browns, and whites giving way to reds and blacks. They were in one of the secret rooms connected to Rhaegar’s solar in Maegor’s, gathered around the map of Westeros which lay on a side table, Arthur at his side looking vaguely annoyed, Oswell next to his brother in arms, clearly amused. How the Kingsguard could find humor in their current topic, Rhaegar could never fathom.

Across from Rhaegar stood Jon Connington, worry visible on his face - though Rhaegar caught the hint of adoration that would be forever etched into the red-head’s features. Jon was one of Rhaegar’s few trusted confidants, having become his friend during long days of squiring in King’s Landing. Jon had even served as Rhaegar’s squire for a brief time before the Griffin Lord earned his own spurs. Always a serious boy, Jon had only become more so after his father’s death - proud and energetic, he could sometimes be blinded by his distrust of women. It had been a repeated argument during these meetings, Jon adamant that they not include the Queen or Arthur’s sister Ashara given the “fickle nature of women.”

It was Arthur’s voice drawing his attention back.

“Please tell me you aren’t daydreaming about her again.”

Rhaegar scowled at his best friend, a brief image of a Northern girl flashing across his memory before he shook it away, “Weren’t you the one encouraging me to think about her? The ice to my fire, the fulfillment of the prophecy.”

Arthur frowned in response, “That was before-”

“Before we found out she was also the girl at the Wall?”

Arthur shook his head, his voice hardening, “You barely know her. And she’s completely unpredictable, her presence at the Wall alone is sign enough of that. You aren’t just looking for a wife, Rhaegar, you’re finding a partner, the future Queen.”

“Arthur, what are you truly worried about? That she can be a little reckless? You seemed to like her quite well when we were in the North - even in Wintertown. Speak freely, you’ve never had trouble doing so before.”

“We are already in a delicate situation, I don’t want you to lose sight of what needs to be done.
Caring for a woman can be a weakness, and you can’t afford any weaknesses. Not now, not with your father the way he is.”

Rhaegar frowned, “I have no intention of being distracted. I can achieve both. I cannot ignore the Prophecy.”

“The Prophecy is not burning his subjects alive in the Throne Room,” drawled Oswell.

Arthur shot his brother in white a quieting look before continuing, “The girl and the Prophecy will certainly still be there to contemplate after. You say you want to do this peacefully, yet we are no closer to securing the support we need.”

Jon interrupted at that moment, drawing Rhaegar’s attention, “Rhaegar, I don’t know who you are talking about, but why not just marry the Lannister girl? Tywin will stand behind you if he thinks it will make his daughter Queen.”

Arthur flinched at Jon’s suggestion, and Oswell chuckled, earning a glare from the Lord of Griffin’s Roost. But it was Rhaegar who responded.

“I shall not marry Cersei Lannister, I intend to pursue my Northern maiden.”

“Who is that? Who could possibly bring the same political power?”

“Lyanna Stark.”

Jon looked as though he had been struck, his mouth gaping before his voice rose with incredulity, “You can’t be serious? Lyanna Stark is rumored to be completely savage! If she’s anything like Brandon Stark…”

Rhaegar sighed, knowing this was only the beginning of the Court’s surprise at his chosen maiden. He kept his voice low, hoping his friend would drop his volume as well.

“The Starks are well known for their honor and warrior mentality. Lord Stark left Lyanna in charge of Winterfell for more than six moons, choosing her over his heir and over his youngest son. She
may be impulsive and rash, but she is clearly very capable of running the largest of the Seven Kingdoms - Rickard Stark doesn’t seem the type of man to make that decision lightly.”

“And she could be Rhaegar’s illusive “Ice,” a balance to the “Fire” of the gods-forsaken Prophecy,” added Oswell.

Jon shook his head, his frown deepening, “She’ll never last at Court.”

“Maybe Court needs to change.”

He could practically see the image of Lyanna in breeches and a tunic, taking to the practice yard despite the sneers of lesser maidens, only to glide into the Great Hall bedecked in the red and black silks of House Targaryen. Rhaegar fought a smile as he thought of how she would dictate Court when she was Queen...

“Rhaegar, the North is far away and isolated. We need the Lannisters more than the North.”

“The Starks bring much more than simply the power of the North, Jon. Lord Stark has forged strong relationships with his bannermen, and will soon be tied to the Riverlands through Brandon’s marriage to Catelyn Tully. He is also connected to the Vale through his second son’s fostering with Jon Arryn, and the Stormlands through Ned Stark’s friendship with Robert Baratheon. That is four kingdoms of seven, by my count.”

“Robert is a wild card,” Arthur interjected, “He won’t be happy with you taking his bride.”

Rhaegar scowled, “She’s not his bride yet.”

“Aye, but the man has been talking about Lyanna Stark for months - he even mentioned the girl the last time I saw him at Storm’s End,” continued Jon, “He fostered with Ned Stark, what is to say Lord Stark won’t choose him in the end? We could probably get the bloody Starks to join us without you marrying the girl, just rely on their ridiculous sense of honor. If anything, they will just choose to stay out of the whole event all together, they’ve always remained isolated. The Lannisters will expect something and are far too close to remain outside of a conflict.”

“Tywin wants the throne. He’ll stop at nothing to get a child of his blood on that chair. What’s to prevent him from killing me once Cersei gives me a son? Or do you wish for my death, Lord
Jon looked stricken for a moment.

Rhaegar sighed with frustration, then continued, “We will have to find something else to appease the lion, for I’m not marrying Cersei. Besides, the King would never approve. At least with Lyanna Stark, we have the potential to convince my father that it’s beneficial to him, a way to tie the North to the Throne. I do not know what exactly Lord Stark is planning, but he is not the typical Stark - there are far too many things going on in the North for me to be secure in their disinterest in power. And who is to know whether that damnable honor would not prompt them to come to my father’s aid? Such a move could lose us both the North and the Riverlands, possibly even the Vale and the Stormlands. Again, the alliances Lord Stark has made are a concern we cannot ignore.”

Jon looked as if he had been forced to swallow poison, but he seemed to begrudgingly accept Rhaegar’s reasoning, “Fine, but what about the other houses? The Tyrells will want something.”

Arthur thought out loud, having met the Tyrells on a few occasions, “Mace Tyrell will follow whatever his mother says - she’s the true power behind Highgarden.”

“Precisely why I have already invited the Queen of Thorns to Court.”

Oswell leaned over the map, his finger pointing to the islands off of the western coast of Westeros. “The Greyjoys will likely stay out of any conflict, though we need to consider the fact that they may take advantage of the chaos to declare independence or reave along the coasts.”

Arthur nodded, leaning to join Oswell over the map, “Such reaving would likely hit the Westerlands, the Riverlands, and the Reach.”

“It could hit the North as well,” Jon added, his voice still sharp as if the words pained him.

Oswell shook his head, “‘Tis still very much the dead of winter in the North, I believe the Ironborn will keep to warmer weather should they so choose.”

Jon grimaced before spitting out the next words, “What about the Dornish? It’s said that they are still not pleased about your refusal of their precious Princess.”
Rhaegar sighed - Jon hadn’t been a fan of Elia, but Arthur had been the woman’s childhood friend, so he ought to still show some respect. “The Princess was not a viable option. Both the ruling Princess of Dorne and my mother agreed upon that. I have been corresponding with Princess Elia in any case - she is a reasonable woman, smart like her brother Doran. Hopefully we are able to come to some agreement. A seat on the Small Council ought to be sufficient, Dorne has long been absent from discussions at court.”

There was a pause in discussions as they all stared at the map of the Kingdoms, the full magnitude of what they were contemplating descending like a weight upon them. Only yesterday, Rhaegar had spent three hours providing words of comfort to his father about the loyalty of his nobles, explaining how no one cared to plot treason against the King’s rule, and yet here he was, the Crown Prince, doing exactly that.

Naturally, it was Oswell to break the silence, his mind forever focused on action. “So how do we do this?”

Rhaegar sighed, “I would prefer to avoid conflict, if possible.”

Jon frowned again, “I still don’t understand why we don’t just kill him. He shan’t shy away from killing us for lesser crimes.”

“He’s still my father, Jon. I prefer to not begin my reign as both a kinslayer and a kingslayer.”

“Rhaegar, you were gone a long time. Things have gotten much worse. He’s killed nearly a hundred relative innocents at this point.”

Rhaegar stared at the wall, where a tapestry of King Maekar I hung. Perhaps such was the way of his family - after all, how many Targaryens had been responsible for the deaths of their close kin? “I am aware, Jon. If you’ll recall, I have the good fortune of speaking with him frequently.”

“What about a tournament?” suggested Arthur, veering the topic away from such an extreme method, “The King hardly ever leaves the Red Keep at this point - it would be as decent enough a disguise as anything to hold a Great Council.”

“Arthur is just looking for another opportunity to beat everyone at the joust,” joked Oswell, lightening the mood further.
Rhaegar cocked his head to the side, not altogether opposed to the concept, “It’s not a half-bad idea - who would host that we can trust?”

“My brother would do it,” suggested Oswell, “His daughter reaches her majority next year, ‘twould be enough of a reason.”

“Harrenhal is certainly large enough to host such an event,” mumbled Jon.

“Young brother would be open to this, Os?”

“I believe so, but with your leave, I shall ride there myself to discuss it with him.”

“Very well, a tournament grand enough to draw the presence of every noble,” Rhaegar nodded, pleased with the quick outcome. Indeed, a tournament could very well suffice. “We will reconvene later to discuss the details to share with Lord Whent. For now, I need some air and I believe I promised Ashara a turn about the gardens. Arthur, come with me?”

Perhaps Ashara could help him strategize on his other priority. Who better to counsel him on a way to court his Northern maiden?

Arthur breathed a sigh of relief as they walked out of the stuffy room and through Rhaegar’s main chambers, walking towards the exit of the Keep. He understood the need for secrecy with the
King’s current state and Lord Varys’ propensity to discover even the best kept secrets, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed being stuffed into a small windowless room. The Targaryen obsession with black and red helped matters none - the dark colors only made the room more dreary, nothing like the vibrant colors of Dorne.

*No wonder Rhaegar is so dark and melancholy. The Targaryen colors only remind people of blood and shadows, death and destruction.*

It had been some time since Arthur had seen the brilliant colors of his homeland, and he could feel the stress of King’s Landing seeping into his bones, chilling him far more than the cool winter breeze. This was no place for joy and happiness, and it hadn’t taken much for them all to fall back into their dangerous daily lives. In fact, Arthur knew that Rhaegar hadn’t gotten a full night’s sleep since returning to the Capital, descending back into his studies and duties. If it wasn’t for the moments of distraction when Arthur caught his friend daydreaming of his Northern maiden, Arthur might have thought they hadn’t been gone a single day.

There was one bright thing in King’s Landing, a flash of violet cloth which Arthur caught sight of as they exited Maegor’s into the courtyard.

A flounce of silk and a smile greeted them as Ashara left the company of three young knights to join them. An ounce of worry disappeared as he took in the image of the one person in King’s Landing that he cared for more than the Crown Prince.

Having his little sister in King’s Landing had certainly been refreshing - his own little piece of Dorne. After missing his family for so long, he had been shocked by Ashara’s transformation into a stunning young woman. She had always been a pretty girl, mischievousness shining from those violet eyes so similar to his own. They might have been taken for twins in fact, if not for the fact that his hair was like that of spun wheat while hers was a rich brown, almost black. But it was not so much her appearance that shocked him.

*Nay, his sister’s mischievousness has manifested itself into whimsical flirtation and subtle manipulation. A boon to the Queen Ashara might be for her aptitude in learning secrets, but it would forever make Arthur uncomfortable seeing men fawn over his sister while ladies of the Court spoke of her rumored illicit liaisons.*

To Arthur, Ashara would always be that sweet, innocent little girl he had left behind at the Palatine Tower at Starfall, no matter the woman she presented to the Court.

*“Lady Ashara,” Rhaegar greeted, his courtly voice returned after the tense meeting they had just*
concluded, “I am sorry for our tardiness. We were delayed by unforeseen circumstances.”

Ashara sunk into a curtsy, her smile pleasant as she pulled her heavy cloak tighter, “Your Grace is kind enough to spare a few moments for me - I would never hold such tardiness against your person.”

“That is good to hear, my Lady. Shall we venture into the gardens? I fear Arthur and I are greatly in need of some fresh air.”

His sister nodded her assent, sending Arthur a quick smirk as she greeted him, “Darling brother, I do hope your duties do not wear upon your attention - ‘twould be most unfortunate should something happen to the Crown Prince on your watch.”

“Fear not, sister, my attention has never been sharper. ‘Tis keenly attuned to all that occurs around those whose care falls upon my shoulders.”

Ashara laughed, clearly understanding the implication. She herself was keenly attuned to how her flirtations bothered him.

His sister changed the topic as they ventured into the gardens, the hedges finely trimmed despite their green color having faded brown due to the prolonged winter.

“How was the trip, your Grace? My loathsome brother refuses to tell me absolutely anything, though I’ve never seen him happier to have hot baths.”

Arthur rolled his eyes, exaggerating his reproach, “Ashara!”

His sister smirked at him, before turning back to Rhaegar, who was smiling.

“The trip went well, my Lady - better than expected, I suppose. And I think we all learned more than a little about how the definition of winter varies by kingdom.”

“That’s all you have to say? My my, still such secrecy. Must it remain a mystery even though you are back?”
Rhaegar chuckled, shaking his head, “I believe the political ramifications that led us to keep the mystery in the first place still very much apply. Though I suppose you shall likely learn enough about it to make an educated guess.”

“Likely she already knows, your Grace,” Arthur interjected, “Ash has a particular talent for secrets.”

“What can I say, dearest brother?” Ashara smiled sweetly at him, but her eyes were twinkling with laughter, “Lord Varys is not the only one who has little birds.”

“A Mistress of Whispers to match the Master,” the Prince smiled at the thought, “I do not think I mind the idea so much.”

Ashara smirked before continuing on, her hands gesturing gracefully, “In any case, the gossip was rampant, Your Grace. They covered every possible thing - kidnapping, running away to the Golden Company, drowning in the swamps of the Neck. Do you know there were even rumors you were eaten by a dragon that had survived Summerhall?”

Rhaegar chuckled, “I think I prefer that last one.”

His sister laughed, the sound tinkling around the garden as they moved deeper into the greenery, “So - what sort of mischief did you boys really get into?”

“Nothing too dangerous. Though I think I was at risk of drowning in scrolls at one point.”

“How very like you, your Grace.”

Arthur snorted, “I do not think drowning in scrolls was the biggest danger we faced.”

Ashara’s head whipped around as she skipped a few steps forward before turning to face the two men, her smile glowing. “Oh do tell! It must be something marvelous by the way Arthur scowls at dear Oswell whenever he brings up the trip.”
Rhaegar glared at Arthur, but the knight could see the amusement hiding in those indigo eyes. Arthur knew that the Crown Prince had been distracted for days since their return from the North - Seven Hells, the man had been distracted even while they were still in the blasted tundra. And despite Arthur’s consternation about his best friend’s focus on the Northern girl, Arthur couldn’t help but enjoy the way the moody Targaryen prince lit up when speaking of Lyanna.

The Sword of the Morning knew how seriously the Crown Prince took his duty - it had been something they had bonded over in fact - but the friend in Arthur had always hoped Rhaegar would find an ounce of happiness. Arthur had been blessed with a happy family, siblings he cared for, and a duty that generally pleased him.

The Crown Prince had never had that. Arthur knew that, even as a child, Rhaegar had thought happiness outside of his reach - and how could you blame him, with a violent father, an abused mother, countless unborn siblings, the memory of being born in destruction, and the constant threat of the Targaryen Madness resting above his head.

“Arthur is concerned I left a piece of my mind behind,” Rhaegar stated thoughtfully.

Arthur snorted, “Your mind or your heart, ’tis hard to tell.”

“Your heart?” Ashara feigned a swoon, the gesture overly dramatic, “Why, your Grace, now I am truly worried. You must say more. I fear losing your heart would cause mass distress at Court.”

Rhaegar’s eyebrow rose slightly as his lips pursed, “I do not think it is necessary for the Court to know.”

“On the contrary, your Grace, you must know it is the constant obsession of many a tireless maiden to acquire and deliberate over such information, and prepare accordingly?”

“I pray they would dedicate their time to more fulfilling pastimes.”

Ashara looked offended, “What pastime could possibly equal the effort of attracting the Crown Prince’s attention?”

“I daresay there are many.”
“I could certainly name a few,” added Arthur, prompting a chuckle from Rhaegar and a giggle from Ashara.

“You see, my Lady, I am clearly never at risk of becoming too proud when your brother is around.”

Ashara smiled, linking her arm through Arthur’s as they turned into the quiet grove of the gardens.

“Indeed, I know my dearest brother’s tendencies quite well. You see, Arthur does not wish for anyone to take the perception of greatness away from him. I fear such has been the case since he earned that damned Sword of the Morning title.”

Arthur glared at his sister, but found it difficult to maintain as the Prince laughed. He did not think he had heard the Prince laugh fully since… well, since Queensgate.

They had reached one of the most isolated spots within the gardens, the day brisk enough to keep most courtiers within. Very few courtiers would venture so far in any case, the hedges slightly overgrown and the path narrower - this was one of the older parts of the garden, supposedly from the time of Aegon the Conqueror himself. Arthur had walked these paths many times with Rhaegar, but had hardly ever seen another soul. Why would a courtier bother to walk in an area of the garden where they would not be seen, after all?

Ashara released his arm and skipped lightly into the clearing, twirling quickly before facing the Prince once more.

“Now your Grace, do not be cagey - I fear I will be forced to investigate should you leave me with little else.”

Arthur shook his head, “‘Tis not a threat to be taken lightly, Rhaegar. Ashara has long had a talent for discovering such tidbits.”

Rhaegar smiled lightly, sitting upon the bench and gesturing for Ashara to join him.

“Perhaps it would be better to speak a few words myself then, if only to prevent misinformation.”
Ashara nodded vigorously, a few strands of her dark hair falling from the elaborate braided confection on her head.

“Very well. Dayne, should you deign to do so, you may add a detail, or two, if it should be necessary.”

Arthur bowed low, exaggerating the motion with a sweep of his arm, “As you command, your Grace.”

The Prince rolled his eyes before turning to Ashara, who was fidgeting with her skirts and the folds of her cloak, arranging them about her legs to keep warm.

“As you have likely deducted, there was a young lady we happened upon while on our journey. A most…” Rhaegar paused, his eyes gazing deeper into the overgrowth, “unusual young lady, I should say. Different from any other I have met, with a freedom of spirit that shone brighter than her smile.”

Ashara’s own smile had grown as the Prince spoke, laugh lines appearing at the corner of her eyes as she watched the Crown Prince speak.

Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw Harry, one of Rhaegar’s new squires, running haphazardly through the hedges towards them. Arthur frowned at the sight, but the Prince seemed not to notice for he continued speaking.

“I daresay I was quite captivated by her. It felt like something of destiny, as if some mystical thread tied us together.”

Ashara raised her eyebrows at Arthur, but he missed it as Harry stumbled onto the path leading to their little hideaway.

Rhaegar finally noticed the incoming interruption, standing from his seat as a frown transformed his face.

Harry was flustered by the time he arrived at their spot in the brush, his breath wheezing. For a moment, Arthur questioned whether the Prince had been mistaken in taking the boy on as a squire -
Harry was not the fittest of young men, and would likely have trouble keeping up with the Crown Prince if he could not manage a quick run through the gardens.

“My apologies for the interruption, your Grace, but there was a raven from Winterfell. The scroll is addressed to you as urgent.”

Rhaegar’s frown deepened as he stepped towards where Arthur stood with the fatigued squire, “Very well, Harry, hand it over.”

Harry handed the scroll, or rather scrolls, for multiple sheets of paper had been sent together, to the Prince.

Standing so close to his friend, Arthur noticed that the direwolf seal of Lord Stark remained intact. Arthur was surprised to see that Pycelle had not read the scrolls – like every other man in the Red Keep, Pycelle was eager for any piece of information he could receive. Then again, Rhaegar had already made it clear to the maester he was not to open any of Rhaegar’s personal correspondence, on pain of dismissal.

Rhaegar unrolled the first missive, the second scroll held lightly in his other hand, scanning the words. Arthur saw the moment that his friend’s face hardened.

“Harry, who else has seen this?”

Harry seemed to shrink in response to the iron in Rhaegar’s voice, “Nobody, your Grace. I was in the rookery with Acolyte Meldon seeing to your new requests from the Citadel when the raven arrived. Not even Maester Pycelle has seen it, for Acolyte Meldon remembered you wished to receive your personal missives directly.”

Rhaegar nodded, but his face was grim, “Good, see that you speak to no one of this. I will handle the matter myself. You may go.”

“Of course, your Grace.”

Harry bowed before hustling away. Recognizing the change in the Prince’s demeanor, Arthur quickly scanned the surroundings and checked the area for any lingering ears. He caught Ashara’s gaze, nodding encouragingly at her - silence was the best approach with the Prince in this state. In
the meantime, Rhaegar had returned his gaze to the second missive, the neat lines of text written in the hand of Lord Stark.

Arthur watched as Rhaegar read, the fury building in his friend’s body like a fire growing in strength. Ashara seemed to notice the shift as well, as she glanced worryingly at him.

“Rhaegar…” he began.

His friends eyes flickered up and he saw the depth of Rhaegar’s fury.  Arthur could not imagine what news from the North could possibly prompt such a reaction - after all, Rhaegar had only received the first letter from Lyanna as part of their unofficial courting a few days earlier.  The man had been hard pressed to stop smiling the whole of that day, responding almost immediately.

Instead of answering, Rhaegar held the first letter out to Arthur.  He approached slowly, taking the paper from his friend’s hand to read.  Once rid of the scroll, Rhaegar began pacing, running his fingers through his short hair.

Arthur chose to ignore his friend for a moment, reading the words that had sent him into such a state.

Your Grace,

I write to inform you of an incident which occurred the night of the fourth of this month between my daughter, Lady Lyanna of House Stark and Lord Robert Baratheon, the Lord of Storm’s End and, on the night in question, a guest in my home.  On this evening, Lord Baratheon was found by my son, Eddard, to have assaulted my daughter in an attempt to take her maidenhead. Though this original intent was not fulfilled, my daughter sustained several injuries. A trial has been set for a moon’s time.  I write to inform your Grace of the crime so that you may inform his Majesty, while keeping news of such matters to the sole knowledge of parties associated. I have included a brief missive for the King within. I assure you that justice will be meted as appropriate for this crime. It is my most sincere hope that such news will not change your intentions towards my daughter, should the fault be determined to lay solely at the feet of Lord Baratheon. I have requested the maester of Castle Black and a distant relative of yours, Maester Aemon, to attend to my daughter and to confirm the intact nature of her maidenhead.

Your faithful servant,

Rickard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North

Arthur reread the letter twice to make sure he had read the words correctly before looking up at Rhaegar.  The Prince had stopped pacing and was staring at him.
Arthur knew what was going through Rhaegar’s head. He could see something ugly rearing its head, the dragon’s fury raised from its slumber. It was that hint of the Targaryen madness that emerged in only rare cases in the Crown Prince…

It was clear he was beyond furious with Robert and worried for Lyanna. It certainly did not help matters that Lord Stark had made little mention of Lyanna’s state beyond sustaining injuries.

*Damn that Baratheon idiot! The Northerners hold guest right sacred - what was the man thinking, to assault the Warden of the North’s daughter within her own home?!*

“I’m sure she is fine-”

“She is injured. He must have hit her, Arthur. The brute, I ought to ride North and kill the man myself.”

“Rhaegar, you cannot ride North, you know that. Lord Stark wishes to keep the affair as silent as possible - your presence would only complicate matters further, not only for him but also for her.”

Rhaegar slammed his hand on one of the nearby trees before collapsing back onto the bench across from Ashara. Arthur’s sister had been remarkably quiet this whole time, clearly not understanding exactly what was going on.

Then his friend did something most unusual - he laughed.

This was not a joyous laugh though. Nay, the harsh tones and scathing words that accompanied it belied its near hysterical quality.

“He thought I would care more for the nature of her maidenhead than for the state of her wellbeing. What a ridiculous notion, that I should wish to discontinue my interest due to the unconscionable actions of my cousin.”

Despite his friend’s words, Arthur could well understand Rickard Stark’s concern - a woman’s purity was held as a prize for most men in the Seven Kingdoms, particularly that of a noblewoman. Dorne tended to not uphold such ridiculous double standards, so the fascination had never really made sense
to Arthur, but it was not unusual for Lord Stark to think such a thing might be important to the Crown Prince.

In fact, it was a testament to Rhaegar’s slightly irrational state that he did not recognize the reality of the statement. Not being a maiden had, after all, been the reasoning the Prince had used to nullify any marriage to Elia Martell just over a year past.

“I cannot even send you or Oswell to represent me at the trial,” the Prince continued, his voice dejected, “it would be no more discreet than my own presence.”

“I am sure her brothers will support her. I cannot imagine Brandon Stark took the news lightly.”

Rhaegar let out a snort, no doubt imagining the wild and protective Brandon going after Robert Baratheon for harming his sister. Arthur still remembered the image of the wild Heir to Winterfell brandishing his bare steel in the Wolfswood, threatening the Crown Prince.

“No doubt Lord Stark is blessing his old gods that it was the second son who discovered the incident. Were it Brandon, that letter might well include news of Lord Baratheon’s untimely death.”

After a moment of silence, Rhaegar rose, retrieving the letter back from Arthur. He turned and took Ashara’s hand, placing a quick kiss on her knuckles.

“Lady Ashara, I hope you’ll excuse my behavior, we will have to return to our earlier conversation at another time. I’m afraid I must see my father.”

“Of course, your Grace. I pray you find a timely solution to whatever incident has arisen.”

“As do I.” The Prince turned to Arthur then, “Arthur, you may remain to escort your sister back at your leisure. I shall be with the King.”

Arthur nodded, recognizing that the Crown Prince wished for a bit of time to himself on the walk to see the King. Arthur rested a hand on Rhaegar’s shoulder as his friend moved to exit the clearing. “I’m certain the incident will be resolved. Have faith in Lyanna, she is a strong woman.”
Rhaegar took a deep breath, pausing as he looked at him. Arthur knew how turbulent Rhaegar’s mind could be, but Lyanna Stark had seemed a resilient sort. The girl they had met at the Wall certainly was, and she had spoken quite fondly of her family - at least the few mentions she had made - no doubt they would be providing her with the support she would need.

Arthur watched as the Prince walked down the path, his dark clothes blending into the shadows of the hedges. Rhaegar, the man, had always preferred the shadows to the light, quite the opposite of the image Rhaegar, the Crown Prince, had to portray. Arthur could only hope that this incident would not distract the Prince too much from the other concerns at hand.

He sighed as the Prince passed from view, turning back to this sister, still seated on the bench, watching him.

“I’m sorry you had to witness that, Ash. I’m quite certain that’s not how you imagined your afternoon to end.”

His sister shook her head, her violet eyes kind as he approached her.

“‘Tis not a bother - it is nice to spend time with you two whenever you are free.”

“I shall be better about seeing you when I am off duty-”

“Artie, you know I will only send you off to go sleep. Your duty is far more important, and I shan’t be the reason for any mistakes due to lack of sleep.”

Arthur rose an eyebrow at her, chuckling, “Dearest sister, have you so little faith in my abilities?”

“Nay, ‘tis said around the Seven Kingdoms you are the gods’ gift, the greatest knight of our time. But even you are a man, and all men must rest, despite what you and the Crown Prince may think.”

Arthur frowned, momentarily reminded of the reasons for such late nights and limited sleep, “Things have been… busy. ‘Tis difficult to prioritize rest when sleep shall not fall upon one’s brow even if the opportunity arises.”
“Is there anything I can do?”

“Nay, and let us not speak of such topics,” Arthur rose from his seat, holding out his hand to Ashara, “I prefer to see you far from the realms of darkness in which we reside these days.”

His sister took the proffered hand, allowing him to aid her in standing by his side.

“I shall allow you to divert the conversation, but do remember, brother, that I am no longer a child.”

“You will always be my little sister, and I shall always protect you from those things in which you must not be involved.”

“Unfortunately, Artie, that is not always for you to decide.” Arthur frowned at her, but she continued, changing the topic as she nudged him back towards the main grounds. “In other news, our brother wrote to us - I received the raven this morning.”

“And is he well? How fares Allyria?”

“He is in good health, and sends his well wishes. He claims that Allyria is a sweet babe, though she has sapped much energy from Mother.”

“Mother has always recovered. ‘Tis natural that a birth this late in life would drain her more than usual.”

“Indeed, ‘tis much what Alfie said.”

Arthur chuckled at the nickname for their eldest brother - as a little girl, Ashara hadn’t been able to pronounce either of her brothers’ names, shortening them to Alfie and Artie. While she used Arthur’s nickname often, it was rare to hear Alfred’s name shortened so; as the Heir, Alfred had always been the more serious of them.

Thinking of his older brother drew Arthur’s thoughts to the man he would eventually replace.
“And Father?”

Ashara sighed, signifying the good news was not to continue.

“Alfred wrote that there has been little improvement. The Maester claims that he shall live out many more years, but Alfie says the man has only just barely finished the final ring on his chain - that had the Maester seen Father in his prime, he would not come to such conclusions.”

“A great number of men live through such trials.”

“You have not seen him in years, Arthur. You do not know how much worse it has gotten. Even when I last left home, he could barely reach the second landing without a pause on the steps.”

“‘Tis that shoulder wound, he should have had it seen to when it first occurred.”

“You were not there. You are not the only stubborn man in this family.”

Arthur glared at her, though his heart was weighed down by the reminder of his absence. It had indeed been some time since he had returned home to Dorne - even longer since he had truly spent time with his ailing Father. His Mother had ventured to the Capital when Ashara had moved there, giving him the opportunity to see her. She had just discovered her pregnancy with their youngest sister, Allyria, a babe nearly 18 years younger than Ashara. According to their eldest brother, Alfred, the baby could practically be Ashara’s child, so close was the resemblance.

“I know.” He sighed, allowing the guilt to wash over him briefly. “And I cannot say when I will next be able to return home.”

Ashara frowned, her voice quiet, “Might be you could ask the Prince for a short reprieve? Father is dying, Arthur, there is no other way to say is.”

Arthur shook his head, “It is not the Crown Prince alone who must approve of it.”

They walked the rest of the path in silence, the distance from home and the reality of their separation from family heavy. As they approached the more occupied portion of the gardens, laughter and
chatter returned, signalling the break from Court was over.

Ashara looked back to him as they breached the main path, a forced smile back on her face.

“You need not escort me all the way. I do believe the Queen is taking tea in the other part of the gardens.”

Arthur nodded, noting the flash of a white cloak in the distance among the groves.

“I shall leave you here then?”

“Indeed, I imagine your friend shall need you.”

Arthur raised an eyebrow at her wording - she had not read the letter herself, but surely could have gleaned a little of the issue at hand.

“I suggest you do not involve yourself in the matter, Ashara…”

“Of course not, I am certain the Crown Prince is entirely capable of managing the situation. However, a Lady can always use her words to divert attention away…”

Arthur shook his head, “Ashara, there is no need-”

“On the contrary, Arthur. I think there is much need. Should he wish to keep this incident quiet, ‘twould be better for Court gossip to be occupied by some other chatter. Fear not, brother, I shall handle the issue.”

Before he could respond, his sister turned in a flounce of silk skirts, skipping a few steps before setting off down the path towards the Queen’s party.

Arthur watched her go, waiting until she turned the corner to the small pavilion where the Queen sat with her attendants.
As he walked in the other direction, his thoughts wandered.

*Perhaps she is not wrong.*

News of the incident between Robert Baratheon and Lyanna Stark would only bring Lyanna undue attention - without ever having stepped foot out of the North - it was likely not the first impression she would wish to make. No doubt it would also complicate Rhaegar’s plans of keeping his interest in her muted, as the gossips would be keen for any information on the Stark girl.

Arthur sighed as he entered the shadow of Maegor’s, the looming darkness of the entrance in front of him. He shivered briefly as he passed out of the cold and into the entry hall.

Winter couldn’t end fast enough for Arthur Dayne - yet he feared their troubles were only just beginning.

Chapter End Notes

Dear beautiful readers!

I'm sorry for the long absence - fear not, I shall not abandon this story! However, my real life has been absolutely bonkers - I'm applying for graduate school, potentially just got a new job, and am trying to pass local legislation with my volunteer organizations, all while working full-time. So unfortunately, writing had to take a pause :(

BUT, we are back. Updates may be slow, as I continue to work through my life stuffs, but just know I am here, trying to write, loving your comments and engagement with the story, even if I can't or don't respond.

As a note, I know there were quite a few negative comments on the previous chapters (along with many many wonderful, thoughtful comments!). While I appreciate constructive feedback and enjoy thoughtful discussion of people's interpretations of canon, I would note that this is very much a personal act of creativity, especially given it is canon-divergent - these stories take a lot of energy and care. It can be immensely discouraging when someone attacks one's work without regard for that - there is no need for negativity, given the multitude of stories available on this site. I love interacting with my readers and only hope that these interactions remain helpful and respectful (even
when simply between readers).

I'm not sure when I'll next be able to update, but I shall try to do so as soon as possible.

Thank you for your patience and I hope you enjoyed xx

olichar_lottie
Lyanna

The wind howled in her ears, the sting of icy air prickling across the exposed skin of her face. She clenched her thighs around Silverwing, rising out of her seat.

She channeled all the emotions of the last fortnight into the force of the blow: Shock. Fear. Frustration.

The first days after the assault she’d been in a state of shock. Brandon had convinced Father to allow them to go on an extended hunt in the Wolfswood, staying in a guard tower in the northern part of the woods. For days after their arrival, Lyanna had ridden silently, focusing all of her energy on the feel of Silverwing beneath her and her bow across her back.

Yet, she continued to feel out of control. The powerlessness was crushing her. In her sleep, she was back in that corridor, the shadows pressing in on her, choking her, her screams unanswered, pale blue eyes grazing her body like a predator who has caught his prey.

To escape the nightmares, she found herself spending more and more of her nights in Nymeria's mind, finding her own power again as she allowed the bloodlust of the hunt to takeover her senses.

*I am a direwolf. I am a direwolf. I am a direwolf.*
During the day, however, it had taken all of her effort to pretend she was okay.

Everything was shaded gray, the shadows pressing in upon her even in bright sunlight, coloring her surroundings a bleak shade of reality.

The laughter that had always simmered in her belly had been extinguished. Her innocence torn away. For the first time in her life, she felt weak.

She was afraid.

And she did not like it one bit. She had always run through life at full speed - danger hadn't make her flinch . . . it had encouraged her on.

Remembering her helplessness, the fact she couldn't escape, that it had taken little effort from Robert to overpower her, crushed part of her.

And then, a few days into their Wolfswood sojourn, she reached a breaking point.

Another sleepless night after an exhausting day found her hiking up the mountain path behind the tower with Nymeria, the moonlight peeking out from behind light clouds illuminating her way. It took time to reach the lookout, a narrow ledge jutting out from the side of the mountain, which rose to sheer heights beyond the point. The moon hung at its peak in the sky by the time she arrived.

Stepping out along the edge, Lyanna barely noticed Nymeria growling a warning, choosing to remain on the path. A bracing wind battered her face, tearing at her cloak and unbound hair, and for a second she lost her balance. Seconds felt like hours as she fought to stay on her feet.

Is this it?

Recovering before she fell from the dizzying height, she found herself contemplating the great expanse below her. The trees of the Wolfswood crowded the base of the cliff, the movement of the leaves in the wind like dark waves against fields of snow. The moon shone bright, blanketing everything in a pale glow. The landscape was a mix of blacks, grays and whites, harsh but beautiful.
The Stark colors. It was everything she loved about the North. It was home.

Determination had come.

Another gust of wind slammed into her, but she was ready this time, braced to allow the icy air to wrap around her. She felt the cold seep into her, chilling her blood, steeling her resolve.

She was the blood of the First Men. She was the daughter of the ancient Kings of Winter. She was the North - ice ran through her veins. She would not be tamed.

Lyanna had never ascribed to the belief that her sex would slow her down when she was younger. She had always been surrounded by men, had enjoyed their activities, sometimes excelling in them, besting men at their own sports.

Now, she had seen her weakness. But like a direwolf, she would not give up, she would not be tamed.

Standing there, gazing down upon the Wolfwood, she swore to regain her fearlessness and her strength. She had always thrived on the beauty of shooting her bow, the thrum of pleasure she got from the physical exertion and effort. Lyanna was determined; she would not allow herself to be weak—she would not retreat, she would advance.

It proved easier than she thought to convince Brandon to agree.

The next morning when she asked him to teach her the joust, stating that jousting was mostly about horsemanship and she was the best horseman in the North. he hadn’t scoffed or argued. He’d merely arranged to begin teaching her in the small clearing on the side of the tower.

The sword would come later, he told her, once they were back at Winterfell.

At first, she was clumsy with the lightweight poles Brandon had the guards fashion, struggling with the weight. Taking after her mother, Lyanna had a slight build; she did not carry muscle the way her brothers did. But she learned quickly, working with Brandon to determine strategies to relieve some of the weight, techniques that were more efficient. Once she could successfully couch a lance,
Brandon promised to show her moves that would allow her to take advantage of her smaller frame and ease in the saddle, and they jested about how it was a shame women couldn’t partake in the joust.

“There’s something strangely appealing about the idea of a woman knight.” Brandon said.

“Who knows, brother, perhaps I shall ask the Crown Prince to knight me instead of marrying me,” Lyanna had replied.

And though a familiar twinge of pain shot up her lower arm as she shifted her wrist to hit the target directly, it was the first time she felt herself genuinely smiling, a relief from the dark sentiments that clouded her vision over the past weeks.

The pain endured in her wrists even now from where Robert had gripped them. Lyanna had refused any treatment in spite of the daily reminder the mottled skin provided; she did not want to forget.

Robert had woken up the morning after the assault with a roaring headache and no recollection of the events.

He’d argued it was a misunderstanding, citing how he believed Maester Walys’ words of assurance on the betrothal came directly from Lord Stark. Even Ned had seemed on the brink of punching the Stag Lord.

Lyanna still shivered when she recalled thought back to the way his face scrunched up in confusion when her father had explained that he was under house arrest, explaining that a trial would take place in a moon once Lord Tully and Lord Arryn arrived, and that Robert would remain under house arrest until that time. And though Brynden had told her that the bruises around her wrists might still be visible at the time of the trial since Robert had bruised the bone, the marks were likely to be faint Lyanna hoped that he was right; she wanted everyone in the castle to see the result of Robert’s “misunderstanding.”

The thump of wood on wood resounded over the wind, the recoil of the hit blasting through her arm. She held strong, her shoulder straining as she rode through the rest of the track where she reined in Silver and heaved the makeshift lance into the snowbank. She inhaled sharply, attempting to bring her breath under control. As the pounding of her heart dimmed in her ears, she was able to hear the cheers from the men watching nearby.
Lyanna turned to take in the image of an exuberant Brandon jogging towards her.

Training her in the joust had been good for more than just her mood.

“You held the finish! Just wait ‘til Ben sees you, he’ll be furious that you are better than him already!”

Her brother’s joy was contagious as she released a laugh at the image Brandon painted.

He reached her, his hands flying to her waist to lift her down from the saddle before drawing her into a hug.

“You are the strongest person I’ve ever known, Lya.”

She pulled away from his arms to look up at him, hoping to convey her immense gratitude for his care the last weeks.

“Thank you, Bran. For everything, for taking me away, for teaching me, for being there-”

“I will always be there. From now on, I will be with you whenever you need me.”

“Fear not, I shall not need your services once you teach me the sword.”

Brandon chuckled, turning her towards where their guards stood.

“Regardless of your prowess with a sword, a bow, or a knife, ‘tis never bad to have someone protecting your rear. We are a pack, and you know what the Starks say about packs.”

Lyanna thought back to the hunt she had gone on with Tor last night in Nymeria’s mind - over the past two weeks, her direwolves had found a small pack of wolves that they had taken to hunting with after Tor had killed the alpha male. The hunts were not more fruitful, for the two direwolves were quite effective themselves, but it was far more efficient with a pack. Hunting had become quite arduous the longer winter lingered…
Lyanna looked up into matching Stark grey eyes as her brother spoke the words passed on from the Age of the Kings of Winter, “When the snows fall and the white wind blows—”

Together the two siblings completed the phrase, “The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.”

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**Ned**

Ned stared out of his window, watching as fresh snow fell upon the courtyard. The space was largely empty at the moment, aside from a few servants scurrying about in preparation for the impending storm.

But it was another scene that played out before his eyes as he gazed out into the wintery bluster, a scene he had seen played out much closer.

*Tendrils of hair fluttered about his little sister’s face as she mounted her beautiful grey horse. Ned frowned as she turned toward him. She looked small and fragile, unlike herself without the smile blossoming across her face.*

*The bruise had taken on a deep purple color with spots of maroon, contrasting strongly with her pale skin. Ned knew the shading matched the marks around her wrists. Ned looked over to see their brother grimace on the next horse, anger lines permanently etched into his face. Ned had seen no other expression from Brandon in the last 36 hours.*

“Are you certain you are okay to ride out?” the deep voice of their Father resounded through the courtyard, drawing Ned’s attention, “One of our bannermen would surely house you instead.”
“I shall be okay, Father. Silver would never fail me. ‘Tis high time Nymeria and Torrhen went for a longer hunt.”

His face taut, Father nodded before turning to Brandon.

“You will be back in a fortnight. I expect the guards to remain with you at all times. Should the storms worsen, return here or make for Deepwood Motte - I have informed Lord Glover that you will be in the area.”

Brandon nodded, turning away to join the guardsmen at the Hunter’s Gate.

Ned watched his father approach Lyanna on Silver, his hand reaching up to her, “Be safe, my darling. Remember we are here for you.”

Lyanna took his hand with both of hers, granting him a small smile. While only a fraction of her usual effusiveness, it was far more than anything Ned had seen since two nights before.

“We will be safe, Father, I promise.”

She had glanced his way as she turned her horse, offering him a wan smile but no words. All he saw was her swaying in the saddle as they rode out of Winterfell into the Wolfswood.

Ned shook his head, glancing back out towards the courtyard. How many times had Lya mentioned her dislike of Robert? How often had he disregarded her concerns?

“It’s not your fault, Ned.”

Ned flinched before he looked over to see his little brother standing in the doorway. Benjen was dressed for riding, his thick winter cloak draped across his arm, snowflakes melting to drip onto the wood floor.

“Father blames himself too. You and he have always been the same that way.”
“I should have listened to her. She’s my sister, how could I-”

“Because Robert is like a brother. Father always says that we see the good in the people we love.”

Ned sighed, knowing it was so much more complicated than that. Yes, Robert was like a brother - in some ways, Ned was closer to Robert than he was to Brandon or Benjen. Yet it was not his love for Robert which prompted his guilt.

“I wanted to be just like Bran when we were younger,” Ned began, his voice soft and low. “When Lya was born and he found a kindred spirit in her, I thought something was wrong with me - that somehow I was not Stark enough.”

\textit{That damn wolf’s blood.}

A blessing and a curse shared by Brandon and Lyanna, making them vivacious and lively, but also rash and willful. Ned couldn’t count the number of times he had been jealous of his siblings’ innate ability to make friends and live life at breakneck speed.

“But then I saw what the impulsiveness got them, the trouble it caused. Even at six, when I left Winterfell, I convinced myself that it was only a destructive force. That nothing good could come of acting the way they did. So I fought whatever might remind me of that wildness.”

Ned had seen the fights, the stupidity, the near-death downsides of such a life. Ned loved his siblings, but how many times in the last month had he questioned their maturity? How many times had he shook his head at Lyanna, who despite becoming a woman was still as volatile as wildfire?

“Robert always had the wildness in him, so it seemed natural for me to be the counterbalance. He loved me for the way I was - there was never any need to be just like him. But as I stood in that hallway, watching him sway as Lya lay on the ground, I felt the anger swelling in my body. And I did nothing. I fought my feelings, when Bran wouldn’t have thought twice about hitting the man who harmed our sister in our home. Brandon would have defended her in a heartbeat - and not just because of the wolf’s blood. You and Father would have fought him in an instant as well. Father said it was shock, but how could I have just sent Robert to his room? How could I have even suggested allowing Lya to go to her room alone?”

“Because you aren’t Brandon. You’re Quiet Ned, the one who thinks through things. It doesn’t
make you any less Stark.”

“When have Starks ever been known for thinking? When has honor held a higher place than protecting the pack?”

Benjen watched him, his head tilted to the side as he considered the question.

Ned sighed again just as Benjen spoke.

“Sometimes, doing nothing is the better reaction.”

He looked at Benjen, who was approaching the window, standing beside him as he continued.

“Had it been Bran who had found Lya, he would have killed Robert, and that would have brought even more trouble. Though Robert’s assault of Lya might have excused it, killing a man who you have granted guest right is a sin, and killing a Lord Paramount has consequences, according to Father. That alone would likely have held back Father’s own impulse to violence. And as for me, I could never have beaten Robert, even when he was intoxicated. I can’t even beat Lya.”

Despite his distress, Ned chuckled lightly at the last bit before thinking through Benjen’s statements. Indeed, Father had been blatantly clear that any violent rebuttal against Robert would have gone badly for both parties - fortunately, Father had had the foresight to place guards at Robert’s door before telling Brandon of the assault that night. Their eldest brother had seen red, declaring that he would gut Robert after castrating him with his sword. Having found guards at Robert’s door, Brandon had convinced himself it was Maester Walys’ fault, barging into the man’s rooms to take out his anger.

But Brandon’s anger had revealed the Maester’s deception. And in the end, it was Brandon who took care of Lyanna, who comforted her and escorted her to her room that night. It was Brandon who suggested the extended hunting trip to get her out of the Keep, away from Robert. It was Brandon who rode out with her and the two direwolves, siblings side by side.

Ned sighed, hoping the guilt would fade. A fortnight without his siblings in the Keep had been miserable, not purely from the unhappiness pervading Winterfell following the event. Ned hadn’t realized how much joy Brandon and Lyanna brought to Winterfell.
Benjen’s voice cut through his thoughts once more, “They should be returning shortly. I ran into the outrider on my ride back. I figured you would wish to be there when they arrive.”

Ned nodded. Turning back to look at the snowy courtyard, his thoughts drifted to the man who would most assuredly not be welcome to greet his siblings. He heard the wood of the door click shut as his youngest brother left him alone to ponder Robert’s situation.

The first few times he’d visited Robert, his friend was apologetic, attempting to explain his actions. He claimed it was the alcohol and Maester Walys’ assurances that Lyanna would be his.

"Ned, you know me, you know I love Lya, I would never hurt her! How could I ever hurt someone I love?"

Ned had directed the conversation elsewhere repeatedly as the days went on, the sincerity in his friend's voice confusing him even as it tempered his anger.

Maybe he'd misread the situation, maybe they’d all had too much to drink... Robert had never harmed a woman as far as he knew - in fact, every women he’d seen with Robert had been more than happy to entertain the smooth-talking Storm Lord. Considering the man’s infatuation with Lyanna, Ned found himself questioning his judgement of the situation he had walked into. After all, Lyanna could be volatile when the wolf’s blood roared to life and the influence of spending so much time with those direwolves could only encourage such behavior...

Doubts had started to swirl around his head as he struggled to reconcile the image of his playful and boisterous best friend with the image he had seen in that hallway, a violent man set on taking what he wanted without any regard for propriety or honor. Maybe the whole situation had just been blown out of proportion, a misunderstanding caught up in a haze of fatigue and alcohol. Ned himself had had a few drinks that night.

Lyanna’s absence hadn’t helped with the emerging doubts which bloomed with the nurturing of his guilt - Ned only heard Robert’s side during the two weeks she lingered in the Wolfswood with Brandon.

Robert had begged more than once to speak to Lyanna as soon as she returned from her sojourn with Brandon.

As the Stark guards poured into the courtyard, heralding the arrival of his wild siblings, Ned
remembered that he had promised to ask. He took a deep breath before descending to the courtyard, bracing himself to enter the storm.

Ned felt a rush of guilt as he saw the mottled purple bruise covering his baby sister’s face, but he had given Robert his word that he would try. It didn’t go well. Brandon practically snarled upon hearing Robert’s name, and Lyanna, predictably displeased by the mere mention of the request, had denied it without hearing the full of it, informing him that she had no desire to see Robert unless absolutely necessary.

When Ned tried to push his friend's case, softly explaining that perhaps it had been a misunderstanding and that they should just listen to one another, he saw the pain flash across his sister's face as she reached out to still Brandon.

Ned didn’t fail to notice the thick bruise around her wrist as she held Brandon back. His brother looked about ready to punch him in the face as their sister spoke.

"A misunderstanding, Ned? Your best friend had every intention of raping me in our home. If you think that I have any desire to speak to the man then you are seriously mistaken." She turned to Brandon then, "Bran, easy. We should speak to Father and then I'd like a bath before dinner. I'll speak to Jory about arranging baths for Tor and Nymeria as well - Father will kill us if they enter the Keep so dirty."

Lyanna left them in the courtyard, grimacing as she walked away towards her rooms.

Ned missed Lyanna's smile.

Brandon sent him a glare before turning on his heel and stalking towards the keep, presumably to their father's solar. Yet again, Ned wished for the days of their childhood, when he had been Bran’s accomplice in mischief. Even once they were fostered, Bran had always respected Ned's quiet and reserved nature, calling him the perfect advisor. Now his oldest brother could barely stand a moment in his presence.

Brandon still couldn’t understood how Ned hadn’t even thrown a single punch that night.

Ned had chosen sides without wanting to; he’d tried to temper his fury, consider the implications, be a voice of reason, but that didn’t resonate with his older brother. Brandon was furious about everything having to do with Robert, including that he’d been detained in his rooms, rather than in
the dungeons. Confronting their father, Brandon claimed Rickard only cared that his precious property had almost been broken, cheapening the value.

It was the first time Ned had seen his father genuinely angry. Rickard Stark had been on the verge of hitting his heir, yelling at Brandon for speaking before he thought and that his rashness would be the end of the Stark house. The Lord of Winterfell had explained forcefully the political ramifications of imprisoning another Lord Paramount. He had even explained that if it wasn't for Ned's testimony, Robert would have likely gotten off unscathed - it was Lyanna's voice against a Lord Paramount's, and one who was already in talks of marriage with her father. The testimony of a woman and a servant would only stand with a reputable source - another nobleman.

Ned had understood then that it was his voice that would or wouldn't condemn Robert. It was one of the reasons he had been to see Robert so much. His word would determine whether the crime was real as Lyanna said, or a simple misunderstanding as Robert explained.

Thus, contemplating the awkward family dinner he was certain to experience in an hour, he found himself outside the door of his best friend's guest room again.

He entered the room, engulfed in heat. Robert had the fire blazing, the heat suffocating for Ned in his fur lined cloak. Robert had yet to become accustomed to the harsh chill of the North, preferring to imitate the Southern heat in his rooms.

Ned found his friend at the window of the front room, an empty wine cup in his hand. Ned knew his father had limited the amount of wine sent to his friend, supposedly for the benefit of all involved.

"You have good news, Ned? She will come won't she? She will come see me, now that she's back." Ned could hear the hope and certainty in his friend's voice. He suddenly felt like the villain - nothing he did or said made either party happy. An utter mess, truly.

"Robert," he started, choosing his words carefully, "she is still a bit uncertain about being around you. She may just need more time..."

Robert whipped around to face him, his expression one of disbelief, "Uncertain around me? More time? She's been gone for a fortnight. What does she need more time for?"

"You scared her, Robert. You forget how big and imposing you are, and Lya is a small woman, I think she is worried you may hurt her again."
"Hurt her?? Ned, I told you, I love her!" His friend's voice was laced with desperation, but there was something else too, "she's the one hurting me! She's the one who bit me! My arm is still infected from the bloody bite she gave me!"

Robert’s untreated arm had been the one battle Brandon had won, especially with Maester Walys dismissed and no replacement. Maester Aemon was expected to arrive in a few days but Robert’s arm was to be left untreated—the extent of his physical punishment until further notice. The wound had festered, leaving Robert uncomfortable with a loose bandage covering the pus-filled skin.

“She bit me, Ned. I would think she’d want to see me, to apologize and make things right between us.”

Ned flinched. The wound was an enduring sign of Lyanna's struggle, a signal that the incident couldn't really have been just a "misunderstanding. Ned recognized his anger rebuilding as he listened to Robert place blame on his sister.

“Robert,” Ned ground out the words, attempting to convey the gravity of the situation, "Lyanna bit you to escape your hold. You cannot seriously think she would wish to see you so soon. Besides, it is unlikely Father would permit an audience between you two.”

Robert stepped closer, his unhurt arm waving, “She needs to understand, Ned, she is going to be mine. You must convince her, explain she has no choice in this matter, that she is mine. She’s the only thing that shall make me happy. I will have her. I will feel her in my arms—”

Something snapped inside of Ned. Time blurred in a flurry of movement. A burst of pain shot through his fist as it contacted with flesh.

Silence roared in his ears as he stood there, his hand throbbing as Robert clutched his face. Impossibly wide blue eyes stared at him, a blossoming red spot an indication that the punch had indeed been as real as it felt.

Finally, Ned broke what felt like an eternity of silence.

“Lyanna is not an object to be possessed, Robert. She is my sister, and you harmed her, in our home. ‘Tis only by my father’s mercy and any friendship that remains between us that you are not subject to the punishment for breaking guest right in the North.”
Robert stared at him, but Ned had already turned to exit, yanking the door open and allowing it to slam behind him. He felt the blood pumping in his veins, the wild feeling thrilling and frightening.

As the lone wolf roared back to life, Ned realized it was time for him to clear the air with his siblings.

It was time for him to rejoin his true pack.

Chapter End Notes

The chapters may be more sporadic (not that they aren't already!) as I'm incredibly over-committed. But hoping to have more time to write in the next few weeks before starting my new job!

Thank you as always for your wonderful comments - you guys keep me motivated and committed to finishing this no matter how many months it takes!

xx
Rhaella

The screech echoed as Viserys flew around the sitting room, his arms flapping wide like dragon wings, his joy contagious.

Rhaella watched her ladies in waiting, giggling at his game, making their own sound effects to add to his imaginary world. In this room, at least, they could be spared the realities of Court.

*To be young and yet unknowing in the ways of the world.*

A knock sounded on the door, only just proceeding the entrance of her other son. As her ladies rose and sank into curteys, Rhaella watched Rhaegar, the subtle flashes of anger evident only to a mother.

“Rhaegar!”

Viserys ran to his brother, wrapping his small arms around one of Rhaegar’s legs. Her younger son seemed oblivious to his brother’s mood, and Rhaella could see her eldest attempt to tamp down on his emotions. It seemed to be posing a challenge on this day.

“Viserys, why don’t you go with Lady Jeyne to watch the practice yard? I do believe the squires will be at work.”

Her youngest turned to her with a frown on his face, “But I want to play with Rhaegar! Rhaegar will play with me, right?” The latter statement was posed to his older brother, pleading clear across
Viserys’ small face.

“Maybe later, Vis. Right now, I need to speak to Mother.”

Viserys pouted, prompting Rhaegar to go to one knee in front of his brother.

“I promise I will come to your chambers this evening and I shall tell you the story of Daenys the Dreamer once more. Does that sound good?”

Viserys nodded several times, jumping to hug Rhaegar before moving to take Lady Jeyne’s hand. Rhaegar remained on one knee, watching them even after the wooden door had closed firmly.

“What is it?” she whispered, knowing the signs of her eldest’s frustration.

Rhaegar stood slowly, staring at her before moving to her side.

“There’s been news from the North,” he spoke quietly, his hushed voice edged with a hint of anger.

Rhaella frowned, her eyes seeking her son’s questioningly, but his gaze lingered on the far wall. He continued after a moment.

“Lord Baratheon has assaulted Lord Stark’s daughter.” Rhaella felt her eyebrows arch on surprise, but Rhaegar spoke on, his eyes never leaving the far wall. “Lord Stark’s second son happened upon the incident before the man’s original intent could be fulfilled. Lord Stark has requested the Crown’s support in whatever judgement he deems appropriate.”

Rhaella reached out to place a hand on her son’s arm, feeling the muscles tense and relax. “Is Lord Stark’s daughter unharmed?”

Rhaegar’s voice remained emotionless, “She has sustained some injuries, though her maidenhead has remained intact. Lord Stark did not provide more information than that.”

The Queen could only imagine what thoughts were roiling through her son’s head - he was clearly
partial to Lyanna Stark after his visit and impromptu meeting with her at the Wall. Hearing that the girl had sustained injuries in her own home could not have pleased Rhaegar.

“I have spoken to the King and he has granted me permission to handle the affair personally.”

“What did the King say?”

“The King cares little for the girl’s feelings - he cared more for the fact that he was not informed of another potential marriage alliance between Lord Paramounts. I do believe he spent more time ranting about Lord Baratheon’s presence in Winterfell than his actions.”

“At least he does not blame the girl.”

“Nay. But he inquired about her beauty, as if the fact that she is pretty would prompt such behavior.”

“Rhaegar, my darling… I know you are upset, but you must be clear-headed when you consider this situation. The girl is lucky her father is taking her side and able to punish Lord Baratheon. Another woman of any other status in life would not have quite so much sway.”

Rhaegar stared at her, which prompted Rhaella to sigh. Men so often forgot the usual plight of women - had Lyanna Stark been married to Lord Baratheon, very few would even seek retribution for the case. ‘Twas the role most women knew to be theirs from the moment they were old enough to know such things.

“What will you do about the case?”

Rhaegar sighed, “I will grant Lord Stark the power to deliver justice as he sees fit. The King has requested the Warden of the North be informed that, should Lord Baratheon repeat such actions, he may find himself short either a hand or a title.”

Rhaella raised an eyebrow, surprised that Aerys would threaten such recompense for an action against a young woman he knew not at all. Rhaegar continued before she could question such a statement.
“I shall also offer the hospitality of the Red Keep to Lady Stark next year. Father has deemed it necessary to have the woman presented at Court.”

“I do not see such an offer being accepted so readily by Lord Stark, even with your informal courting period.”

“I do not either. It seems Lord Stark has been quite content to keep his youngest children far from King’s Landing. So I was hoping you might offer to host Lyanna with her older brother Brandon after the tournament at Harrenhal.”

Rhaella nodded her agreement - having the girl come with her older brother would undoubtedly be more acceptable to the Warden of the North. Combining the trip with the proposed tournament at Harrenhal would also diminish the perceived distance of the trip, given the proximity of Harrenhal and the Capital.

“So you will continue to pursue her then?”

Rhaegar looked at her sharply, “Of course! Why does everyone believe I shall be deterred by such an action?”

Rhaella gently stroked Rhaegar’s arm, “Darling, I did not think you would be, ‘twas merely a question. But I should warn you, she may be less open for the time being.”

“What do you mean, less open?”

Rhaella sighed again, thinking of her own battles in her relationship. The physical abuse had long ago stopped holding such sway upon her person - bruises healed, scratches could be mended. Aerys would never dare do more, for fear of the gods’ retribution should he kill another of Targaryen blood. But the torment of fear and helplessness took its toll psychologically - physical hurts would fade, but the memories lingered. Lyanna Stark was not much older than the first time Rhaella herself had felt the brutality of a man’s fist.

“Rhaegar, my love, Lady Stark has just been through a physical trauma. Such incidents do not only leave a mark upon one’s body, but also on one’s mind and soul. I am certain she will endure, but it is possible she may be more reserved as she endeavours to heal.”
Rhaegar stared at her, clearly having not considered such a fact.

“But she will recover, won’t she?” Her son’s words did not carry quite as much certainty as they usually did.

Rhaella nodded, before adding softly, “But she will likely be affected by the memory even after the bruises fade. Just be cautious, there is no need to be overeager.”

Rhaegar’s anger dissipated as he turned full to her, gently grasping her hand.

“Apologies, I did not think how this might feel for you…”

“Rhaegar, such actions have long lost their power over me. On the contrary, I am glad you have informed me. Likely the King shall use the incident at some point to diminish the girl - hopefully I may be of some comfort to her when she visits.”

He squeezed her hand, bringing it to his lips to place a light kiss on the back.

“You are the strongest woman I know, Mother.”

Rhaella smiled at him, looking up at her beautiful son.

“‘Tis all for you, my darling. Seeing you grow, praying for your happiness - that is what makes me wake each morning and yearn for the daylight each night. One day soon you shall understand.”

Rhaegar smiled, “One day soon…”
The dripping of melted snow was the only sound he’d heard for the last… who knew how many days? How many days had he been in this dungeon cell?

One false step, one push too far.

The words echoed around his head, his tongue flickering around his mouth, repeating the words. Tasting them. Feeling the weight of reality sink in.

“You seemed surprised by this news, Maester.”

Walys shivered, remembering the way Lord Stark’s voice had cut him with its iron tones and sharp edges.

“Of course I am surprised, my Lord! What sort of man takes advantage of guest right in such a manner?”

“A man who has been told he has the right to do so.”

Walys had never disliked Lyanna Stark - she had seemed an unruly obstacle after proving to be an uncooperative pawn in the marriage power brokerage. In fact, Walys had sincerely hoped to find her a husband that would bring her happiness - so few women were granted such, and Walys respected
the Starks enough to wish it for Lord Stark’s daughter. But most of all, Walys was not a man of violence. ‘Twas the reason he became a Maester - well, that and his bastard status.

Seeing the fire in her eyes on that fateful night, the clenching of her fists beneath the long drapes of her Father’s cloak, and the bruises blossoming across her face, Walys understood he had underestimated her just as much as Robert Baratheon.

“Who would have encouraged him to do such a thing?”

Lyanna took a step towards him, “Perhaps the man-”

“Lyanna,” Lord Stark interrupted, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. Walys noticed as the girl flinched slightly, before relaxing into the touch. “Why don’t you take a seat at my desk while we have this discussion. I would prefer to see you resting.”

The girl had seemed ready to protest, but thought better of it, nodding and moving to sit in Lord Stark’s chair behind the heavy oak desk. The wood seemed to swallow her.

“Maester Walys, I am not sure if you are fully understanding the situation…”

It had not taken long for Walys to understand the situation. The Stormlord had taken his encouragement on the potential for a formal betrothal as an indication of success. Walys had known the man was irrational, but he had not thought him completely daft - to take a noblewoman’s maidenhead before fully signing the betrothal agreement…

The door slammed open, wood slapping against stone only just proceeding the fury that was Lord Stark’s eldest.

“How dare this man remain alive, let alone free of fetters!”

Walys shrank a step back, noting the drawn sword Brandon Stark carried. Tufts of white material drifted down from the sharp edges, like snow in a storm. The man did not wait before roaring onto his next concern.
“While you are still a free man, care to explain these letters?”

Brandon held up a small packet of letters, a few slashes damaging the parchment. That explained the white tufts - it must be cotton from Walys’ mattress. He should have burned the damn letters…

“Where did you find those, Brandon?” inquired Lord Stark.

It had been over not a moment later. Mayhaps without the letters, Walys could have plead his innocence in regards to Robert’s actions. Yet the discovery of two smaller lies, lies that had been harmless at the time, destroyed any remaining credibility he held with the Lord of the North.

Treason.

It was a powerful word, carrying the weight of its consequences. Walys knew the ways of the North, had spent the last five years learning them and seeing them firsthand. The North might not be savage like Southerners believed, but they were merciless when it came to treason and guest right.

“Your life is forfeit.”

They had taken his chain and his robes, granting him rough-spun clothing and a meagre cloak to endure the chill of the dungeons. ’Twas enough to keep him alive, but no more.

It mattered not at all, for he thought death might prove preferable.

“I do not derive pleasure in the taking of a life, yet you shall no longer bear the chain of a Maester.”

“You can’t seriously think to spare him!”

Brandon Stark would be the death of his House, Walys had thought at that moment. Too prone to violence, lacking the thought process required to make a wise Lord. That fateful night, Walys had truly appreciated Lord Rickard’s choice of Lyanna to run Winterfell.

Her voice was soft but powerful, “It would not do to kill a man when he can be of use alive,
Brandon.

Brandon stared at his sister, engulfed in Lord Stark’s chair, “You cannot believe that, you of all-

“He has forfeited his Maester’s chain, Brandon. He will serve as all criminals do at the Wall - as a common man, convicted of one of the highest offenses.”

The Wall. Even now, a shiver ran through Walys to think of it. While Brandon’s frown had been muted, Lord Stark had nodded at his daughter’s judgement. Though Walys had attempted to argue against the punishment, Rickard Stark heard none of his pleas, and the accusations thrown about the next morning by a hungover Lord Baratheon had not helped Walys’ case in the least.

The shock had worn off days ago, leaving nothing but weariness and pain.

One false step, one mistaken ally…

His mind wandered through the last moons yet again, wondering what he had missed. Not for the first time, he thought back to Lord Stark’s second conversation with Lord Baratheon.

“Another suitor? How?”

Lord Stark’s lips twitched at the corners, belying some emotion that he masked on the rest of his face.

“As many of these situations come to pass, Lord Baratheon. My daughter is of-age, ‘tis not uncommon for suitors to make their case. I daresay they are no different from yourself. Or do you not deem Lyanna worthy of multiple suits?”

“Of course not, she deserves every man to worship at her feet. I am simply surprised they could offer a more favorable position for your daughter.”

“Alas, my Lord, position is not the only consideration. I do hope to allow my daughter some dose of happiness.”
“I will make her happy, Lord Stark. I swear it by my ancestors.”

“I do not doubt you would try, my Lord. ‘Tis more complicated than that.”

“Who is he, this suitor that presents a stronger case?”

“I did not say it was a stronger case. In fact, I said nothing regarding the man. We will keep it so until matters have advanced further.”

Walys had pressed Lord Stark for information on the suitor after Lord Baratheon had stormed out without an answer, but Rickard Stark had remained firm in his decision to not disclose the identity of the suitor. While the Keep whispered names of potential suitors, Roose Bolton among them, Walys knew it must be some Southerner with lofty connections. Walys had received Roose Bolton’s offer himself two days after, delivering it to Lord Stark in an attempt at gleaning more information.

He had received none, but it did not seem that Lord Stark favored the other option above Robert. That had made him believe it was simply a method of stalling, to allow Lyanna to come around to the idea.

If only he had dug deeper, he might have known what alternative existed - perhaps he would have discouraged the Stag Lord himself...

The faint sound of shuffling steps tore him from his thoughts, the pattern different from that of the usual jailors who brought him food three times a day. Mumbled voices preceded the sound of a key in the lock.

Walys straightened up in his spot on his pallet, pulling his cloak tighter to his body. He had received no visitors in days, so he knew not who might have come.

The jingle of a chain announced the slow entrance of an old man dressed in maester’s robes, his white hair cropped close to his head. He was accompanied by a young guard in all black, who carried a stool and a blanket, which he promptly arranged for the old man.

So Lord Stark had called upon the old Maester of the Night’s Watch - an unusual move, given the
Night’s Watch took no part in Westerosi politics. Regardless, Maester Aemon was respected by many of the Northern Lords who had spent time at Castle Black.

Silence remained as the Maester got situated on his stool, dismissing the guardsman to wait without. After that, the two men sat staring at each other for some time. It was the old Maester who broke the silence.

“Maester Walys.”

“I am a Maester no longer,” Walys corrected, his voice raspy from lack of use. His hand flew to where his chain used to lay, the weight missing. The Maester caught the movement, despite his failing eyesight.

“Ah, yes. ‘Tis strange isn’t it, how heavy our chains feel when we don them only for us to feel bare, empty, exposed without them?”

Walys didn’t answer, watching the man with a blank expression. When he realized that Walys would not answer, Maester Aemon continued, rearranging the heavy blanket around his legs.

“Soon, you will trade one set of vows for another. Twice I have sworn off family and comfort, yet the burden does not lighten.” The old man gazed off into the corner of the room, the dripping of the water the only sound in the room. “Nay, no matter how many years pass, this life we give up yearns to be revisited, like an orphaned child yearns for a parent. We swear ourselves to duty, but what does duty to a Kingdom mean when it requires leaving all you hold dear within that Kingdom behind?”

“I already swore off titles and kin when I left the South.”

“And yet you found something new in Winterfell to hold on to.”

Walys was silent once more, watching the old man in front of him as the Maester rapped on the cell door with his cane. The guardsman appeared instantly, taking the man’s outstretched hand and aiding him in standing. But Maester Aemon was not done with him.

“Power is a dangerous bedfellow, Walys Flowers. We grasp for her, yet she always seems to be just out of reach, our fingers feeling the touch of her hair as if no more than a breeze.”
The old man paused again, allowing his words to sink in.

“Like all things which bring us such gratification, power is fickle for she never keeps to one bed. And one day, you shall wake up to find she is gone.”

The Maester turned and took a few shuffling steps towards the entrance before turning back to Walys. For a brief moment, he could see violet shining in the depths of the old man’s eyes.

“Power corrupts, Walys Flowers. ‘Twould be best to leave her behind as you venture north, where you’ll find your new bed. The Night’s Watch plays no role in the politics of Westeros and you shall wear the black of our order until your dying day.”

Lyanna

Lyanna paced in her room, the sound of her boots against the floor echoing around the chamber.

“Acolyte, you may leave us for a few moments.”

Acolyte Brynden nodded to Maester Aemon and gave her a small smile before seeing himself out, barring the door once more. Lyanna paused her pacing to stare at the old Maester sitting on the stool by the bed, arranging his black robes. Silence filled the room as Brynden’s footsteps faded down the hall.
Maester Aemon had arrived the night before with a guard of several men of the Night’s Watch, matted black furs hiding tired bodies.

It was a hard but respectable life, the Night’s Watch - Stark men had joined the Watch for centuries, and the position of Commander of the Night’s Watch was viewed in the North with the highest regard.

Maester Aemon had been the Maester at Castle Black for as long as Lyanna could remember - and many decades before. In the many years she had been visiting the Wall, she had often imagined him as her grandfather, with his gentle voice and his wise words. She and Benjen had long carried a modest obsession with the Wall and the tales of the Land Beyond the Wall: of wights and White Walkers, of wildlings and ice dragons…

For years, people had claimed direwolves were long gone from Westeros, yet two resided in the very walls of Winterfell. Who knew what other mystical truths lay beyond the 300 foot tall walls of ice?

Alas, legends and myths were far from the primary concern for Lyanna at this very moment.

“Maester?”

The old man chuckled faintly, glancing up at her with a knowing gaze.

“Fear not, child. I have no intention of going through with this farce.”

Lyanna let out a sigh of relief, approaching the edge of the bed with tentative steps, “Truly?”

“Given Lord Baratheon himself claims he was not successful in having you, I am inclined to believe you remain untouched.”

She shuddered at the alternative. Even now, three weeks after the incident, she could still feel his phantom touch.

“At least he is telling the truth in that.”
“Alas, we must give the perception that we have spoken. So, I thought we might pass the time by speaking of other matters, like the dreams you once wrote to me of.”

“The wolf dreams.”

“A name not far from what the Targaryens call dragon dreams.”

Lyanna shook her head, “Daenys the Dreamer dreamt of the future, of things to come to pass. I do not dream in the future; I dream in the present.”

Maester Aemon paused at her wording, “You believe they are events occurring in the present?”

She nodded, sitting at the edge of the bed, “I can enter Nymeria’s mind, see through her eyes, run in her body. I have seen myself from her eyes, my still form with eyes the color of snow. And it is no longer simply when I sleep. The connection has gotten stronger; I even feel it with my horse, Silverwing.”

The Maester looked at her curiously. “Silverwing? Named after Queen Alysanne’s dragon?”

Lyanna nodded, “She was the last Targaryen queen to visit the Wall. She stayed at—”

“Queensgate. The Lord Commander mentioned you are restoring the castle.”

“It is not far from there that I found Nymeria and Torrhen.”

“And you can now run in Nymeria’s mind.”

“Acolyte Brynden believes it may be an ability lost after the fall of the First Men.”

“The First Men called it warging.”
Lyanna stared at him, “It’s real?”

“Only you my dear can confirm that. You may be the first confirmed in centuries.”

Lyanna stood and once more started pacing the room, “It certainly feels real to me. I can’t control it though, it’s as if my mind jumps without my permission. But I feel powerful when I’m with Nymeria. I can feel the bloodlust, the thrill of the hunt, the joy of a kill. It lingers when I wake.”

Maester Aemon watched her as she worked through the idea of putting a name to the ability that had only grown in strength.

“As with any other ability you will need to learn to control it.”

“But how do I control something that no one has confirmed to exist in centuries? And how do I inform my family? Who will possibly believe me?”

“These are questions I know not the answers to - only you may determine how to manage this knowledge. But I would counsel you to think on it, to ensure you do not lose yourself in another creature’s mind.”

Lyanna paused in her pacing, returning to stand at the edge of the bed again, “It is an escape, I suppose. I feel like she understands me - I don’t have to be afraid when I run with Nymeria.”

“Fear is healthy, my dear. No man is spared the touch of the Stranger, nor the pain of the Gods’ wrath. We must always remember the reality of our humanity.”

Lyanna sighed as she sat on the bed once more. She did not wish to speak of fear or death any longer.

“Maester, you held the Targaryen name before taking your vows, did you not?”

“I did indeed, my Lady, though it has been many years since.”
Lyanna nodded, leaning back against the pillows and staring at the ceiling. She felt her skin flush slightly as she contemplated her question.

“Do you know your kin well, Maester?”

Maester Aemon paused as he arranged his robes to look at her kindly. “As well as one can know one’s kin when isolated on the Wall.”

Lyanna felt a blush rise in her cheeks as she asked her next question, “Do you know much of the Crown Prince, by any chance?”

The Maester chuckled, the sound both gritty and reassuring. “Ah, Rhaegar - indeed, I daresay I know him the best.”

“What manner of man is he?”

“Why, I do believe I shall be entirely biased, my Lady.”

“We all carry some bias. And please call me Lyanna, Maester.”

“Very well... Rhaegar is a complicated young man. I’ve always enjoyed his words of correspondence, for even as a boy, he was well read and thoughtful.”

“He writes to you often?”

“Oh yes. He first wrote me when he was no older than five namedays, just rough scratches on a paper. My eyesight was a good deal better back then.”

“And now?”

Maester Aemon chuckled, “He writes to me still, though I daresay I sometimes need my acolyte to
aid me in deciphering some words. Age does not spare anyone.”

“What do you mean by complicated?”

“There are both positives and negatives of an inquisitive mind, Lyanna. Much as we were just discussing with your ability to run with your direwolf, living a life for someone or something else can be dangerous. It can take over your senses, both physical and mental.”

“And the Crown Prince is afflicted with something similar?”

“The Crown Prince is like many of our Targaryen kin.” Lyanna flinched, thinking of the stories of the Mad King. Maester Aemon noticed the movement, and shook his head. “Not like Aerys. Aerys is much like my older brother - Aerion was convinced he was invincible, a true dragon trapped in the body of a man. Nay, Rhaegar is reminiscent of our good ancestors of old, who saw the magic of the world and believe in its various manifestations, past, present, and future.”

Lyanna frowned, “I’m not sure I understand. Do you mean he believes in magic?”

“Do you not?”

Lyanna paused, thinking about her connection with Nymeria and to a lesser extent, Silverwing. She thought too of the mystical feeling she got when standing up on the Wall, a feeling of something greater than nature that she had spoke of with Jay.

“I believe it is not impossible for magic to exist.”

Maester Aemon nodded, “And why is that?”

“There doesn’t seem to be any evidence it does not exist. Like the tales of the White Walkers and giants, there is nothing proving they did not exist. If dragons were real, what is to say other mythical creatures are false?”

“A wise observation. Rhaegar believes much the same, and more. He is a scholar of many things, and does not discount tales as simply fantasy purely because there is no proof against the reality.”
“And is he not a knight as well?

“Indeed, though I know not how fond he is of the knightly arts. I have read of his jousting success, but ‘tis not a frequent topic he writes on, at least to me. It is my understanding that he has always preferred the harp to the sword.”

Lyanna nodded, having heard much the same - that was something she both understood and failed to understand at the same time. She couldn’t imagine why a man would dislike the knightly arts, things she had long yearned to learn herself. But she also understood the feeling of being forced to be someone you did not wish to be - it seemed as if the Crown Prince would have been happy to be a scholar and musician but had taken up the mantle of knight due to his position. Lyanna often felt much the same; she would have much preferred to be a knight herself, but had been forced by her birth to become a prim and proper lady.

“Have you not yet met the Crown Prince, Lyanna?”

Lyanna shook her head, “Nay, but we have just begun to correspond.”

“He seeks a wife still, I do believe.”

She blushed once more, embarrassed to be speaking of the Prince with his relative who clearly knew him well.

“‘Tis simply an informal correspondence. I’m sure he is speaking with many of the ladies from the Great Houses.”

“Perhaps,” was all the Maester responded, allowing silence to hang in the room.

There was a knock on the door, just preceding the voice of the acolyte.

“My apologies, my Lady, Maester, but Lord Stark wished to see if the matter had been resolved.”
“You may enter, Acolyte Brynden,” responded Maester Aemon. The old man continued once the acolyte had entered. “The matter is resolved. Lady Lyanna remains as she was prior to the assault, a maiden fair.”

“Thank you, Maester.” Lyanna sat up in the bed, arranging her skirts as she stood.

“Excellent. If you will, Maester Aemon, I am to see you to Lord Stark’s solar. Lady Lyanna, your father thought you might wish to discuss the plans for Moat Cailin with me, should you have the time.”

“Of course, I shall meet you in my workroom after checking on the kitchens.”

Lyanna turned to Maester Aemon, taking his hands in hers, “Thank you Maester, for your wisdom and guidance. I do hope we will have time to speak before you depart in a few days.”

“I do hope so as well, my dear. Take care of yourself,” the Maester said, giving her hands a firm squeeze before releasing them. As he stepped through the doorway, he added in a knowing voice, “And tell my nephew hello, should you have the chance.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks, as always, for the patience! I have the next chapter basically ready as well, with one more POV to edit - there will be a mini time jump after that, but I still have quite a bit of work to do on those POVs. But we are groovingggg!

Your comments continue to be motivational lifeblood - THANK YOU to all who continuously comment :)

I hope everyone is enjoying Fire and Blood - my copy delivered to my apartment, but I've been traveling in between jobs, so I haven't had a full chance to read it yet!

BUT in other news - for fellow fantasy book nerds, I just read The City of Brass by S.A. Chakraborty. I finished it in 27 hours (I had to sleep a bit!) - it was PHENOMENAL. I literally pre-ordered the second book in the trilogy within minutes of finishing. Highly recommend, especially for anyone interested in Middle Eastern folklore or history (and djinns and magic!).
Happy belated Thanksgiving for all USA-based readers!!
There was a new sadness in Lyanna’s eyes. He noticed it during their time out hunting, but it was more pronounced once they got home. Though she still gave out smiles, they seemed forced, and worst of all, her laughter was tempered. This is what hurt Brandon the most to see; his sister had always been the joyful one, laughing when most girls would cry.

Sure, she was quick to anger, but mirth was always on the horizon of her eyes. The only time she was truly sad was when they spoke of Mother, and even then, she had a determined edge to that sadness - she had always channeled it into her responsibilities around Winterfell, a chance to honor their mother.

This was a different sadness. And only a blind man could miss the dark circles under her eyes, or the huskiness in her voice from the yells Brandon could hear sometimes at night, coming from down the corridor.

She was jumpier too, flinching every time she was touched. She even allowed additional guards to travel with her during trips to town, not bothering to voice her usual gripes about Father not trusting her to defend herself.
But she was more committed than ever to her weapons training. She had convinced Brandon to teach her the joust during their hunting trip, running at rings in the small tower yard, and, longing to see her smile genuinely, Brandon had persuaded their father to allow for sword training as well. Only the basics. It was a small thing, to be sure, but it was the only thing Brandon could think of—something he could give her. His sister was hurting and he could do nothing about it.

Her determination in the training yard was a small consolation, and she was utterly committed to her duties as Lady of Winterfell. Her trips to town increased, as she spent more time teaching the lower classes and helping with issues too small to bring to Lord Stark. Either he or Benjen were with her nearly all the time. As for Ned, Brandon could barely even look at his middle brother for continuing to visit Robert. Nonetheless, Brandon held out hope that his brother would do the right thing, that he would choose family, choose Lyanna. For her sake, Brandon had softened towards Ned, inviting him to ride with them the few days leading up to the trial. As Lyanna reminded them the first morning Ned joined, they were a pack, they had to stick together.

"When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives."

Over a moon had passed, and Brandon was grateful when the day of the trial finally arrived. He was ready for Robert to be gone, and for his family to start living again.

The trial itself was a relatively private event, with only a few key lords in attendance. Father had desired the presence of another Lord Paramount, so Jon Arryn made the trip, and Hoster Tully sent his brother, Brynden the Blackfish, as his representative. The affair was to be kept silent outside of this select group, so both men had traveled under the guise of other business matters.

Father had also sent a brief missive to the King and the Crown Prince, given both the involvement of multiple Lord Paramounts and the Prince’s expressed interest in Lyanna. While Prince Rhaegar had not been able to attend, he had granted Lord Stark full power to pass the King’s justice, requesting a full update on the matter upon completion. He also indicated his support of Lyanna's story and Lord Rickard's judgment, and made two requests - that Lord Rickard ensure Lyanna was not the only woman in the room and that her word be treated with the same weight, if not more, than his cousin's word.

Impressed by the Prince's intervention—leaving judgment to his Lord Father, yet ensuring Lyanna was comfortable and her best interests represented—Brandon had worked with his father to determine the right women to attend with Lyanna. His sister did not have many female companions, but she was quite attached to her two handmaidens. The girls were from respectful Northern houses, so would not be poor company. His father had surprised him by also inviting an elderly servant woman, Sella, who helped Lyanna with running the keep. She was held in high regard by the rest of the servants and had been a mother figure for Lyanna in the early years after Mother’s death. His father reasoned that having a recognized servant attend would also ease the pressure on the young servant boy who would serve as a witness.
When they all assembled in the Great Hall, Brandon truly understood the Prince's request. Without the three women his father had invited, Lyanna would have been the sole young woman in a room full of grown men.

His sister was the only one missing as the guards escorted Robert into the hall. The man didn't look much worse for the wear, other than his arm, which was clearly infected. Brandon tried to contain his smirk as one of the guards jostled Lord Baratheon's arm, causing the man to let out a snarl in pain - not allowing a Maester to attend to that bite was Brandon's only real success in the debacle.

He glanced at Ned and Benjen curiously, silently questioning them about their sister’s absence. Ned frowned, but Benjen just said simply, "She said she would arrive alone."

As if on cue, he heard the sound of a door pushing open, her small footsteps echoing off of the floor. Several intakes of breath followed, as his sister approached the dais, her chin raised and her eyes sparkling with some unknown mix of emotions. Her hair was finely curled, a silver circlet embedded with pearls and diamonds nestled among the deep brown locks. It was a Stark heirloom, worn by generations of Ladies of Winterfell – a statement piece to represent the role she served.

But it was her clothes that garnered the most attention.

She was wearing the tattered rags of the dress from that night, her new white shift gleaming beneath the ripped folds of deep blue velvet. The skirt was practically half off and the bodice was ripped at the top, near her cleavage, to reveal the corset beneath.

Brandon also realized that this was why she had refused balm for her bruises. Everyone in the room could see the thick green lines of fading bruises around both her wrists, the color still noticeable next to her pale skin. The bruise across her face was better, but still held a lilac tinge as the faded yellows and greens blossomed across the left side of her face.

He would never forget that image of his defiant sister, a reminder of how they had failed to protect her. However, guilt stemming from that failure was accompanied by pride in the strong woman before them who still held her head high.

The room was dead silent as she reached the front, dropping into a curtsy in front of her father. Brandon stepped forward to offer his arm, escorting her to her seat on the dais.
"That was magnificent, Lya," he whispered into her ear.

She flashed him a tight smile.

And the official trial began.

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**Rickard**

Rickard sighed, his hand coming up to rub his temple. The last few moons had proven to be a challenge in more ways than he had ever imagined - he couldn’t even recall the last time he had managed to get a full night’s rest. He was no longer a young man, and was steadily feeling the weight of time sink into his bones. It was a heaviness that settled in his head, a tightness in his chest...

Jon Arryn’s voice cut through the still air of his solar, his voice thoughtful.

“It is unlikely to be the Tyrells - they have no connections with House Whent.”

Ser Brynden shook his head, “My brother has said nothing of the event. I cannot imagine Whent can fund it himself, and they have not sought the aid of House Tully.”

Jon frowned in response, and Rickard moved to lean upon his desk, his eyes glancing once more upon the announcement that had only just arrived. The words were simple, no different from any other tournament invitation, but somehow they carried a meaning far beyond the usual.
“There are few other Houses who could shoulder such a burden, but many possible reasons to do so. Key among them being the current state of the ruling House.”

Both men opposite him nodded in agreement, well aware of the rumors of the Targaryen madness manifesting itself in the present ruler of the Seven Kingdoms.

The Starks had historically remained aloof when it came to issues of the realm, preferring to stay out of what they considered Southron politics. Only once had the Starks succumbed to the call of the South, when Cregan Stark took up the seat of Hand of the King. Even then, he had promptly returned the title after the Hour of the Wolf.

“The snow has begun to fall and winter is coming. My place is in Winterfell.”

Rickard did not necessarily believe any different, though the presence of Maester Walys over the past years had indelibly shaped his view on the utility of the South. With the Targaryens at their weakest point in years, the current situation provided an opportunity to strengthen the power of the North. Rickard’s personal relationships with two fellow Lord Paramounts from during the War of the Ninepenny Kings had facilitated burgeoning alliances that would carry the North into a stronger position for the future.

“The news from the Capital continues to be concerning,” said Jon, “as the King’s mind continues to deteriorate.”

“It is unlikely Aerys will make the trip to Harrenhal, Jon. The man hasn’t left the Red Keep in years.”

“Perhaps that is what the host behind this event is hoping for.”

“It is not a poor strategy,” added Brynden, “by assembling the Lords and Ladies of the realm in one location under the guise of a tournament. But a man like Aerys is unlikely to be happy by the news of such an event without his presence. One can never underestimate a mad man.”

Jon nodded, before speaking, “However, it may be the best chance to see the state of affairs ourselves. I have no doubt it will at least provide ample opportunity to speak of the business between kingdoms.”
Rickard sat back in his seat, templing his fingers in his lap.

“So we will attend.”

Brynden confirmed, “I will see that my brother attends. He will likely wish to bring my nieces.”

“Good, it will serve as an opportunity for Brandon and Catelyn to spend more time together.”

“So you will bring your sons?”

“I will attend with Brandon and Lyanna. The King has demanded Lyanna be presented at Court within the next year, and the Queen has offered her and Brandon accommodation.”

“And Eddard? We must discuss the plans for him in the interim as well,” inquired Jon.

“You still wish for him to return to the Vale with you?”

Jon nodded, his mouth pursed tight. “I do not enjoy taking him away from his home, but he is the only one who continues to hold sway over Robert.”

Brynden snorted, “That boy must be put in his place. If he had done that to my niece-”

Rickard cut Brynden off with a glare, “Lord Baratheon’s punishment deems no further discussion. I want the man removed from the North as soon as possible. If that means my son will accompany Lord Arryn back to the Vale for some time, I will agree to it. But Ned will return North after the tournament.”

Rickard was no more pleased with Jon Arryn’s lack of control over his ward, but he could not ignore the way in which Ned held some modest sway over Robert Baratheon. If Ned’s company would aid in removing Robert from the North, Rickard was willing to permit it. He was only thankful that Ned had seemingly taken Jon Arryn’s more favorable qualities instead of his fellow ward’s.

“I will leave within the week,” said Jon, “I do not have any desire to draw out the departure.”
Brynden rose, “I leave on the morrow, my men wish to return to the Riverlands.”

“Very well. Let us reconvene at Harrenhal in several moons. Brynden, please see that you share what we have spoken of with your brother. Jon, we shall speak again before you leave. For now, I must speak with my daughter.”

Jon rose from his chair as well, and both men departed without much fanfare. He heard greetings exchanged at the door, seeing both man bow slightly as the shadow of Rickard’s daughter sunk into a curtsy. Brynden Tully in particular had taken quite well to his daughter, no doubt seeing a resemblance to his nieces in her.

Lyanna entered the room clad in a simple grey dress and her cloak, her hair in one long braid down her back. She had been working with Sella this morning on the arrangements for the enduring winter, ensuring that there were sufficient supplies for the inhabitants of Wintertown, which continued to increase.

Rickard worried for her, notably after the trial. While her physical ailments seemed to be healing, it was her demeanor which worried him more. Lyanna had always been so joyful, so full of life - this new Lyanna was more reserved, though no less determined. But there was a new melancholy side to her that hadn’t existed before.

His daughter sat opposite him, granting him a small smile as she folded her hands in her lap.

“Father, I hope your meeting was fruitful?”

“It was, indeed. How are you feeling?”

Lyanna shrugged her shoulders, but Rickard could see the darkness shadowing her silver eyes. "I will not be weak. I will not sit here and be haunted by the inappropriate actions of Robert Baratheon.”

“Very well,” he nodded, glad to hear the iron returned to her voice. “I believe a trip to White Harbor would do you good, and Lord Manderly is eager to host you - he would like you to meet his daughter, who I believe you will get along with. And then if you would like, I would have you spend some time overseeing the progress at Moat Cailin.”
Lyanna’s eyes got bigger, excitement shooting across her face, “Really?”

Rickard smiled softly, “Aye, I know how much time you spent with Acolyte Brynden making the plans. I cannot go myself, and thought that it might be good for you to oversee the men for a moon or so. It will be a good learning experience for you; Brandon will join you for some of the time. I know he is eager to spend more time with you. Mayhaps Benjen as well, since he may one day take up the seat as his own.”

Lyanna smiled brightly, the first genuine smile Rickard had seen on her face since the assault.

“Thank you, Father. I cannot wait.”

“That is not all of the travel news. There is also to be a tournament at Harrenhal, hosted by Lord Whent. The announcement only just arrived today.”

Lyanna read over the announcement, placing it back on the desk and leaning back in her chair before responding.

“‘Tis quite the event for a daughter’s majority. I did not realize the Whent’s were quite so fortunate.”

Rickard nodded, for he had thought much the same upon receipt of the announcement. The Whents were sparing no expense, and the tournament was said to be shaping up to be the greatest of the generation. But unlike some of their coastal peers who benefited from blossoming trade, the Whents were no more wealthy than any other average nobleman. And with a behemoth castle like Harrenhal to maintain, it was quite unusual to see such an elaborate event for a daughter whose prospects were not quite so lofty.

“I had much the same thought. Ser Brynden and Lord Arryn have both assured me that Lord Whent has not stumbled upon some unknown gold mine; they have paused as much as I have.”

Lyanna tilted her head as she pondered these words, an action she inherited from her mother.

“Unless there is some other source of funding…”
Rickard nodded, keeping quiet as his daughter worked through the same thoughts he had just spoken of with Lord Arryn and Ser Brynden.

“If Lord Whent is unlikely to cover the full cost, perhaps he is merely providing the venue.”

“For what purpose might he do such a thing?”

Lyanna paused, a small frown marring her face. “It is possible there are many. What is more critical is who is providing the funding. There are few with such resources.”

“Indeed there are not. Therefore, it is important that the Starks and the North are represented - for whatever purpose may be underfoot.”

“Regardless, Father, who would risk such a move with the rumors of the King’s state? Wouldn’t an event of this nature cause unnecessary questions to arise?”

“The King has not left the Red Keep since Duskendale. It is unlikely he shall make the journey even to Harrenhal.”

Lyanna nodded, her eyes gazing into the distance.

“There was another letter from the Capital,” he handed her the missive from the Queen, “the King has demanded your presence at Court within the next year. The Queen has offered to house you for a time in the Red Keep, provided Brandon accompany you.”

“My presence in King’s Landing? Why?”

“I do not know. It is possible that it is related to the Prince’s expressed interest. Has the Crown Prince mentioned such?”

“Not in so many words - he merely expressed his hope that we would soon be introduced in person.”
Rickard nodded, thinking through the timeline. He did not wish to send his two wolf-blooded children to the Capital, where they would no doubt cause far too much trouble for their own good...

“Perhaps Brandon and I could proceed to King’s Landing following the tournament? This would allow us to avoid unnecessary travel while also falling within the King’s demand for our presence within the year.”

“That is indeed the most reasonable solution. It has been a long time since the Starks have attended such an event. Ned can join us for the tournament from the Vale, and Benjen will remain in Winterfell.”

Though Lyanna nodded she looked troubled. Aware there must always be a Stark in Winterfell, she was likely thinking about how Benjen would be distraught at being left behind.

“Must Ned return to the Vale?”

Rickard sighed.

*Of course this would not please her.*

His second son would no doubt be displeased by the news as well, given he had only recently seemed to reconcile with his siblings. But Rickard had given his word to Jon Arryn that Ned would return to the Vale with him and Robert.

“We all must do things we would rather not. Ned will return North after the tournament, but this way he shall be able to finish his fostership.”

Lyanna sighed, “Very well. When shall I depart for White Harbor?”

“I would have had you accompany Lord Arryn and Ned, but given the rest of the company, I would prefer you remain for a fortnight at Winterfell. It shall also allow you to meet the new Maester who is to arrive from Oldtown.”

“So Maester Aemon will return to the Wall?”
“His place is at the Wall, Lyanna. His presence here was merely temporary.”

“May I accompany him back to Castle Black?”

Rickard shook his head, knowing the true meaning of the question. “I’m sorry, Lyanna, I would prefer you not to visit Queensgate at this time. I know you love the ruins, but we do not have the guards to accompany you. The Lord Commander has indicated increased snowstorms along the Wall, and I do not wish to see you snowed in so soon after the incident.”

Lyanna looked ready to argue, but then her shoulders dropped with a deep exhale.

“I understand, Father.”

Rickard softened his expression, knowing how much comfort his daughter got from the old Queensgate keep.

“‘Tis for your safety, darling. I cannot bear the thought of you alone in such a place so soon after we failed to protect you.”

Lyanna nodded, a serious expression appearing on her face again.

Rickard stood, moving around his desk and holding out his hand for his daughter. Lyanna looked up at him, her face so reminiscent of his late wife Lyarra. She placed her small hand in his, allowing him to pull her up into a warm embrace.

He was not normally an effusive man, but seeing his little girl, his pride and joy, sad was enough to prompt an outpouring of love.

Rickard held Lyanna to him, remembering all of the precious moments they had shared throughout her childhood - images of a scared, motherless girl running to him when she had nightmares or an excited, dirty girl blabbering about some new lesson she had learned in her archery training.
“I will always be here for you, Lyanna.”

She pulled away only enough to turn her face up to him again, a smile once more plain on her face.

“Thank you, Father.”

What more can a father wish for than the love of his child?

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Rhaegar

"There's a letter from Winterfell, your Grace."

"Thank you, Marwyn. You can place it on the desk. Any news from King's Landing?"

"No your Grace.” Rhaegar let out a sigh, thankful that there was no news from the Capital - the last three letters from his Mother had all spoke of one of his father’s burnings. “But Lord Whent has written, pleased with your planned attendance at the tournament at Harrenhal in the new year. He indicated that he is awaiting responses from the other Lords and Ladies.”

Of course, Rhaegar’s attendance had been assumed at the tournament he himself was funding. But they must maintain appearances.

“Very good, Marwyn. I will come to you with a response for Lord Whent once I have read of the North.”
He stared at the rolled parchment in his hand, feeling the rough texture of the paper still slightly chilled from the journey, as the door closed behind the maester.

Part of him had wanted to ride straight for Winterfell himself when he had heard about the incident between his cousin and Lyanna Stark. But the Prince in him prevailed, as he was wont to do - he couldn't just ride for the North without giving a reason, and he had very much respected Lord Stark's desire to keep the whole affair private. He could not send Arthur or Oswell Oswell in his stead as he’d needed Oswell to visit his brother to work on the details of the upcoming tournament and sending Arthur would have attracted far too much attention. Besides, Rhaegar needed Arthur with him for other business matters.

Exacerbating his discomfort, he’d had to obtain approval from his father to handle the matter. Aerys had little love for the boisterous Baratheon boy who'd whored around Kings Landing for several weeks last year, but it was so difficult to predict how he would react to such an event. Rhaegar still remember the grimace of displeasure on his father’s face as he had read the Warden of the North’s words.

In that moment, Rhaegar feared the King might care more about the wolf’s audacity at putting another Lord Paramount on trial. Luckily, the Prince had caught his father on a decent day.

“I always told Steffon that boy would be the end of his House. He should have beat some sense into the boy as I instructed him.”

The Queen had been equally concerned about the actions of the late Lord Steffon’s eldest son, expressing her concern on several occasions about the incident.

“Cousin Steffon would be appalled by his son’s behavior” His mother shook her head, her kind face showing a raft of emotions. “Steffon might have been a warrior like his kin, but he was always affectionate with his wife and mother. It seems his respect for women did not pass along to his son.”

During one of their conversations, Rhaegar had asked his mother if she thought the case could warrant a repeal of Robert’s titles - as far as the rumors went, it was Robert’s brother Stannis who ran Storm’s End much of the time. But she had denied the rationale, saying such an action could only come from the King and would likely have to be at Lord Stark’s request. Given Lord Stark had not requested such, it was likely that the Warden of the North did not view such extreme interference from the Crown as necessary.
No, the North would likely deem it more appropriate for the Warden of the North to take Baratheon’s head with his greatsword than involve the Crown in the punishment.

Though Rhaegar could do little outside of overriding whatever Lord Stark decided upon - an action he had no desire to act upon - he still hoped Lord Stark placed a heavy burden on Robert for assaulting his only daughter. Rhaegar had included a note for Lyanna herself when writing to Lord Stark and Brandon. He’d had to redraft the note multiple times in an attempt at mixing care with the required formality – after all, in Lyanna’s mind, they had never met.

Rhaegar stared out at the endless expanse of the sea, the roiling clouds of a storm descending upon Dragonstone matching his mood.

He had removed himself to Dragonstone shortly after receiving news of the assault on the notion of taking care of business. The King had permitted the action, already bitter over the Crown Prince’s popularity after so short a time returned. Remaining at the original Targaryen seat allowed less prying eyes for any news from the North and permitted him some needed quiet.

Even two moons in Kings Landing had taken a toll on his sanity.

His father had sunk deeper into his madness, and his name day had been only a minor disaster. Rhaegar’s lauded arrival did not help, so Aerys had started the week feeling upstaged by his heir. The positive reports given by himself and his men refuting any rumors of rebellion by the Starks had only angered Aerys, increasing his paranoia. If it wasn't the Starks, it must be someone else, he claimed.

The King had burned three people in two moons. Three nights Rhaegar had sat awake all night, his mother's screams inaudible but tearing through his heart nonetheless. Each morning, she had worn long sleeved dresses, but he knew of the bruises and scratches covering her body.

It was those nights that the self-doubt was the worst. He was the Crown Prince, the heir to the throne, yet he couldn't even protect his own mother. How could he possibly protect his people if he was too weak to protect the woman who gave birth to him? How could he expect his subjects to respect him if he allowed the one person who loved him unconditionally to be brutalized? How could he respect himself?

And then he was an eight-year-old boy again, pushing open a big wooden door, following the screams and yells. The voice was so familiar but so desperate, her fear permeating the room, swallowed by a violent darkness. He saw his mother struggling; her dress ripped and pulled up to her stomach, tears streaking her face. Her cries were muted by a large hand that slapped across her
face, before moving to restrain her delicate wrists above her head. His father towered over her, a grin plastered to his face as he leaned down to bite one of her breasts. Rhaegar didn't realize he had grabbed a fruit knife from the entry table, but as his mother shrieked again, his father's hand somewhere between her legs, Rhaegar yelled for his father to stop, to please stop, he was hurting mother. His mother screamed for him to leave, but he held out the knife in his small hand, as his father stalked over to him, his face furious. The darkness surrounded him in a tunnel as his father raised his hand, then black.

It had been the only time Rhaegar had tried to stop him. Thirteen years. His mother had begged him to never do it again, had pleaded, had made him promise.

It was the hardest promise he had ever had to keep.

He hoped he wouldn't have to keep it much longer. For his mother's sake at least. But there was still much to do on that front, and Rhaegar had learned long ago that patience was essential to the success of any plan with so much danger. Hopefully the tournament at Harrenhal in the new year would serve its purpose.

As if matters weren't bad enough with his father descent into madness, Rhaegar had another quandary facing him in King’s Landing: Cersei Lannister.

The girl had made herself quite at home in the Red Keep, managing to create her own subset of court to compete with his mother's. Clearly, Tywin Lannister's daughter had not understood the King’s dismissal of her father's suit for her marriage to Rhaegar - or perhaps she had just chosen to believe it was not final.

In any case, the girl had made herself quite unavoidable, appearing in all manner of places to present herself as a companion. At first it had been mildly amusing - the girl was beautiful with her golden curls and bright green eyes, always flawless in her elaborate Southern gowns. And she was charming, though still quite young and naive. Though Rhaegar had no intention of pursuing her, he found her attempts at connection, no matter how out of her depth she was, moderately entertaining.

But then he found himself quite incapable of doing anything without her presence and it quickly grown tiresome. Arthur grew weary of her even faster, agreeing with Rhaella’s plan of using Ashara as a potential distraction.

Alas, the only thing this had accomplished was to encourage Cersei's dislike for Ashara.
Ashara, to her credit, found the whole thing wildly amusing. Rhaegar had to agree with her to some extent, especially when remembering the look of pure fury on Cersei's face when she learned that not only was Rhaegar retiring to Dragonstone for several moons, but Lady Ashara would also be accompanying him to keep her brother, Ser Arthur, company.

Rhaegar had himself been uncomfortable with the idea of Ashara joining them, as gossip ran rampant that he had taken her as his mistress, but both Ashara and Arthur seemed fine with it. Ashara hated Cersei and wished to see her squirm, and Arthur believed that the rumor would actually protect his sister from all the dandies at Court - no man would try to sleep with the Prince's supposed mistress, even if the Prince wasn't confirmed to be sleeping with her.

Happy to have the company, the Prince had eventually agreed.

Unfortunately, Dragonstone was only a temporary solution to the Cersei Lannister problem. Tywin was surely behind it, which of course complicated the whole arrangement - he couldn't just turn down the girl without offending the father. And he needed Tywin on his side for what he planned.

Shaking himself out of his wandering thoughts, he reached for the letter from Winterfell, unrolling it to find three separate pages. He read the longest first, finding a detailed description of the proceedings at Winterfell in the hand of Lord Stark.

Robert had been found guilty of assault. He was fined an exorbitant amount, agreed upon by three other Lords Paramount - Rhaegar's eyebrows lifted at the mention of Jon Arryn and Hoster Tully’s brother Brynden - to be paid over the course of two years. Robert’s suit for Lyanna Stark's hand was categorically denied, and Robert was never be alone in her presence. Lord Arryn would see Lord Baratheon escorted back to the South personally, as the Storm Lord was not to be in the North without express permission for the foreseeable future.

Lord Stark also detailed that Lord Robert had sustained a wound on his left arm, a bite that had become infected. The new maester, to replace the one that had gone behind Lord Rickard's back in an attempt to sell Lyanna to Robert, had determined that the infection had reached some of the tendons in Robert’s left hand, rendering them numb. The maester had worked diligently to fight the infection, but Robert would likely have great difficulty using the arm with as much dexterity.

Rhaegar thought of his cousin and his warhammer, and felt a twinge in his chest. Rubbing the spot, he wondered if the bite might limit Robert’s ability to use such a weapon.

Somehow, Rhaegar imagined that Brandon Stark was quite pleased with that particular outcome.
Lord Stark ended his missive with a request for the Crown's formal approval of the judgment, should Robert seek recourse. Rhaegar quickly wrote out several versions of a royal approval, to be sent to all parties involved. He also jotted down a quick letter to Lord Stark, noting that the Crown would keep Lord Baratheon’s behavior in mind, taking action should any further incidents arise.

Rhaegar then turned to the shorter notes. Noticing Brandon's signature at the bottom of the next paper, he read through the messy writing, his heart picking up at the contents. Brusque and straightforward, the heir of Winterfell confirmed he would be traveling to the South with his siblings for the upcoming tournament. Lyanna herself would spend a few turns at various locations in the North, including spending time at Moat Cailin, before proceeding to Harrenhal. Their brother Eddard would meet them for the tournament after returning to the Eyrie with Jon Arryn. Brandon and his sister would then spend several moons in King’s Landing, should the Queen’s offer still remain open.

The last note was the shortest, the words plain.

Lyanna Stark was not one for pointless frippery, and her writing reflected that, neat and simple.

She thanked him for his support and for his suggestions regarding the trial. She appreciated his mother’s offer to stay at the Red Keep while in King’s Landing - she had always wished to travel, so she looked forward to the adventure.

It was the last lines which gave him a sliver of hope: "I admit to not having known many Southern knights, but your words speak kindly of your honor and respect - I look forward to meeting your Grace in person."

On reading it over, Rhaegar had to remind himself that she didn't know who he was - she still didn't know that he and Jae, the knight she had meet all those moons ago at Queensgate, were one and the same.

He tried to imagine how she would react if she found out on the steps of the Red Keep. He wasn't sure the picture would be a good one. He supposed they would likely meet each other at the tournament, the thought only slightly more pleasant – courtiers, Lords and Ladies ever eager for gossip, would still surround them.

Rhaegar would also have to inform his father of the Stark’s visit – he had been worried initially when Aerys had demanded Lyanna be presented at Court, but his mother’s intervention by inviting Brandon alongside Lord Stark’s daughter had hopefully eased some of the worry.
Still, he had much to consider when it came to the Starks - how he would approach Lord Stark, how to manage the North’s growing power, and most of all, how to woo a woman who still didn’t know who he was.

A knock came at the door, and Arthur walked in a moment after. Rhaegar smiled at his oldest friend, who was always up for a challenge.

“Ah, Arthur, just the man I need.” He held up the letter from Lyanna, “You may wish to send for Ashara as well - it appears we have some work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

As I mentioned previously, I just started a new job that is going to be pretty time consuming, along with a few other big life changes. I'm still writing, but it may take some time to get chapters up. BUT, we are getting closer to some of the good action (and Harrenhal soon!). So while I know it is difficult (believe me, I'm a reader of a few other stories where I'm dyingggg to know what happens next!), please have patience with me :)

Cannot wait to share the rest of this story with you all - thank you as always for your enduring support and comments! They make this experience even more fun and rewarding!!

Also, I promise to catch up on responding to comments soon!!
Ravens Come and Ravens Go

Chapter Notes

Please note, not all letters during this period of time are shown. Roughly a 10 months pass during this time period - as you all recall, we began Chapter 1 in 278 AC, and the meeting at Queensgate occurred in 280 AC (and we all know the Tournament occurred in 281 AC, i.e. the Year of the False Spring).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Letter from Castle Black to Dragonstone

Rhaegar,

I am glad to hear you have been able to spend time at our ancestral home. As we have discussed in the past, I always enjoyed my time there with my brother. There is something stirring about the castle that draws the soul and the blood. Even now, in my mind’s eye, I can see the dragons carved into the rock, the curve of necks, the power of outstretched wings.

As you know, I have recently returned to Castle Black from Winterfell following an unfortunate event involving Lord Stark’s daughter, Lyanna, and Lord Robert Baratheon. Lady Lyanna mentioned you were in contact, which pleases me greatly. I have known Lady Lyanna since she was a young girl fascinated by the Wall and wildlings beyond. She came once with her Lord Father to visit Castle Black, and has returned on Winterfell’s business a number of times since.

Given your correspondence, you will likely gather that she is far different from the ladies with whom you have interacted in the South. Lady Lyanna is greatly admired and well-loved in the North, much like her father. I would be remiss if I were not to warn you against any empty promises when it comes to the Starks, particularly the present Lord and his daughter.

My new assistant recently found a scroll in the depths of the archives, which I believe you shall find most interesting. I intend to read it more thoroughly and will inform you should anything pertinent to
Letter from Moat Cailin to Dragonstone

Dear Prince Rhaegar,

I have just arrived at Moat Cailin from my brief sojourn at White Harbor, which is the reason for the delay in my correspondence. Lord Manderly was a fine host, and I enjoyed my time with his wife and children. I imagine you are quite familiar with the sights and smells of coastal cities, but I found it most uncomfortable at first. Lord Manderly’s eldest introduced me to sailing on a few occasions, and while I found the journeys amusing, it was certainly disconcerting to sway with the waves. I think I prefer a horse ride to any manner of transport on the sea.

My eldest brother Brandon will join me here at Moat Cailin in a few weeks time - I have most recently been journeying with our newest Maester, who has been much better company than expected. I intend to spend much of my time exploring the southern regions of the North and the ruins of the keep here.

It is good to hear you will be in attendance at the upcoming Tournament at Harrenhal. I hope we will be granted the opportunity to speak in person; I will be with both of my older brothers and my father, and we would be honored to host your Grace.

Should you return to King’s Landing shortly, please give the Queen my deepest thanks for her kind treatment of our studies appear within.

Fondly,

Aemon
words with regards to our upcoming stay.

Fondest regards,

Lady Lyanna Stark
anything to be arranged in advance of the visit, please do inform me - I shall do my best to accommodate you and your brother, Lord Brandon, in any manner possible.

Fondly,

Prince Rhaegar Targaryen

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**Lyanna**

*She could practically smell it, taste it.*

*Fear.*

*Her legs sprung into action, the hard earth comforting beneath her paws, her body stretching gracefully as she ran through brush and snow.*

*There.*

*A quick turn to the right.*

*Ducking under a branch, jumping over a bush with broken limbs.*
The sign of retreat.

A whicker and stumble to the left. The wind swept into her face and along her back, slowing her pace.

She moved into a crouch, pausing her strides instantly to prevent the crackle of leaves.

Close.

One step. Two steps.

There, through the underbrush.

The doe struggled to its feet, head swiveling. Yet she was down wind.

Fatal flaw.

Muscles strained, claws dug into the icy earth, lips curled back into a snarl that might have been a smirk if she had been human.

And then she was flying through the brush, jaw clamping around the neck of the doe.

She whipped her head to the side, her jaw tight on the struggling animal as her momentum brought them crashing to the ground.

Snap.

She allowed a whimper to release from her mouth as she stood, pain pulsing through her ribs where she had landed.

The doe remained on the ground, the life seeping from its eyes like the blood that pooled on the ice
below its head.

The sound of hoofbeats in the distance, the baying of the hounds.

Men were so loud.

She got up once more and circled her catch, stretching her legs, feeling the strain in her side begin to fade as the welcome cold melted into her skin.

She sat just as the first horse entered the small area - not even a clearing.

Brandon, a voice deep in her mind whispered.

The man laughed full-heartedly as he approached her.

“Excellent kill, Nymeria! Or,” he winked at her, “should I say Lya?”

Lyanna blinked, her eyes opening to the familiar scene of her tent, the older man sitting next to her.

She rubbed her face as if waking from sleep just as the sound of the hunting bugle sounded.

“A doe,” she said simply, her tongue slipping out to lick her lips. She could still feel the crack as the doe’s neck snapped, the smell of the fear.

Maester Luwin nodded, noting it down in his small notebook.

“And how do you feel?”

Lyanna assessed her body, wiggling her toes and fingers. She frowned as she felt a strip of pain buzz through her left side.
Luwin frowned, noting how her hand had drifted to her ribs.

“Did she sustain an injury?”

“She - well, we - landed awkwardly when taking the doe down. The ribs-”

The old man stood from his stool to approach her, his hands upturned.

“May I?”

Lyanna nodded - this was their usual routine by now, an attempt to control and understand her connection with Nymeria.

She had been skeptical of the man at first. After all, Maester Walys too had come with glowing remarks from the Citadel. But it was Maester Luwin’s appreciation for the North during their trip to White Harbor, and his revelation that he, unlike many, had actually undergone the full study for his Valyrian steel link…

The study of the higher mysteries, the mystical, the magical.

Luwin too had his reservations when hearing her tale. He had explained that in studying the higher mysteries, he had found naught but tales and rumors. He urged her to fight against the dreams, to be careful not to lose herself in them.

“Belief can make a man accept anything, no matter how unreasonable. My order studies the logical and the historical - but I found nothing in the higher mysteries but a need for belief. ‘Tis no different than our belief in the Gods.”

It wasn’t until he witnessed one of Lyann’s episodes—when her eyes went the color of milk and her mind entered the direwolf’s, allowing her to see a camp of bandits not far from the road— that he saw her ability as something more.
They’d spent months practicing, honing her control. Luwin’s primary concern was around the
d bloodlust and the wildness that seemed to seep into her human form the longer she spent in
Nymeria’s mind - it made her crave running free more each time. The control exercises helped, as did
d the hours she spent outside training with bow and lance—though Brandon had indeed held his
promise and taught her the sword, she quickly realized her skills were better suited to quick
movements and agility.

Luwin finished his examination of her, frowning slightly.

“It is a bit tender, but nothing is physically wrong. It is likely a lingering tendril of the connection.”

Lyanna nodded, standing to stretch and walk to the pitcher of water, bringing a glass back over to
Luwin before sitting back down.

“Any news from Winterfell?”

“Aye, your Lord Father has indicated that Lord Benjen will be arriving today. I will return to
Winterfell with the guardsmen who accompany him.”

Lyanna grinned, jumping up to pack her books. She hadn’t seen Benjen in two moons, when she’d
returned to Winterfell for a few moons during construction. It had been during that time that she and
Brandon had convinced Father to allow Benjen to travel with them to Harrenhal - a boon to her in
particular.

The boon had come at a cost, as all things do.

Prince Rhaegar’s most recent letter lay discarded on top of some sketches of the new keep structure
at Moat Cailin, reminding her of one of the promises she’d made to her father that day.

Three hours they’d sat in his solar talking, and many hours in the following days. Lyanna had finally
told him of her warging abilities, but that was only a minor component of the discussions. Plans,
motivations, opportunities… much could hinge on a few small things. As she departed for her return
to Moat Cailin, her father had reminded her how her actions could set off a flurry of reactions.

All it took was one decision to unravel it all.
Lyanna picked up the letter, noticing the way the parchment frayed slightly at the edge where the ribbon had tied it tight.

She could not say she disliked the idea of the man. In truth, the idea of him was perhaps easier to stomach than the man himself. Lyanna had never been one to pine after a dashing prince to save her and make her his Queen - Lyanna had always wished to be a knight, a warrior Queen. And while there had been Targaryen warrior Queens in the past… it had been many years since a Queen had taken such a role.

Lyanna had no illusions as to what might await her should she pursue the option the Crown Prince might provide.

A pretty bird in a pretty cage.

But joining the royal family could bring much to her family - the Crown Prince seemed a thoughtful man, who sought her opinion on all manner of things, from Northern history to architecture. She’d allowed herself to hope that if he was like this in letters, it would endure in whatever relationship they would have. Having such power was not something to be underappreciated. Plus, she had not found their correspondence overly burdensome, easily responding to his letters upon receipt.

Yet this last one, perhaps the final letter before they were to meet in person, had given her pause.

There had never been a mention of their unofficial courting period, nor any mention of it becoming more official. She had no way of knowing if his interest endured - was she merely a backup option, or was he serious about a potential betrothal? Lyanna knew there were other ladies her age who would present an equally strong proposition to the Crown Prince.

For a moment, she allowed herself to think of Jay and stolen kisses in the ruins of Queensgate. Everything had seemed so easy, so simple with Jay. Nothing would be easy or simple with the Crown Prince of Westeros. Even his letters carried a degree of complexity, asking questions of her interests far beyond what one normally might.

She sighed, tucking the letter back in with the rest of her papers. Since he seemed to know she might be traveling soon to the tournament, she had not felt compelled to answer, which was helpful because she had no idea what to say with an impending meeting so close.
As they packed up the rest of camp, greeting Benjen and his men, and prepared to depart, she turned to look at the road south, wondering if any piece of happiness awaited her beyond the borders of the North.

Alas, happiness was not guaranteed for a noble Lady.

Rhaegar

Mist surrounded him as hot water seeped into his clothes, heating his blood. There was a cold bitterness to the air in spite of the warmth wafting over the water, which lapped at his chest.

Why was he wearing his black silk Court attire in the hot springs?

A giggle sounded in the mist, a sound he had heard often in his dreams.

His body began moving towards the noise which seemed to bubble up from just beyond his reach. When he strained his eyes, he would have sworn he saw a shadow move ahead of him.

“Lyanna-”

His voice sounded hoarse to him, no more than a whisper in the wind. Suddenly, the water receded, leaving him up to his ankles. A current strained on his wet pants, the chill from the colder water stinging his skin.
The mist deepened and the sound of giggles turned to moans of pain, the song of swords echoing in the background.

“Lyanna!”

He went to take a step, but then pain bloomed in his chest, forcing him to his knees. He looked down at the water as the cries of a woman racked through his head.

The water ran the color of blood.

A woman whispered, “Rhaegar.”

“Rhaegar!”

He jerked awake, scattering the papers spread across his desk.

Rubbing his eyes to clear the remnants of the dream, Rhaegar stared up into the concerned eyes of his best friend. He turned to look at the window, shards of light piercing the dark curtains shadowing the room in darkness.

“What time is it?”

Arthur gave him a look of reproach before taking in the state of Rhaegar’s solar.

The Crown Prince was normally committed to orderliness in his affairs, including his chambers. It was a well-known story that when he was nine namedays, he had taken a week to reorganize full sections of the library with one of the acolytes in order to ease searching the old archives.

With papers and maps strewn across every surface, the current state of his chambers revealed little of that character. Though troubling, this matched his present mood perfectly.

Arthur approached the desk, picking up a stack of maps they had left on the desk the night before.
“You do know that sleep is good for your well-being?”

Rhaegar snorted, pushed his chair back and walked to the side table where a flask of water remained untouched.

“I find there is little rest for me in the land of sleep.”

Rhaegar poured them both a glass and walked back to his desk. His throat felt raw even with the soothing liquid sliding down. Had he been yelling in his dream?

“You know there are remedies for that.”

Rhaegar gave his friend a sharp look. They both knew it was not simple insomnia that plagued him these nights.

Nay, it was the ever present risk of treason from every angle, the stress of a courtship that had progressed little in moons, the knowledge that while one parent burned innocents, another parent suffered in body and soul. All of that would have been enough to keep any man awake at night, yet here he was attempting to run a country of factional regions, eager for any weakness from the ruling family. Not to mention, the Prophecy…

“Do not think of it,” Arthur’s harsh rebuke brought him back to reality. “I know the look you get when you think of it. It transforms your face.”

“Arthur, you know how important-”

Arthur shook his head, “There are many more important things that require your attention, and they require it now. There will be time enough to think of what-ifs and possibilities when all is settled.”

*But what if it never settles? What is the importance of a realm when that realm is in danger by forces it does not know?*
Rhaegar stared down at the papers across his desk, the stacks of old books written by long dead maesters, and the letters from the many lords of Westeros. One letter lay on its own in the corner.

The last letter he had received from Lyanna Stark.

It had been over two weeks since he’d sent a response, and yet no raven had arrived in return. He knew he was being unreasonable, but he couldn’t help feeling a lingering disappointment.

Their correspondence had been polite, encompassing the usual topics of discussion. But it felt like something was missing - the quick wit, the spark that he’d felt every time they spoke at Queensgate. In his deepest moments of doubt, he remembered all the warnings Arthur had given him about how little he actually knew the girl that he’d met at the Wall. To be sure, they hadn’t known each others’ titles, but had he been so desperate for a connection that he read more into the words she’d said when unguarded? Would the true Lady Lyanna be no different from all of the other ladies of Court?

With these concerns came doubts about the interpretation of the Prophecy, new doubts, which hadn’t arisen until Arthur mentioned a Stark being the Ice to Rhaeger’s Fire. While he loved his best friend, Rhaegar had never read anything to indicate the Ice had to be a Stark, and now, he found himself wondering, what if pursuing this option was delaying him from the Prince Who Was Promised?

What if it was all a mistake?

Ned

Ned watched the massive figure ahead of him, swaying in his saddle as they followed the mountain path that would lead them out of the Vale. The grey weather seemed to match his own mood, but it did not seem to impact the man who he used to think of as his best friend.
Robert was telling some tale to one of the knights of the Vale accompanying their party to Harrenhal, his voice booming and his face expressive despite the knight’s forced smile.

Recently, Ned had begun noticing that some people treated Robert not with respect, but with dutiful obeisance to the title he carried. Certainly, there were many men who loved his boisterous attitude and generous spirit. These men ascribed to Robert’s view of happiness—endless alcohol, fights, and whores. Robert lived the life these men sought, the life that those men viewed as the peak of privilege—a life without boundaries.

Ned remained several lengths back from the Storm Lord, a testimony to the current state of their relationship.

Cracks had been forming for moons without Ned’s awareness—and they had only deepened in the moons since leaving Winterfell.

Robert had been immensely affected by Ned’s punch, both physically and metaphorically. Ned found he could not look at Robert while giving testimony of the evening he’d found his closest friend towering above his sister in the halls of Winterfell, a scene that would not leave Ned’s memory for as long as he lived. But Ned also could not forget the look of hurt and distress on Robert’s face when, the day before the trial, Ned told his friend he would defend his sister in the proceedings.

After the trial, Robert was no longer welcome in the North, and he was determined to return to the South to see a proper maester for the infection in his arm that only served to worsen his sour mood. Part of Ned had not wished to return with Robert to the Vale after the trial, remembering the miserable trek up to Winterfell. And, in the end, with Robert’s mood and Jon Arryn’s stern frustration, the trip to the Vale was tense; the looks on the faces of the Northern bannermen they housed with only made matters worse. Never before had Ned truly felt ashamed to stand next to his foster brother.

Ned knew he was not the only one, remembering the disappointment on Jon Arryn’s face the night after the trial when they’d discussed the outcomes and imminent departures.

*Jon sighed, looking deep into the fire burning on the other side of the room.*

“I do not know where I went wrong with him. I thought I raised him better.”
The older man paused, looking at Ned for a moment before turning back to the fire. “You two are like sons to me, along with Elbert. To see what has become of him…”

“Surely one action does not a man make?” Ned questioned, more for himself than for his foster father. He wanted to believe that Robert was not the man he had been with Lyanna.

Jon looked at him hard, his eyes soft. “Ned, you have seen far more of his actions than I but I fear this action is merely a representation of the man he was becoming, a man we failed to acknowledge. The boy I failed.”

Ned thought back to times when he and Robert were younger and he could have influenced his friend’s behavior, when he could have stemmed the drinking and whoring, when he could have helped Robert cope better with the loss of his parents. Robert’s less savory habits were not of Ned’s doing, but he had done little to stop them. “’Twas not you, Jon, you did not encourage such behavior—”

Jon interrupted him with a shake of his head, “I may not have told him to take what he thought was his from your sister, but I did not teach him that he should not think she was his to take. I knew of his ways, especially after Mya’s birth, but I never stopped him. I did not restrict him or teach him the ways to respect a woman. Nay, Ned, this is ever my burden as well.”

“But Jon, you have taught us so much: honor, strategy, truth—”

Jon shook his head again, “It seems only you and Elbert have taken those lessons to heart. You have a good and honest heart, Ned. I would be proud to call you my son, as I know your father is. You and Elbert will be my enduring legacy.”

Upon their initial return to the Vale, Robert had attempted to atone, doing his best to be on good behavior - particularly after he approved the first payment to Winterfell from the coffers of Storm’s End. He was diligent in their discussions with Jon and the Maester at the Eyrie, he responded to many items of correspondence pertaining to the operations of Storm’s End, and he restrained himself in town during their ventures there.

However, the situation had begun to degenerate by the time Robert received troubling news of issues in the Stormlands. Stannis, Robert’s younger brother, had been running much of the business in the region while Robert was in the Vale, and apparently, he’d handled an issue not to Robert’s liking. This news came on the heels of an intense argument with Jon Arryn, who insisted Robert arrange for the remaining payments to House Stark while at his residence. The sum was quite hefty after all, enough to warrant careful budgeting of the payments over the two years. Robert had not wished to
think of the trial, his anger swelling with every declaration from Jon that it was a matter to not be pushed aside.

Leaving this issue unresolved, Robert departed for Storm’s End and peace reigned in the Eyrie, a calm Ned had not felt in a long time. After a moon, and a brief battle with a few errant rebels in the hills of the Vale, Jon Arryn had formally knighted Ned. For once in his life, Ned felt accomplished - he was no longer overshadowed by Brandon or Robert. This he had achieved alone.

The feeling was to be short-lived. Robert had invited him to visit Storm’s End while he was home, and so, within a moon of being knighted, Ned took a ship to the seat of the Baratheon’s.

Initially, all seemed well. Robert was in a good mood, showing Ned the castle and surrounding lands by day and feasting by night. His friend even hosted a feast in Ned’s honor, a celebration of his knighting.

All it took was one night of too much wine for the cracks to re-emerge.

Robert’s anger did not seem to be directed at Ned himself, but rather what Ned represented. Robert had begun to discuss openly his frustration that Jon hadn’t yet knighted him, that Ned’s father had rebuffed his suit for Lyanna’s hand, that he was now saddled with this enormous debt and a hand that was not healing. Ned reminded Robert of all of these tribulations.

It did not help that Robert’s too-serious brother, Stannis, antagonized Robert, constantly raising the burden of the remissions to House Stark and berating Robert for his poor behavior.

When they had returned to the Vale for a brief time before beginning this trip, Robert had argued with Jon Arryn for hours, demanding his knighthood and support for an appeal against the amount due to House Stark following the assault. Ned declined to aid Robert in his plight, which only caused further tension.

Now, riding to what was already being called the grandest tournament of their lifetimes, Ned hoped to find some reprieve with his family.

More than that, Ned was ready to reaffirm his place in the Stark pack.
Tywin

Tywin Lannister stood on the walls of the Red Keep, watching the early morning movements of the people of King’s Landing. The city was coming to life after another night, the shopkeepers throwing cold water upon the drunkards who had fallen asleep on their doorstep, the fishmongers setting up their stands to sell the catch from dawn.

It was these simple things that separated the lives of the peasants from the nobility. The people were the driving force of the kingdom, yet they lived day to day. There was no strategy to their lives, they held no power, they sought no achievements beyond survival of each day.

*The lion surveying the sheep. How appropriate.*

It had been blessedly calm since much of Court had accompanied the King and Crown Prince to Harrenhal, allowing Tywin the time to work more efficiently. Strategy did not function as well when rushed, and now was the perfect time for him to begin the foundations.

*No longer will the lion be viewed as inferior.*

The King had not wished for his attendance at the tournament, instead demanding his children be present to represent the Lannister family. Tywin had no particular desire to go himself now that the King was, but he would have preferred for Jaime to remain with him. Though Cersei was convinced the King’s request for her had come from the Crown Prince, Tywin very much doubted it - the Crown Prince and his father were no closer than Tywin was to the King at the moment. Nay, there had been some other reason for the King’s demand, but it would not serve Tywin to linger on the whims of a mad man.

While the Crown Prince might not have asked for her presence, Cersei would have time aplenty to garner Rhaegar’s attention. With every eligible lady of the great houses of Westeros in attendance,
Cersei would shine bright, the only logical choice for the future Queen.

There had been whispers of Lord Stark’s daughter vying for the crown after a betrothal with Lord Baratheon fell through, but Tywin couldn’t see how that would possibly fit with House Stark’s present movements. Tywin had listened closely to the Prince’s detailed discussion of the North, and all movements pointed towards consolidation. Why would Lord Stark marry his daughter into the weak ruling House, when he could marry her to a powerful bannerman and consolidate further? With three sons, there was little chance of inheritance issues.

Tywin turned back to his desk, glancing at the letters on his desk from his brother, who was running Casterly Rock. House Lannister was not quite as secure as House Stark, which meant careful planning was necessary to strengthen their position.

Though he did not display it outwardly as the Queen had done, Tywin had also been relieved to watch the royal party departing. The paranoia of Aerys Targaryen hardly permitted any degree of maneuvering. However, even more than the King’s absence, it was the absence of Varys that served as the true boon to Tywin Lannister’s plans.

Despite the additional freedom Tywin had been granted in King’s Landing, the Spider had not left without causing his usual destruction. Having chosen to remain for a few days after the royal party’s departure, “tending to the King’s business,” the Spider had appeared at his solar door. Tywin grimaced as he sat down at his desk, contemplating the Spider’s visit.

“My Lord Hand, Lord Varys requests an audience.”

Tywin nodded, breathing through his nose to still his annoyance. In an instant his solar was flooded by the pervasive sweet lavender scent that hung off of the eunuch

“‘Tis a shame you do not plan to join us at Harrenhal, my Lord Hand. I think it shall prove to be a most entertaining event.”

“The realm does not stop functioning due to the elaborate whims of Lord Whent. What do you want, Varys?”

“Ah, I only wished to share a few pieces of information I thought might interest you, given…. present circumstances.”
“Very well, what is it?” Tywin did not have time for Varys’ simpering.

“Just that my little birds tell me that there is perhaps more to the Crown Prince’s emergent interest in the North.”

Varys paused, staring at him with that smug look on his face that drove most mad with frustration. Tywin waited as patiently as he could, knowing that there was likely more to this information, but refusing to play into Varys’ game. He himself had taken note of Prince Rhaegar’s interest in the North, though such interests made sense in the context of the game that every Lord Paramount seemed to be contemplating.

“Ah, my apologies for remaining vague. It is simply that rumor has it that the Stark girl has caught the eye of the Silver Prince. I believe the old Maester of Winterfell had once proposed her for your son, no?”

Tywin fought the instinct to grimace - that had not in fact been a particular interest Tywin had thought the Crown Prince had developed. In truth, Court rumors had long spoke of the Prince’s intimate interests swaying further south as opposed to north. But the Stark girl would present a match much more suited to the heir to the throne than House Dayne...

Varys was not done.

“It is said she is quite the beauty, with a gift for and unusual experience in ruling. With no betrothal, she is free to attract the Crown Prince’s attention. She would have certainly been a strong choice for the young Ser Jaime. Such a shame that the King is looking to accept another young knight into the Kingsguard...”

Tywin interrupted, “I am certain Ser Gerold has provided the King with several options of knights with distinction.”

“Indeed, but it seems that the King has been particularly intrigued by young Ser Jaime. Knighted by the Sword of the Morning himself just before his sixteenth nameday after moons training with the King’s elite warriors. Such distinction surely warrants consideration.”

The Spider had seen himself out promptly following his delivery of such news, and Tywin had immediately called for two of his most trusted men to ride to meet the royal party in order to determine the veracity of such information. Likely the former would be difficult to determine -
Rhaegar had continued to entertain Cersei’s advances after all, not to mention the fact that the Crown Prince was admirably capable when it came to disguising his true sentiments - but the news regarding Jaime warranted swift action.

A boy of sixteen, Jaime had certainly earned himself a name as an exceedingly competent swordsman. In fact, it was the only thing his son was competent at - Jaime lacked both the intelligence and the motivation to excel at any thoughtful pursuits.

Varys was right; knighted by the Sword of the Morning himself, having trained for a few months with the Kingsguard in the Red Keep last year, Jaime had managed to make himself a prime target. Tywin cursed the stupidity of his children once more. Jaime was his heir, the one to carry on the Lannister legacy.

Should the King take away his son, Tywin would have to take drastic measures. The realm did not deserve two Lannisters in service to the King.

Tywin had hoped for some time that he would not have to serve Aerys much longer. He knew the Crown Prince was likely planning something, but Rhaegar was not nearly ruthless enough. The boy had never been one for violence, preferring his books and harp, but this Tywin had thought he would grow out of - he’d thought that as a young man, Rhaegar would learn that as a King, as a ruler, one had to make difficult decisions. Often times, a small amount of violence was far more effective and efficient than a carefully planned political move.

It was times like now when Tywin cursed himself for allowing Ser Barristan to save the King at Duskendale. If only Rhaegar had taken the Throne then, a young 18 year old ruler in need of advice. The Crown Prince had been much more malleable then and he had been quite taken with Cersei, as all young men were.

To think, one death might have achieved so much - Rhaegar a King, Cersei a Queen...

One death might be all it took now. Tywin knew Aerys, had known him since they were boys. He had seen Aerys descend deeper and deeper into his madness, had watched his mind become crippled by paranoia and power. Aerys would not go willingly. The Crown Prince would be naive to think such a thing possible - Rhaegar saw the madness as much as Tywin.

Aerys would have no qualms about sinking to violence. Nay, the mad King practices violence in his own Court on a daily basis.
A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts, only just preceding the entrance of Jack, one of his squires.

“My Lord, my apologies for the interruption but you indicated you wished to be informed immediately should any raven arrive from the Royal Party?”

“Enter. Give it here.”

The boy shuffled forward quickly, his eyes downcast as he handed the parchment to him. Tywin dismissed him with the wave of a hand.

Six words were scratched into the paper hastily, but they were enough to warrant action.

_The Dragon will take the Cub._

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter of 2018! Happy New Year to everyone, wherever you are!

Shout out to all my incredible fans - Queensgate officially won four awards in the Ice and Fire Awards 2018 - Rhaegar/Lyanna Awards!

Queensgate won for Best Long-fic, Best Romance, Best Smut, and Best Characterization - I feel so lucky to have such faithful readers!! I was also runner-up as Favorite Author, behind the lovely @toaquiprashippar (who has been writing a whopping 15 fics in 2018!).

This year has been crazy in my personal life, but AO3 has always been there - I'm so excited to see what 2019 brings!

Up next: the long awaited Tournament arrives - what drama will it bring??
Traveling Travails and Agreements

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ashara

Golden ringlets came into view, only just proceeding that voice Ashara had done so well to avoid in the last days.

“Ah, Lady Ashara, it’s nice of you to finally join us.”

Ashara turned fully as Cersei Lannister stopped just in front of her. The Lannister lady was decked in crimson and gold, an elaborate silk dress that was most inappropriate for travel. Then again, due to the King’s presence in the retinue, they were moving far slower than they might have otherwise.

“Lady Cersei, it’s a pleasure as always. I actually just came to find my brother.”

“I do believe he is with the Crown Prince. I would have imagined you would know that, given how close you used to be with the Prince…”

Cersei’s little posse giggled indiscreetly and Ashara struggled to not roll her eyes. They had been back at Court for no longer than a few days before embarking on this arduous journey, but gossip had flourished nonetheless, centered around how little the Crown Prince seemed to speak with Ashara, his so-called mistress. No one considered the fact that the Crown Prince rode with the King most days, while Ashara remained in a carriage with Lynesse Hightower at the request of the Queen.

It was ridiculous enough that people thought that Rhaegar, who hadn’t ever kept a mistress since coming of age, would reverse upon that trend suddenly with his best friend’s sister. But the idea that these women thought that a man, even as handsome as Rhaegar, would discard Ashara after less than a year...
“I know not of what you speak, Lady Cersei. I do not believe I am any closer to the Crown Prince than any other Lady of the Queen.”

“Of course, how imprudent of me to suggest otherwise. Such an idea would be unthinkable. Alas, as one of the Queen’s Ladies, you must be upset by her absence - ‘tis indeed a shame she could not grace us with her presence.”

The way the Lannister woman was behaving made it abundantly clear Cersei viewed it as anything but a shame. As for Ashara, the only shame about the Queen’s absence was the fact Rhaella wouldn’t be there to commiserate with Ashara over Cersei’s overt flirtations towards the Crown Prince. In truth, it was so rare for Rhaella to have time without the King’s “affection” that Ashara was grateful the woman would have two moons of peace.

Up ahead, she spotted the white cloak of a Kingsguard, indicating her brother was not far.

Excusing herself, she turned without waiting for a response; Cersei did not deserve her kindness, and being courteous was becoming all the more difficult recently. The lioness had gotten secure in her standing, not realizing the obvious lack of affection in Rhaegar’s eyes.

No, it had become readily apparent in the last few days that Lady Cersei had the wrong Targaryen’s attention.

Seeing her approach, her brother called to her, “Ash!”

“Ah brother of mine,” she replied, moving to her tiptoes to place a kiss on his cheek. Arthur offered his arm and escorted her towards where the front of the party was resting.

“I saw you speaking with Lady Cersei?”

“Gods she is odious. I do not know how Rhaegar puts up with her.”

Arthur chuckled, “He is a better man than you or I, it would seem. Though I think he enjoys it to an extent.”
“Watching her flounder and fluff herself up as if she is already Crown Princess? I admit I find it amusing as well, as long as she is directing her attention at him, not elsewhere.”

Arthur shrugged, “I do believe Rhaegar thinks her actions are having unintended consequences.”

“Oh? And what might those be?”

“Tis not for me to share.”

“Oh Arthur! You are an awful tease you know?”

“So you do enjoy telling me.”

Ashara sighed, knowing she would get no more out of him on the subject. She had already seen the King’s burgeoning interest and had not thought much more of it - the King’s eye had always been known to roam, and his supposed affection for Cersei’s mother had been well known. But if the Crown Prince had noticed it as well, it could well mean more. Such a development with Lady Cersei could prove most interesting.

“How is his Grace? I can imagine it is a surprise to have the King’s attendance.”

Arthur grimaced. She could only imagine how furious Rhaegar had been when the King had announced his intention to attend so last minute. It certainly put a crinkle in months of well-developed plans…

“He is as well as expected when one’s father chooses to grace an event of such repute with his presence. The Crown Prince is glad to have the King’s interest in seeing the Lords and Ladies of Westeros.”

*In essence, Rhaegar was not well pleased that the King suddenly took an interest in the Tournament when Aerys had previously refused to leave the Red Keep for years.*
“‘Twas indeed most unexpected. I am certain the Lords of the Seven Kingdoms will be glad to see the King is in good health.”

_The Lords will all see the King’s madness clear as day, with his beloved heir standing next to him, a sane and intelligent alternative._

“We can only pray the Lords and Ladies do pledge themselves once more to the Targaryen Crown.”

_Hopefully the Lords will see that Rhaegar represents the safer Targaryen to place upon the Iron Throne._

“Do you think such a pledge likely?”

Arthur looked at her, his eyebrow raised, before shaking his head.

“The King has already spoken extensively during our journey of his intentions to demand fealty from each Kingdom.”

“I see.”

So Rhaegar had not yet decided on a course of action. It was not unwise to wait and see the mood of the event, but Rhaegar’s movements would likely be severely limited, if their journey at present was any indication - the King had barely allowed his son leave to sleep in his own tent, so strong was his paranoia.

Fortunately, the King did not seem to know whether to fear his son or fear for his son - Aerys was convinced some plot was afoot, but he was as oft to think Rhaegar a victim as a suspect.

“And on our Prince’s other dilemma?” she inquired, steering the conversation in a more amusing direction.

Arthur rolled his eyes, and Ashara couldn’t help but giggle.
When she had first learned of Rhaegar’s interest in pursuing Lyanna Stark as a wife, Ashara had been surprised. Not that she knew the Stark girl well at all, but she knew Rhaegar admirably well - he was an intelligent man, who lived his life in pursuit of knowledge. He had never shown much interest in the usual pleasures of life, his melancholy taking precedence. Ashara had not expected him to be infatuated with a girl who sounded so different from his own character, but if the light blush that colored his cheeks when he spoke of Lyanna was any indication, this girl had managed to bring out a new side of Rhaegar.

She heard the call for the party to begin moving again so she winked at her brother before turning to return to her ride.

“Oh, worry not, dear brother. The Crown Prince will have all the assistance he might need to woo his lady.”

Lyanna

"Lya, please -"

"Brandon, I have no desire whatsoever to sit in that wretched cage. Honestly, I do not know how anyone survives such a horrifying experience."

"Surely it can't be that bad. And shouldn't you be wearing a dress at least? Might I remind you that you agreed with Father to behave?"

Benjen snickered as Lyanna scoffed, "It's not as though I'm up to some mischief. I'm merely riding my horse. I cannot believe that to be defined as misbehaving. In any case, we are certain to be the last ones already, and it wouldn't serve for us to delay further."
Recognizing a losing battle, Brandon threw up his arms in defeat, "Just promise me to behave once we arrive?"

She rode closer to him, placing her hand on his arm, as she crooned sweetly, "Don't worry dearest brother, I will be all that is grace and beauty once we are settled in camp."

Brandon rolled his eyes as Benjen broke down laughing, prompting Lyanna to look about innocently, "What, pray, is so laughable? Do you think me so savage? I promise you I am the spitting image of the perfect Lady." She lifted her chin haughtily, smiling brightly.

Between laughs, Benjen interjected, "The only part of that image that's true is the spitting."

At this, Brandon also joined in laughing while Lyanna went to smack her younger brother upside the head. "You two are insufferable!"

They crested the top of a slope in the road and Harrenhal came into view. The castle was still leagues away, but one could already make out the outline of the towering structures emerging out of the mid-morning mist. Even from a distance the size and scale of the Keep was incredible.

Brandon watched smugly as both of his siblings' mouths dropped open - he remembered the first time he had seen the giant castle en route to Lannisport a few years back. He spent the next few hours teasing them and regaling them with stories from the tourney at Lannisport.

The encampment came into view gradually, hundreds of tents fanning out beneath the long shadows of Harrenhal. Most of the camp was to the west of the castle, with the tourney grounds constructed in the open space outside of the walls.

She and Brandon had been coordinating with Lady Whent over the last weeks and had been granted a camp on the edges of the grounds given they were likely to be the last to arrive - most of the Great Houses were to be housed in the castle, but all the Starks agreed they preferred open camping with their fellow Northerners. Lady Whent had insisted on at least providing tents and associated amenities for the Stark siblings at the campsite, and given the long journey, Lyanna was glad they had agreed to it. She already knew she would be responsible for overseeing the camps of the men who had accompanied them, for Brandon was unlikely to do so with so many possible distractions so anything that eased her tasks was appreciated.
Of course, with the bright colors and banners of the Southern houses slowly coming into view, Brandon yet again attempted to persuade her to change into a dress.

Putting on a thoughtful expression, Lyanna decided to indulge herself - it was perhaps her last real breath of freedom before ten days of useless frippery.

"Okay, Bran."

Brandon looked taken aback, shocked that she might agree so easily.

_Not so quick, brother dearest._

"I have only one condition."

Still recovering from his presumed victory, Brandon nodded, "Name it, dearest sister."

Turning forward briefly to hide her smirk, she quickly surveyed the terrain leading to the encampment. All it would take was a quick step to the right and then it was open field - Lyanna's advantage, considering her lighter frame atop Silverwing. And she hadn't named the charger Silverwing for nothing - the horse practically flew when given the space.

As if anticipating her mistress' intentions, Silverwing started to pull eagerly.

Lyanna flashed her brother a bright smile, pausing only long enough to see the recognition dawning on Brandon's face. In a moment they were off, Lyanna loosening the reins to give Silver the freedom to fly as she yelled to her furious brother, "Catch me first!"

She barely heard Brandon yelling her name furiously as he gave chase. The landscape was a blur of greens and browns, but the only thing that mattered was the beautiful beast beneath her as she guided the horse lightly. Silver needed no encouragement and Lyanna didn't need to turn around to know that Brandon would never catch them.

Giddy with adrenaline, Lyanna couldn't help the laughter bubbling out as they crossed the last few miles at full speed. Nothing would ever compare to this feeling, the purest feeling of elation. She felt
days of worries over appropriate behavior, courting etiquette and potential betrothals fall away as the joy overwhelmed her.

Her braid came undone in the last mile, the wind finally tearing at the scarp holding it together, and her hair streamed behind her.

As they passed the outer edges of the camp, she slowed only enough to successfully navigate around obstacles, both stationary and non-stationary, moving towards the Stark banner that had been erected. The modestly slower pace also allowed her to take in the sights and colors of the tournament - it was her first, after all, and she couldn't help her giddiness from the exotic nature of the whole experience.

She peeked over her shoulder to see Brandon seething behind her, though whether his ire was from her willful display or his loss in the race, Lyanna couldn't tell. Turning back before she ran into an unsuspecting soul, she spotted Ned up ahead near where temporary stables had been constructed.

"Ned!"

Silver had barely stopped before Lyanna was dismounting, quickly crossing the distance to hug her middle brother. Brandon had caught up to her by the time she pulled back from Ned, jumping from his own horse to join them. He gave her a stern look, prompting a bright smile from her, before he too greeted Ned.

Two young stable hands appeared to take Silverwing and Brandon's charger, and Lyanna fished a copper for each, quickly requesting a thorough brush down for both horses - the boys nodded vigorously, thrilled by the extra coin.

Only upon turning back did she realize the full company Ned had been keeping.

Two of the men were not familiar to her - Ned introduced them as Elbert Arryn, Jon Arryn's nephew and heir to the Vale, and Kyle Royce, Lord Yohn Royce's young cousin. Both men were genial and respectful, jesting with Ned about finally meeting his "ever elusive sister."

"No wonder they never speak of you, otherwise every young man would be riding to Winterfell to behold your beauty and ask for your hand."

Lyanna laughed, shaking her head as both of her brother's shot glares at Elbert for such a comment,
"Good ser, I'll not entertain such falsities. I cannot imagine my appearance to be quite so pleasing at present, though certainly that should please my brothers if it turns away suitors." She winked at Brandon, who huffed exasperatedly, as Elbert and Kyle chuckled.

Much to her displeasure, Ned's final companion was known to her, and he made his presence apparent with his raucous laugh at her comment.

"Easy boys, I can tell you from experience the ride to Winterfell is as harsh and icy as the Starks themselves - though they certainly make up for it in hospitality." Robert flashed a cheeky smile at the Stark siblings, though it only seemed to cause tension. Robert approached her, reaching out to grasp her hand, "Lya, it's lovely to -"

Lyanna cut him off, clasping her hands firmly in front of her as she dipped into a shallow curtsy, "Lord Baratheon."

Robert faltered slightly at her formality after the lightness that previously prevailed, but he recovered quickly to bow low. Straightening, he spoke, "Lya, I'd have no animosity between us. I hope we can move past any prior indiscretions."

Lyanna kept her posture straight, remaining as formal as possible, "Lord Baratheon, you are my brother’s friend and the Lord of Storm’s End, therefore civility is required. I pray you not expect anymore than that, for I fear I shan't be capable of it."

Robert looked about to argue, so she held a hand up, lifting her chin defiantly before continuing, "Indeed, my Lord, I'd appreciate it if you revert to addressing me by my full name - Lya is a nickname used exclusively by my family. Brothers, if you'll excuse me, I wish to change after our journey and someone should make sure Benjen hasn't gotten himself into mischief."

With a quick dip of a curtsy, she was walking briskly towards the edge of the encampment where the Stark camp was being set.
Ned

Ned stared at the man who he had once thought of as his brother, his gaze flickering back to the receding form of his younger sister.

Why does he insist on making light of the issue?

It had been a trying several months for Ned, between the return trip to the Vale with a bitter Robert and a stern Lord Arryn. The ensuing months had gotten no easier - while Robert brushed off the assault within weeks, his attempts at returning to their prior camaraderie had only angered Ned further. Ned had hoped that Robert would at least respect him by showing some remorse when facing Ned’s siblings.

Ned noticed all the faults in his best friend now - characteristics Ned had previously excused were glaring, revealing a man that he did not recognize. Overconfidence, a keen interest in war and weapons, a love of drink and whores, all compensation for deep seated insecurities that had only festered with a lack of discipline and an excess of power at a young age.

Robert created his own reality; any details that didn’t fit in it were discarded. No one had ever taught him to view the world differently. Ned might not have faulted him for that before, but Robert’s insistence on shifting the dialogue around his assault of Lyanna frustrated Ned endlessly. Why couldn’t his friend simply admit he made a terrible mistake in overstepping his bounds and work to repent? Brandon might never forgive Robert, but Lyanna and his father were usually reasonable people when atonement matched the crime.

The sound of Robert’s laughter brought Ned back to the situation at hand. Robert clapped Ned on the shoulder, saying, "She's a spirited one, your sister! I'm sure she'll come around!"

Ned grimaced watching Brandon, his true blood brother, glower at Robert. The eldest Stark’s voice was like ice as he spoke.

"If you lay a hand on her again, Baratheon, I'll kill you."
The words hung in the air, the tension building. In that moment, as Brandon stared at Robert, Ned saw a striking resemblance to their father; he could see there was more than a sliver of the Lord of Winterfell in his older brother.

Brandon broke the stare, nodding briefly to the other men before stalking off after their sister. Elbert and Kyle looked confused by the sudden course of events – no doubt they were surprised given the siblings had seemed relatively at ease until Robert spoke – but Robert just shrugged off the Wild Wolf’s threat.

While he didn’t wish for continued animosity, Ned was less than pleased with his friend’s behavior.

“Robert, I know you mean well, but perhaps it’s best if you steer clear of my siblings for the next few days.”

“Don’t worry Neddy boy, I’m sure they’ll simmer down. Didn’t you say it’s that wolf’s blood of theirs? Quick to anger, quick to forgive.” Robert slapped his shoulder again, and the grimace on Ned’s face deepened, due to his friend’s words not his actions, “Well boys, I’m off to find the ale. There’s got to be drink a plenty, and I couldn’t help but notice all the lovely servant girls scampering around.”

Unhappy with Robert’s quick dismissal of the situation, Ned was about to confront him when Kyle offered to join the Lord of Storm’s End. Elbert excused himself to find his uncle and Ned followed suit, saying his goodbyes quickly, escaping to follow his siblings, hoping the explosive fight that was sure to come didn’t burn down the camp.

Ned was just reaching the entry to the Stark’s shared pavilion when he heard Brandon and Lyanna. Two sides of the tent, which would serve as a common area for the duration of the tournament, were propped open to allow a breeze, so Ned was able to just see the outline of his siblings as they spoke.

He was not surprised by the topic of discussion.

“Bran, for my sake, please hold your animosity at bay. We have to uphold appearances. He is a Lord Paramount and I am merely a woman.”

“You are the daughter of the Warden of the North, a Lord Paramount. The man cannot flaunt his power over you!”
“And he won’t. You read the Crown Prince’s reply to Father – should Lord Baratheon overstep again, the Crown will step in.”

“He won’t have a chance to overstep. You will have one of us with you at all times.”

“Oh Bran, do not be stifling. I will be fine. The man wouldn’t dare do something so rash with all the Lords and Ladies of the Seven Kingdoms in attendance.”

“I think you underestimate men…”

Lyanna laughed, “Perhaps, but that’s what a knife is for. Now, I don’t know where Ben scampered off to, but we need to find him before we present ourselves to the King.”

“Bloody hell, these Southrons and their ridiculous Court gestures.”

Ned heard the smack Lyanna must have delivered, “Bran! He’s the King, you can’t say such things!”

“Ah, sweet sister, are you worried about meeting the perfect Prince? I’ll admit he’s every maiden’s dream.”

Lyanna huffed, “You are incorrigible!”

“Hey, hey, mercy! You know my stance on the matter, if it keeps you away from Baratheon, I’m all for it.”

“At least on that we can agree.”

What are they talking about? Is the Crown Prince interested in Lyanna?

“I’m off to find Ben.”
Lyanna walked out of the tent, Brandon’s voice following her, “Make sure you change!”

His sister saw him and smiled, then rolled her eyes at Brandon, who had appeared at the entry of the tent behind her.

“Ah, Ned, good,” Brandon turned to address him, “did you already greet the King with Lord Arryn? Or will you join the rest of us as a Stark?”

Ned cringed internally at the phrasing, the message implicit.

“I chose to wait for your arrival, brother. I am a Stark of Winterfell”

Brandon chuckled, “Indeed, you are,” his brother clasped his shoulder, “glad to have you standing by us. Go change, but come by my tent before we head to the castle - we should speak about Lord Baratheon.”

Ned nodded, having figured this conversation was overdue.

He turned to his own tent across the dirt path, watching as Lyanna chattered away with Benjen, pushing him into his tent before she skipped to her own.

Just as she reached the entrance, Lyanna turned and seeing Ned, waved and smiled at him briefly before one of her handmaidens emerged to fuss over her. Ned could practically feel her eyes roll as she was dragged within.

He found himself staring at the entrance of his own tent, the Stark direwolf painted across the flap, swaying lightly with the breeze, and for a moment, he took in the feeling of standing among his family. After months of struggling with Robert, Ned realized this was where he belonged, among the wolves of Winterfell.

Smiling to himself, he pushed open the flap, thinking about the letter he would write to his father.

Robert might not be welcome in the North, but it was time for Ned to go home.
Home to Winterfell.

Chapter End Notes

Slow roll, I promise I still intend to finish! There is a lot already written going forward, just have to edit and fill in sections that are still missing.

Bless you all for being so patient and leaving such wonderful comments! They are what make me work on this whenever I can!!

Sooo many tournament chapters to come - hopefully ya'll don't get sick of it :)}
Rhaegar

Rhaegar was surveying the encampment from the castle walls with Arthur, watching the camp come to life even as he felt his plans starting to crumble.

It had been a difficult few days, capping off a long and somewhat disastrous moon turn. Months of quiet planning was seemingly squandered when his father surprised everyone and decided to attend Lord Whent's tournament, the King's first venture out of the Red Keep in years. Rhaegar's plans of gathering the powerful lords of Westeros to host a Great Council were largely in tatters - with his father in attendance, there would be no way to subtly arrange such a meeting.

By some grace of the gods, Aerys had yet to implicate Rhaegar in any plans to unseat him, fixing his wrath on Tywin and any number of other lesser lords. But Rhaegar knew it was only a matter of time - even their departure from King's Landing, lauded by the city's residents, had raised the King's suspicions of his heir. For while the common people received the King with cool respect, they were not shy in their love for the Crown Prince. The sound of his name echoed through the streets as he followed his father's wheelhouse, and Rhaegar had been subject to his father's ire ever since.

To make matters worse, Aerys had decided it was time for Rhaegar to marry - in one of his deeper swings of madness, his father had threatened to make Viserys his heir should Rhaegar remain unwed. Rhaegar wasn't sure what such an act would accomplish, seeing as Viserys was still a child of five and was still years from producing children. Alas, the threat had been made, and Aerys intended to see it through.

Rhaegar was given six moon turns to finalize a betrothal agreement, though his father wanted a name
by the end of the Tournament. The glimmer in Tywin Lannister's eyes was visible from across the Small Council chamber, and Cersei Lannister had been practically dancing around Court the last days in the Red Keep. The forwardness had been so overt that Rhaegar had chosen to ride out ahead of the Royal party once they were a few days from Harrenhal, informing his father than he needed to ensure the Whent's were properly prepared for the King's attendance.

Rhaegar's only consolation when it came to the Lannister's - modest as it were- was that Tywin was apparently oblivious regarding which Targaryen was interested in his daughter. While Rhaegar found Cersei Lannister objectively attractive - she was undeniably a beautiful woman - it was his father's gaze that lingered over her form too long. The King's desire and love for Cersei's mother, Joanna, was a well-known piece of court gossip, and given Cersei’s supposed likeness to her mother, it surprised few that Aerys would be drawn to her. Given Rhaella's struggles with bearing children continued to be an issue for Aerys, Rhaegar wondered whether his father would attempt to take Cersei as a mistress. It certainly wouldn't be the first time the King had taken a mistress, and choosing Cersei to fill this role would have the added benefit of putting Tywin in his place as a servant of the Crown, something Aerys clearly liked to do.

The truth was Rhaegar was committed to his pursuit of Lyanna Stark, but even that contained its fair share of challenges. Rickard Stark had chosen to remain behind at Winterfell, sending his four children to the tournament and, while this was not altogether a disaster, the Prince recalled Brandon's explanation in the Wolfswood that Rickard intended to conduct discussions regarding Lyanna's marriage exclusively in person. The Warden of the North remaining in Winterfell meant Rhaegar would have to ride North to finalize any potential agreement.

And this assumed Lyanna was at all amenable to the proposal - the more time that passed, the more Rhaegar's hesitance grew. When Lyanna’s letters had continued on the edge of formality, Arthur had aptly pointed out that, while Rhaegar had spent months thinking about her, Lyanna still did not know that the Crown Prince of Westeros and Jay from Queensgate were one and the same.

Which led him back to Harrenhal and his plans spiraling out of control: The Starks had chosen to remain in the camp instead of the castle; Cersei continued to make her presence felt; Prince Oberyn of Dorne had already managed to insult Mace Tyrell, the Lord of Highgarden; gossip was abounding about the possibility of a new Kingsguard member; and all the while, the King grew more anxious with every passing minute, seeing treachery everywhere.

Arthur's news regarding the Kingsguard gossip, though not unexpected, only exasperated him further. He glanced towards the practice yards, where a young lion cub sparred against a knight from the Westerlands, his golden locks shining even from afar.

"He's quite set on Jaime Lannister?" he quietly questioned again, though he already knew the answer.
"I don’t see a way out of it. Rhaegar, had I known the reasoning behind his questions..." Arthur's voice dropped off as the Prince shook his head.

"I know, my friend. The vacancy has been left for too long in any case. I just wish he had chosen someone less controversial."

His friend nodded, understanding the direction of his thoughts - Tywin Lannister was not likely to appreciate his heir being sworn into a lifelong commitment, forswearing lands and titles. If the rumors were true, Tywin was in discussions with Hoster Tully to marry Jaime to Hoster’s younger daughter, only further complicating matters. The Kingsguard would steal Tywin's heir, leaving Casterly Rock to Tywin's youngest son, Tyrion, a dwarf and according to Court, Tywin Lannister's greatest embarrassment.

Arthur spoke again as they continued to watch the golden boy win his sparring match, "At least the boy is talented. While the political ramifications may not be desirable, he shows great promise."

Rhaegar smirked at his friend, "A roaring endorsement from the Sword of the Morning, huh? Has the Lannister boy finally determined the golden price for Ser Arthur Dayne's praise?"

Arthur scoffed, feigning offense, "I do hope your Grace is not suggesting my praise can be bought. I'll have you know I pride myself on my lofty standards."

"Ah, so that Lyseni whore must have been quite the woman to meet your lofty standards. Sent you to the stars and back, I assume?"

"Your Grace is an apt observer, but he should recall that such a situation was only prompted because of his Grace's insistence on those extra tankards of ale."

"You lost the bet, Arthur. Surely you are aware of how bets work."

Arthur just shook his head and Rhaegar chuckled.

"It is good to see you jesting, Rhaegar. I was worried you might have forgotten how."
Rhaegar sighed, noting the concern in his friend's tone. "I know, my friend. It's been a trying few months. I just feel as though we take one step forward only to be pushed back two."

Arthur placed a hand on his shoulder, "You are doing all you can. All is not lost - maybe the plans can not proceed as originally envisioned. But you still have a large number of the most powerful lords in Westeros in one place. There is still much you can achieve."

Rhaegar nodded his agreement, turning back to glance at the massive castle sprawling behind the thick walls. Harrenhal was an enormous structure, built on a scale better suited to giants than to mere men, with massive curtain walls that all but obscured the five towers of the castle. In spite of its size, much of the castle was in a deep stage of decay, each tower bent and cracked in places, the blackened stones lasting evidence of the burning of Harrenhal by Targaryen dragons during Aegon's conquest. Only the bottom third of three of the towers were still used - the Whents had allowed the rest to go to ruin. Frankly, Rhaegar didn't blame them - restoring the castle would cost a fortune, and the space would remain unused in any case.

Even now, though the castle was bustling with servants and nobles in preparation for the tournament, it still looked shockingly empty, the ruins soaring into the sky and blanketing everything in shadow. It was a stunning and tragic reminder of the former Targaryen glory, one lost with the death of the last dragon.

*A dead species for a dying name.*

"Rhaegar." Arthur's voice pulled him out of his deepening melancholy. With his mind still a foggy, he turned to look at the figures Arthur was pointing out in the distance.

A dark figure was moving at full speed across the distant grasslands from the north, a second figure cresting the hill behind it. The riders were almost a league away, and from this distance, he could only see the dark cloaks billowing behind the riders, a mix of grays and blacks.

"Outriders from the North? Though I can't imagine why they would ride full-speed across the plains instead of taking the road."

Rhaegar couldn't help but notice how fast the riders were moving - the same distance would take a normal horse significantly longer to cross. Rhaegar could feel Arthur's amusement next to him, prompting him to glance at his friend. Arthur looked back at him, shrugging, but his eyes spoke to some secret knowledge. Rhaegar felt his brows furrow in confusion, his mind still clearing, but he
turned back to the riders. A third figure had emerged on the hill, trailing further behind the first two, which had come into better view.

Both riders were crouched low over the saddle, effortlessly steering their chargers over the rough terrain. At their current speed, the front rider was only a minute or two away from the edge of camp, but they made no indication of slowing. The speed finally took its toll on the first rider, as long dark brown hair whipped out of its braid. Recognition shot through him as the woman reached the edge of camp, slowing her gray charger only enough to avoid the many human and structural obstacles. Even from the high walls of the castle, Rhaegar could see the joy on her flushed face; he could see she was unconcerned about the many stares she garnered as she moved towards the Stark camp.

After a moment, her pursuer too reached the camp, the figure of Brandon Stark barreling through in an attempt to catch his wily sister.

Arthur started chuckling next to him, "The Starks sure know how to make an entrance."

Keeping his eyes glued to the figure of Lyanna Stark laughing over her shoulder at her oldest brother, Rhaegar could only reply simply, "Aye, they certainly do."

Seeing Lyanna after so long sent his heart racing, his mind instantly hurtling through a mix of memories, dreams, and wishful hopes.

He felt Arthur shake his head, "If the Court didn't think they were wild savages before, they certainly must now. Half of the camp must have seen them flying across that field." Though the words could be construed negatively, Rhaegar could hear the admiration and laughter in his friend's voice.

Lyanna and Brandon were almost out of view as they dismounted their horses at the temporary stables assembled for the Northerners.

“She still doesn’t know it was us, does she?”

“If the formality of her letters is any indication, no.”

No, Lyanna Stark’s letters had remained formal in spite of his subtle attempts to soften the language. Though this had caused him a fair share of hesitant concern, he tried to rationalize it away, reminding himself she would have no way of knowing. He hoped that once she learned of his
shared identity with the man she’d met at the Wall, they might fall back into the easy relationship that had driven him near mad.

Lyanna’s continued formality was not his only concern regarding the Stark’s arrival.

Rhaegar wasn't sure what to think of the Stark's request to remain without the castle - he was sure his father wouldn't be pleased, but fortunately the King had yet to take note of the absence. Most Lords still had tents in the camp, as a place to hold for meetings and store equipment for the tournament’s events, but they usually preferred formal chambers to any form of camping.

The Prince had thought Lord Rickard would want his children to meet and mingle with the other nobles of the Great Houses, given his apparent interest in Southern alliances. Yet Rickard Stark had remained in the North and his children had requested to make camp with the rest of the Northern bannermen instead of reside in chambers in the castle. Just another thing setting aside the Northern kingdom.

“Do you think she’ll recognize you?” Arthur asked.

Rhaegar considered the question. His hair had been long and black as night at Queensgate; a year later and the black dye was now gone, leaving his natural silver-blonde. He’d also had to cut off a couple hands’ worth when the color didn’t completely fade from the ends, leaving his hair to just barely skim the top of his shoulders - finding the style agreeable, he’d kept it short. They’d also been dressed like common hedge knights the entire time they’d been in the North, nothing compared to the silk and elaborate black armor of his Court apparel.

“I honestly don’t know. I hope so, but I’m not even sure how to tell her, if she doesn’t.”

“She may recognize Oswell and me before recognizing you. She certainly seemed intelligent enough to put the pieces together.”

“I’m not certain that’s preferable.”

“Aye, it might be better to tell her yourself. But you’ll have to go through her brothers, in addition to avoiding the eyes of almost every Lord and Lady in the Seven Kingdoms.”

Rhaegar sighed, knowing his friend was right. He had no idea how Lyanna would react when she
found out he was Jay and that they’d been in the North without notifying the Starks. It had been moons since he’d seen her and to be honest, he realized he barely knew her. They’d spent a week together, but everything they had shared remained vague at Queensgate. Knowing their true identities put every comment in a whole new light.

And titles changed everything.

He only hoped that the months of correspondence via raven, even if formal, would endear him to her.

“Speaking of avoiding eyes, it seems we have been spotted by one Cersei Lannister.”

“Seven hells, the girl is tireless.”

“Ashara says the lioness feels abandoned - you did retreat to Dragonstone without her after only a few moons in the capital. She does so enjoy your company…”

Rhaegar scoffed. Cersei Lannister had made it more than apparent exactly what she enjoyed about his company, and it had little to do with his person and everything to do with his title.

Arthur continued, a smirk on his face, “She thinks you took Ashara as a lover, only to already discard her.”

“I’ve discarded her already? Surely the Court thinks more highly of your sister’s Dornish wiles.”

Arthur shrugged, “I do not feign understanding of women's gossip. In any case, I would never allow you to use my sister so brazenly.”

They watched the golden lioness walking towards the castle from the Lannister tents, surrounded by her posse of young Court ladies.

“Sometimes I truly think she is the plague.”
Arthur chuckled, “We best retreat to the keep then, your Grace, I don’t believe your father would be pleased should his heir catch the plague.”

Rhaegar shook his head at the jest - he wasn’t sure his father didn’t pray for such an outcome at times.

“Yes, Arthur, let us return to this joyous affair.”

Brandon

Brandon sighed, tugging on the cotton tunic in displeasure. He might give Lyanna grief about her hatred of dressing up, but he cared for it no more than she. While there were certain things Brandon enjoyed about Southern customs, their insistence on completely impractical attire was not one of them.

And all this fuss for a brief greeting with a mad man.

Well, that, and of course, it would have been preposterous to appear disorderly to his dearest betrothed.

Lord Hoster Tully had sent a messenger shortly after their arrival, expressing his interest in welcoming them, and Lyanna had insisted they stop to see the man and his daughters on their way to the audience with the King - she would accompany Brandon while Ned and Benjen saw to the lodging of the Stark bannermen.
Unlike the other Great Houses, who merely had small meeting tents set up in the camp, the Starks had chosen to reside outside the Harrenhal walls. Not only was the castle said to be haunted by the ghosts of old Harren and his sons, but both Lyanna and Brandon had agreed it would show solidarity with their men to stay alongside them. House Stark might be the Wardens of the North, but they were Northmen nonetheless, and would not require superior treatment.

So here he stood with the odious Lord Hoster and his gruff, but appreciatively more interesting brother, Ser Brynden. While Hoster Tully was politically focused and ambitious, Brynden Tully was known for his honorable knightly pursuits - as well as his refusal to marry at his brother’s behest.

At present, Brandon could only bemoan the fact that the practical Brynden was not the Lord of Riverrun as Hoster Tully weaved an elaborate tale of expenditures and harvest proceeds in an attempt at shifting the timeline of the dowry payment to House Stark before and after his marriage to Catelyn.

Thinking of his betrothed, he glanced over to where she stood with her sister, Lysa, and his own sister. Catelyn was still beautiful, but her quiet and gracious demeanor threw him off. Lysa, on the other hand, was bright-eyed as ever, speaking hurriedly about how excited she was to see all of the Lords and Ladies of the Court. At that moment, Brandon heard Lyanna ask the Tully girls about their pastimes, and hearing the ensuing discussion about needlework and dancing made him realize it was time for them both to depart.

He turned back to Lord Tully, who was in the middle of describing a new potential timeline for the payments, which would result in a significant delay in funds for House Stark. Fortunately, Lyanna had reviewed the terms of the contract with him on the walk over, so he knew that such things were already final - it was moments like this, as he interrupted the older man mid-sentence, when he praised the gods for his sister.

“As you know, my Lord, the terms of the payment of the dowry were settled when we signed the contract. Should you wish to change such terms, that will have to be discussed more thoroughly with my Lord Father.”

Lord Tully grimaced, but Brandon continued before the man could speak, “And I’m terribly sorry, my Lord, Ser, but unfortunately my sister and I must away - we have yet to present ourselves as the representatives of House Stark to the King, and we do not wish to raise his ire.”

Hoster seemed to recover, adopting a small smile, though Brandon could see the tightness in his eyes. Or was that purely the lines of age?
“Understandable, my boy. Girls, say your goodbyes to Lord Brandon and Lady Lyanna.” Brandon bristled a little at the too familiar title, but distracted himself by bowing to both men before turning to his sister.

Lyanna curtsied to both girls, before turning to Lord Hoster, a sweet smile plastered to her face, “My Lord, I was hoping Lady Catelyn might have your leave to sit with me during the opening jousts on the morrow? I believe I speak for both myself and my siblings in stating we are very much interested in getting to know our future good-sister.”

“Of course, Lady Lyanna, she has my leave to do so.”

The younger girl, Lysa, spoke up, her whiny voice pitching with desperation, “But what about me, Father?”

During Brandon’s last trip, the girl had been barely tolerable, obsessing with gossip and trailing around after her sister with the loathsome boy who was squiring with Lord Tully. Brandon only hoped Lyanna didn’t invite her to join them in the Stark box - Brandon had so hoped to enjoy the festivities, which would already be inhibited by Catelyn’s presence.

Fortunately, Lord Tully’s response put that fear to rest, “Lysa, you will sit with House Tully. Perhaps you may even ask Lady Cersei to join her in the Lannister box.”

The girl was clearly not as pleased with that suggestion, but nodded her assent. Lyanna and Brandon made their way without, Brandon offering his arm to his sister.

Once out of range of any of Lord Hoster’s men, Brandon complained of the man’s attempt to push the marriage earlier without paying the full dowry up front.

Lyanna scowled, “He does understand that the contract is signed? Father will never allow the wedding to move forward without the dowry secured.”

“That is what I told him, the old man is trying to stiff-arm me because he thinks I don’t know the terms.”

“Well then, I am glad we reviewed them on the walk over, I must admit I did not think he would question them at this point. The ink has been dry on the contract for over a year.”
“Thank the gods I have you, Lyanna. What would I do without you?”

Lyanna laughed, “Gamble away Winterfell, most like.”

“Fortunately, sister of mine, gambling is not one of my vices.”

“Nay, only wine and women. Speaking of women, Catelyn is much prettier than you described. How very bright her hair is!”

Brandon groaned - as pretty as his betrothed may be, speaking with her was like talking to a wall. The woman had no personality whatsoever. Then again, Brandon was used to Lyanna, who had far too much personality for her own good.

“She is so stiff and serious, though. It’s as if she thinks speaking to me will be a sin in the eyes of the Seven.”

“My my,” Lyanna teased, “I never thought I’d see the day that a woman seemed an insurmountable challenge to Brandon Stark. It seems you’re not immortal after all.”

Brandon scowled, “I didn’t say she was impossible.”

“Yet you claim she’s stiff. Brandon, she seems perfectly lovely to me, if not a bit shy. But she is beautiful, and it’s not like you to not want a beautiful woman.”

“Perfectly lovely you say… maybe you should marry her.”

“My gods, that would be wonderful, she could do all of the embroidery for the two of us. I swear I’ve never heard a girl speak so fondly of sitting and pricking herself with a needle for hours.”

Brandon snorted, “If anyone is an impossible woman, it’s you.”
Lyanna smirked at him, “I shan’t disagree with you on that.”

“Thank the gods, Lyanna Stark doesn’t fight me on everything.”

Lyanna burst into laughter, attracting the attention of several people. The unrestrained mirth on her face prompted Brandon to smile. His sister had been a touch too serious for his liking in the months following the assault. It was so good to see her fully back to her playful, joyful self.

“Brandon, why don’t you just try flirting with her? You’ve had more than enough practice on every other lady in the Seven Kingdoms. Compliment her dress, or the way she does her hair, or whatever these Southron ladies preen about. Nothing too obscene of course, we wouldn’t want to tread on sensibilities.”

“Who would have guessed Lyanna Stark thought anything of sensibilities.”

“Obviously not mine own sensibilities, Bran, your darling betrothed’s. Frankly, I believe Father would host a tournament himself in honor of the occasion were I to ever display the sensibilities of Lady Catelyn.”

Brandon snorted - the image of his sister displaying any of Catelyn Tully’s characteristics was comical at best, horrifying at worst. Nay, for all his teasing, Brandon much preferred his wild and wicked-tongued sister to any proper Southern lady. Even seeing her in formal gowns like the one she wore now made him smile as he was so unused to the sight of her in anything but riding gear, Benjen’s old clothes, or the simple Northern wool kirtles.

Granted, she did look stunning, though she would never believe it.

*Perhaps she is serious about doing her best to attract the Crown Prince’s attention.*

She had thankfully changed out of her riding leathers - it was the King they were greeting after all - into a light-weight dress of cotton and tulle, a more comfortable alternative to her typical Northern wool and velvet. The dress was in the colors of House Stark, a dark grey skirt with snow white tulle creating the full skirt, which flared from her corseted waist. Brandon couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her in a corseted bodice - in fact, he wasn’t sure he’d ever seen such a thing. Fortunately, she had yet to adopt the Southron ladies’ style of low cut dresses, and the material cut across her chest modestly, before covering her shoulders and upper arms.
The dress was simple compared to the elaborate creations he’d seen most Southron ladies wear, but the grey and white complemented her bright grey eyes which shone like silver in the light. Her pale skin completed the picture, contrasting starkly with her long dark brown curls which lay unbound other than a few strands held up by a direwolf pin.

His little sister looked like a pretty lady, and it made him feel even more protective. In fact, Brandon had noticed the stares increasing as they crossed the camp, and it was taking all of his effort not to snarl at the young squires gaping as they approached the entrance of the castle.

Ned and Benjen stood at the base of the tower waiting for them and even the two of them looked surprised by the image of their sister acting close to proper, walking arm and arm with Brandon.

“Brothers, shall we enter the dragon’s den?” Lyanna asked lightly, though they all knew that this experience would be far from enjoyable.

Ned and Benjen fell in behind Brandon and Lyanna as they entered the tower, a Whent guardsman guiding them. Lyanna spoke quietly to all of them as they walked the down the final hallway, two Kingsguards stationed at the doors at the end.

“Brandon, you will be expected to respond to any general inquiries as Father’s heir and representative. Hopefully we can escape this event unscathed.”

As they stepped inside the room which was serving as an informal, one of the Kingsguard announced them. Each dropped into a deep obeisance at the listing of their names, waiting for the King to address them.

It didn’t take long.

“Where is Lord Stark?” Aerys shrieked, causing Brandon to sigh internally. He had heard much of the King’s declining mental health but to witness it in person was a sight to be seen.

It was said the King was once a handsome man, very similar to the Crown Prince, who stood to the right of his father’s makeshift throne. However, the men looked nothing alike any longer.

The King’s blonde hair looked grey from dirt and lay in long stringy clumps, unbrushed and uncut. His beard was unshaven, his body bent as if his spine had curved. The man was of an age with
Brandon’s father, no older than forty namedays, yet he looked as old as Maester Aemon. The classic violet Valyrian eyes of the Targaryen family were cloudy even from a distance, the gaze harsh.

As Brandon prepared to speak, he took a deep breath, knowing that this was an important moment to maintain calm. No doubt the King was offended by their father’s absence, particularly given the presence of almost every other Lord of the Great Houses.

“Our Lord Father sends his apologies and well wishes, your Majesty. Unfortunately, business matters have kept Lord Stark in Winterfell, but he sent all of his children in his stead. It is an honor to join such an event and to be graced with your Majesty’s presence.”

“We hear that Lord Stark chose to have his daughter serve in his stead instead of his heir or his youngest son last year. Are Northern men so incompetent that the Warden of the North must rely on a woman to run his lands when he is away?”

Brandon kept his voice calm as he responded, having spoken with Ned and Lyanna about the fact that the topic would likely arise. They had determined the best way to spin such information, in the case the King himself brought it up.

“Nay, your Majesty, my Lord Father simply wished for continuity for his people, and with myself and my brothers fostering and conducting business around the rest of the North, he deemed Lyanna the most capable solution. She has served as the Lady of Winterfell for many years since the death of our Lady Mother, and thus is well known to many. Our Lord Father believes the experience will make her better suited to become a good and faithful wife, when coupled with child bearing.”

Brandon almost cringed at the last line, despite it having been Lyanna’s idea. He knew how much Lyanna hated to be reduced to nothing more than a broodmare who managed only small affairs around a keep, but she had argued that in the South, it would behoove them all for the message to be one of assimilation, not differentiation. Lyanna would stand out in many other ways, no doubt, but in this description they had some control.

Aerys grimaced, as if displeased by such an explanation, “Women are fickle creatures, who bring nothing but disappointment. No man needs more than a woman who can bear him healthy children before she dies.”

Nobody responded, as Aerys’ statements seemed to be rhetorical. Brandon took that moment to realize that Lyanna was the only woman in the room, and he couldn’t help but bristle somewhat at the idea.
“We are surprised Lord Stark did not leave his daughter in his stead on this occasion,” the King’s voice rose again to yell, “He seemed determined to hide the girl away! The Court whispered of a savage wolf girl who barely resembled a woman!”

“My Lord Father believed it best for my sister to remain in the North in her youth.”

“Are you saying he was correct to hide her from Court, boy? To hide her from his King? You dare defy your King?”

Lyanna stepped in at this point, placing a soothing hand on Brandon’s arm and sending him a small but tight smile.

"Dearest brother, the King is right - I'm sorry I ever convinced you and Father that I should only remain in the North.” She turned to the King at this point, dipping into another curtsy as she looked down at the floor. “Your Grace is apt to point out the deficiency in my education. Hopefully our stay in the South will help in this matter."

Aerys stared at Lyanna for a few moments, before beckoning her closer with one of his thin fingers, the nail overgrown and yellow.

“Come closer, girl, let us see you.”

Lyanna walked a few feet closer to the King, her eyes still cast down and her hands clasped demurely in front of her. The King raked his eyes over her figure, his gaze like a predator, eyes lingering on her small bust and hips. A sneer appeared on his face as he looked to be appraising the value of Brandon’s sister.

“She is pretty isn’t she, Rhaegar? Small, but with three brothers, that bodes well for the birthing chamber. We can see why our cousin Baratheon is so determined to have her, aye?”

Lyanna kept her gaze down in deference, though Brandon knew her blood was boiling like his. He felt a muscle in his jaw twitch at how hard he was grinding his teeth.

“Aye your Majesty.” The Crown Prince’s voice was neutral, his face emotionless. It was so
different from the varied intonations that had accompanied Brandon’s conversation with the man outside of Winterfell. The man was a talented actor no doubt, but Brandon couldn’t help but question whether the Prince’s sentiments towards Lyanna had been truthful.

Alas, the King was not done with Lyanna, to the growing discomfort of all in the room. “Tell me girl, are you as feral as they say? Or did that Baratheon boy tame the little savage when he attempted to take your maidenhead?”

Brandon felt as though he was about to burst. How dare the King humiliate his sister like this! Lyanna was a noblewoman, the daughter of the Warden of the North. Within her veins ran the blood of men who had been Kings far longer than the Targaryens - she didn’t deserve this treatment, even if Aerys was the King.

Fortunately for all of their sakes, Ned held him back. Brandon likely would have been able to break the hold, but he knew that such an action would only put Lyanna in more danger.

Lyanna ground out the next words icily, “Lord Baratheon has duly compensated my Lord Father for the offense he committed against House Stark, your Majesty.”

Suddenly the King stood, spitting as he yelled, “That wasn’t my question, girl!”

Ned flinched next to him, though his hand remained on Brandon’s arm, holding him back. Benjen shifted his weight from side to side next to him, clearly wishing to aid their sister. The Crown Prince took a step forward towards his father, only to be held back by one of the Kingsguard. The King was sneering at Lyanna, his eyes bright with power and malevolence.

Lyanna hadn’t moved.

The room was silent, the tension crackable.

*Keep it together, Lya, keep it together….*

Lyanna lifted her chin to look at the King, a daring move, and Brandon knew that she was about to spit fire.
“No, your Majesty,” Lyanna’s voice cut through the tension, the words utterly flat and emotionless, “a stag cannot tame a direwolf. Lord Baratheon’s arm is proof enough of that.”

Stillness returned as everyone held their breath.

Then Aerys let out a cackling laugh. From anyone else, this would have been a sign of eased tensions, but with the King’s track record, Brandon couldn’t be sure that a whole generation of House Stark wasn’t about to be burned on the spot.

“It seems that at least one wolf does have some bite.”

The King waved his hand, dismissing Lyanna to join her brothers as he returned to his throne, allowing all in attendance to relax subtly.

“Away, I have had enough of wolves. Rhaegar!”

Lyanna had reached them by then, Ned sliding over so that she could loop an arm through both his and Ned’s. Her face was calm but Brandon could feel her hand shaking.

“Yes, your Majesty?”

“You’ll watch these wolves. No wolves should be running without supervision.”

“Your Grace, perhaps.”

“Do not fight me on this, boy!” The King turned back to them before the Crown Prince could respond, “Leave.”

Brandon and his brothers bowed low, maintaining a grip on Lyanna as she curtsied, and then they moved to file out of the room, Benjen and Ned moving in front of Brandon and Lyanna.

But the King was not done quite yet.
Brandon paused when Lyanna did, noticing the way her throat bobbed as she swallowed.

She released his arm as she turned, dropping into a deep curtsy again.

“Your Majesty?”

The King paused as he stared at them in the entrance of the room, his face twisted in a malicious grin.

“Nothing a dragon cannot tame.”

Lyanna

“Let me go, Ben, I’m fine.”

“Lya,” Ned started, “I know you’re upset, but perhaps it’s better if-”

“Oh, let her go, you two,” interrupted Brandon, “it’s not like she can’t defend herself.”
She sent a grateful look at her oldest brother before turning to stomp off towards the edge of camp. She could feel the wolf’s blood pounding in her veins, the fury mixing with that horrible feeling of powerlessness that had pestered her for months.

It harkened back to that dark time after the assault, the greyness of misery encroaching from the corners of her vision.

She had spent months running away from the memories, fighting the swells of fear with attempts at finding that endless joy upon which she had previously thrived. Within a minute, the King had brought back the whole affair.

And the Prince just stood there, agreeing with his father that she was pretty enough to warrant Robert’s unseemly conduct. Lyanna couldn’t quite determine whether to be furious at him for standing by in silence or to be humiliated that such a topic had been broached. While the Prince had informed Father that the assault did not change his intention to court her, their correspondence over the last year had remained formal, cool at best.

Her aimless wandering brought her towards the less utilized practice areas, but as she reached the edge of camp, shouts and grunts interrupted her thoughts.

She hastened her steps, coming upon the image of three young squires attacking a man who lay prone on the ground, his green and brown garb covered in mud.

For shame, hitting a man while he’s alone and smaller! Those squires had no honor!

As she hurried over to the space, she recognized the man’s attire as that of a crannogman, a quiet and secluded people who lived in the Neck, the most southern part of the North. They often remained in their swamps, and were not usually seen at tournaments such as this. Nonetheless, they were loyal bannermen of House Stark, and Lyanna was loathe to allow any Northern man be hurt in such a dishonorable manner.

Wolf’s blood pumping through her veins, she grabbed a discarded tourney sword, and with little regard for the finely made gown she was wearing, ran towards the despicable scene. She had the urge to snarl, but settled for yelling.

“Stop at once! That’s my father’s bannerman you’re hitting!”
She had the element of surprise as she hit the squire closest to her hard in the shoulder, sending him careening to the ground. Her range of motion was severely limited by the tight laces of her corset, so she had to be strategic about her movements. Fortunately, the other two boys were thrown off by her sudden attack, and she was able to smack the second at his knee before quickly following up with a hit to the arm.

Lyanna allowed all of her anger and aggression to flow out onto the boys as she returned to disarm the first boy, who still held his tourney sword but had yet to get up off of the ground. A quick pivot allowed her to land a blow with the flat of her sword to the shoulder of the second squire as he struggled to his knees.

As his friends moaned and tried to lift themselves off the ground, the final squire took in her dress and the state of his friends. By then the squires had realized she was not just some foolish girl in an elaborate gown. She may not be as good with a sword as she was with a bow, but she was far better than the average boy of fourteen.

Something in her eyes and posture must have frightened them, because no sooner than the final squire managed to lift his injured friends to their feet, the boys were scampering off.

“Don’t forget,” she growled after their retreating figures, “the North remembers.”

She stood for a second, fighting back the urge to pursue them. They ran like injured prey, just waiting to be hunted. For the briefest of moments, she felt as though she was in Nymeria’s mind, thirsting for the hunt, for fresh blood.

A groan to her side brought her out of her revery and she quickly moved to kneel by the battered crannogman, cursing yet again the damned corset for restricting her motion.

“Are you alright, Ser?”

Bright moss colored eyes stared at her, gratitude shining alongside the pain. “Battered and bruised, but no worse, thanks to you, Lady Stark.”

“You know who I am?”

“Of course, my Lady. Every Lord in the North knows of Lord Rickard’s daughter, if not by sight
then by reputation. You have the look of your father and brother.”

“Which brother? Brandon?”

“Aye, Lord Brandon and Lord Rickard both stayed at Greywater Watch at times last year. Your father spoke very fondly of you when he stayed.”

“So you are a crannogman!”

“Howland Reed, Lord of Greywater Watch, at your service, my Lady.”

Lyanna scoffed, “I’m no lady. If that display wasn’t enough proof, I don’t know what is. Please call me Lyanna.”

She quickly scanned his body for injuries, noting nothing of extreme severity. Nonetheless, the man would carry bruises all over his body.

“Can you stand?”

Howland paused, testing the motion in his limbs and subsequently nodding through the grimace on his face.

She helped him up, grateful that he was not much larger than her. He was not steady on his feet though, and she staggered slightly at the additional weight as he leaned on her.

Fortunately, the Stark tents were not far from the edge of camp, nonetheless, Lyanna’s arms were burning by the time they stumbled into the main tent that served as a common area for the Starks while attending the tournament. The cursed Court dress only made matters worse, and she was quite certain she had completely ruined the hem.

“If I might ask, Lord Reed, what by the gods provoked those squires to attack you so?”

“I do not know, my Lady. Alas, I wish I had stayed far away; the crannogmen are not viewed kindly
by others.”

“Nonsense, Lord Reed, those squires have not a shred of honor to attack you with no reason. And to gang up on you, three against one. ‘Tis shameful!”

_How could squires be so dishonorable? So cruel? Had their knights taught them nothing of honor?_

They stumbled into the main Stark tent, Lyanna moving Howland onto one of the low stools by the brazier that was warming the space.

“Wait here. I know we brought a kit for injuries somewhere.”

She bustled around grabbing a basin, pitcher of water, and small towel to wipe the dirt off of Howland, all the while asking him of his home in the swamps of the Neck.

“Is it true only a crannogman knows the safe way to Greywater Watch?”

“Aye, my Lady, ‘tis an ancient sort of knowledge passed generation to generation.”

“Is there no way for an outsider to learn?”

Howland shook his head, “It is something innate my Lady, I do not believe there is much one can learn.”

Lyanna frowned but somehow she felt she understood. She imagined it was like her ability to warg, something that felt so natural - she knew not how she could ever teach such an ability.

After a few moments of silence and steady work to patch up the crannogman, Lyanna broached the subject of the attack once more.

“Howland, how did the squires happen upon you? We did not hear that you would be in attendance.”
“Alas, I had not planned to attend originally; I have been on the Isle of Faces I simply thought to spend the night here on my way home”

Lyanna leaned forward, her hands pausing her work. “You have been to the Isle of Faces?”

“Aye, I have spent many weeks there.”

Lyanna stared at him in awe, “What is it like? I have been begging Father to allow us a trip there, and thought to maybe convince Bran to make a stop before we head to King’s Landing, but it seems that my wishes continue to be tempered.”

“‘Tis a sacred place, the Isle. At once natural and yet unnatural, something beyond the comprehension of our simple minds. It is both peaceful and troubling, for one dreams while yet awake. But it is as close as one can come to the Old Gods.”

Lyanna made a small noise of acknowledgement, considering his words.

“Do you like it there?”

“That is a difficult question to answer, my Lady.”

“Howland, I did tell you to call me Lyanna.”

“As you wish, my Lady.”

Lyanna rolled her eyes - it seemed even crannogmen were insufferable men - before continuing the direction of her questions.

“If you had no intention of attending, why did you not just return to the Isle upon realizing the Tournament was engaged?”
“‘Twas a feeling that urged me to leave when I did. A feeling of rightness, of fate.”

Lyanna furrowed her brows, wondering yet again at the man’s wording. “Yet here you sit, injured by such dishonorable men.”

“Yet here I sit having the good fortune to meet you.”

Before she could respond, their conversation was interrupted by the sudden arrival of Ned and Benjen, both of whom took one look at her and the strange man who sat next to her before questioning the situation.

It took a few moments to summarize the encounter that had led to her acquaintance with Howland, during which her anger resurged with the re-telling. She became even more indignant when Ned stated the obvious - that they could likely do little to revenge the injury to Lord Reed.

“Lya, you saw how well things went with the King today. You know we cannot risk doing anything to prompt his ire.”

“I know that Ned,” Lyanna scowled. Did her brother think her stupid? It was her who was humiliated this afternoon and could do nothing. She was becoming well acquainted with the feeling.

Benjen had turned to Howland, his voice cracking briefly as he asked the crannogman if he recognized any of the sigils. It was possible that Brandon could speak to the knights on Howland’s behalf, though such an action would certainly do little to ease the physical pains Howland was enduring.

“I’m sorry, I did not recognize their sigils.”

Lyanna shook her head, “Howland, it makes no matter. You shall attend the feast with us this evening and then you may be able to identify them. We should have plenty of space at the Stark table.”

“My lady-”
“It’s Lyanna, Howland, please.”

“Lyanna, it would not be appropriate for me to attend, for I am not a Lord like those in attendance…”

“Nonsense, you have as much right as any man to attend. You are a Northern Lord, and you will sit with House Stark, as befitting your station. A friend of the Warden of the North.”

“I do not have the proper attire-”

She held up a hand, “I will hear no more arguments, Lord Reed. In any case, I’m certain Benjen has something which will fit you.”

Benjen spoke up, “Aye, here, come with me and we will find something.”

Howland allowed himself to be dragged away to Benjen’s tent, leaving Lyanna with her middle brother.

Ned helped her to her feet from where she had sat to care for Howland, taking in the state of her dress.

“Lya, I imagine you shall wish to change.”

“Of course, brother. I imagine Marsia is quite beyond herself with worry for my delay.”

She stepped towards the door before turning back to her brother. Moving quickly, she wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling away before he could even return the gesture.

“I am glad you are back with us, Ned.”

Lyanna smiled softly before bounding out to meet a frantic Marsia.
“My lady! Your dress! And Gods, we have so little time to prepare for the feast.”

As she sat at the vanity, allowing Marsia to prepare her hair in something resembling a style, Lyanna allowed her mind to wander to the disgrace of Howland’s attack, the injustice of which sat ill with her.

Brandon would be just as tempted to action if he had discovered the event - alas, he had been taking on his role as Father’s proxy with some dose of seriousness. Even if he wished to do something, the squires would doubtlessly get less than a slap on the wrist should Brandon go to their knights.

Nay, if she wanted justice, it would have to be done anonymously...

Jaime

Jaime wiped the sweat from his brow, waving away the servant who was running to provide him with water - he was done for the day, and had to prepare for the opening feast that evening. Cersei would take his head if he was delayed in escorting her into the hall, resplendent examples of the glory of House Lannister.

_Not for long._

After all, Cersei was getting her wish.

According to her, she had succeeded in anonymously suggesting Jaime’s name for the open Kingsguard position to King Aerys. It had been something they had discussed in the past, late at
night, tangled in each other’s arms, whispering of schemes and plots.

Despite Cersei’s less than honorable intentions, Jaime couldn’t find it in his heart to be disappointed. It would bring to fruition Cersei’s plans to keep them together in King’s Landing, one soul in two bodies that shouldn’t have ever been separated. And what could possibly be disappointing in joining the legendary Kingsguard with swordsman like Ser Arthur Dayne and Ser Barristan the Bold?

Father would be furious, of course, but Jaime had never been much inclined to be a part of his father’s machinations. Gods only knew that Jaime had zero interest in marrying the second Tully girl - from his limited interactions with her, she was a thin, pasty girl with copper hair that was far overshadowed by the beauty of her older sister, Catelyn. Jaime could never love such a woman when he had a lover like Cersei - what could possibly compare to the sun?

Hoster Tully would be no more thrilled by his impending induction, but Jaime couldn’t care less - the man had reached too far, offering his second daughter to the heir to Casterly Rock. Even Jaime could see the greedy joy Lord Hoster had shown when greeting Jaime for the first time at Riverrun.

Besides, Tyrion was still a child and already had the mind and patience to make a better Lord of Casterly Rock. Not that the glorious Tywin Lannister would ever admit such a thing. Only Jaime had ever gotten along with his younger brother, tempering some of Cersei’s maliciousness towards the boy.

To Jaime, Tyrion had only ever been the last gift given by their mother - Tyrion was no more guilty of killing her than his father was for getting her pregnant again. Jaime could see Cersei’s point of view, for his sister cared only for things that were beautiful and aided her. But he had always struggled to understand his father’s perspective on Tyrion. Aside from his physical disability, Tyrion was much of what Tywin would wish for in a son - he was smart, witty, interested in military planning… all of the things that Jaime had oft shunned in favor of swordplay.

Jaime made his way back towards the hulking mass that was Harrenhal, watching the quaint lives of hedge knights who stayed at the edge of the camp. He had chosen to train at the further grounds to get away from his sister for a moment.

Cersei had been everywhere during the journey and the few days they’d been at Harrenhal, except for with him. She spurned his late night advances and would only speak with him when it pleased her - even then, the only thing she spoke of was the Crown Prince and how wonderful it would be to be his wife.

Jaime knew he would forgive her, but her present obsession with Rhaegar Targaryen was hardly
something he wished to hear about constantly. Jaime liked the Crown Prince well enough, in fact, he respected the man quite a bit. But Jaime could see that the Prince would never treat Cersei with the adoration she wished for - Jaime couldn’t see the man treating any woman with adoration. The Prince would certainly never love Cersei the way Jaime loved her.  

_Couldn’t she see that?_

He had just reached one of the thoroughways when he heard the grunts and shouts. Turning back towards the practice grounds, he saw three squires beating up a boy who lay prone on the ground.

Jaime knew the right thing would be to intervene - that as a knight it was his duty to protect those who were not capable of protecting themselves, and this boy seemed entirely beholden to the three cruel squires who were now taunting him, likely telling him to get up and fight.

But this was not Jaime’s fight. They had not seen him, no one was around for him to prove himself to. And what was the point of doing a good deed if no one was there to witness it?

But just as he was turning to stalk off and continue on his way, a thought struck him.

_What would Ser Arthur do?_

Deciding to turn back, resolved to try to embody his idol, he heard another voice yelling.

“Stop at once! That’s my father’s bannerman you’re hitting!”

Jaime watched as a girl in a beautiful court gown picked up a tourney sword and ran towards the three squires, ignoring the dirt that was certainly ruining the hem of her beautiful dress. She looked no older than him, yet she brandished the weapon with purpose, surprising the three boys as much as Jaime.

Even more shocking than her actions was the skill that accompanied them - the girl thwacked the first squire across the shoulder before pivoting and slamming the blade into the second squires knee and arm. The moves were practiced, if not a little jaunty, though that certainly could have been due to the limited mobility of her attire.

Jaime stood watching as the girl made quick work of the three boys, smirking as she threatened them - she was quite the little sprite, energetic and aggressive in a way Jaime had never seen. Her dress and manners, though rough, certainly spoke to nobility; had she not been wearing such a fine gown
and speaking in such a proper manner, Jaime could have well believed that she was some strange wildling from the North.

*She must be the Stark girl Cersei has been belittling for moons.*

He watched as she knelt in the dirt, all regard for her gown gone as she helped the boy - no, man - up. Cersei would never be caught dead in such a position, let alone help some random boy she knew not. It brought a smile to his face imagining his sister swinging a sword, her golden curls flying about as she spun. Cersei loved to dance but for some reason could never appreciate the art of swordplay - perhaps this Stark girl understood that they were one and the same.

Jaime felt a swell of admiration for the wolf girl as she practically carried the injured man towards the Stark tents, a pang of guilt accompanying the feeling as he noticed he hadn’t made one step to assist her.

*She had it well in hand - likely she would have been angered if I had helped her.*

Nay, this Stark girl was no damsel in distress - and he couldn’t deny it intrigued him.

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU, as always, to my incredible readers who leave such wonderful comments and are so engaged with this story. You guys keep me going, even when my time is limited and real life gets in the way - it is such a joy to read your reactions and thoughts.

Two of my favorite things about AO3 are the engagement between writers and readers, and the way that the site is a platform to inspire writers to put their work out there. As someone who is writing a lot of my own stuff, it's an opportunity to share and learn, and hopefully encourage others to put forward their own work.

A couple chapters ago, a reader posted a poem that this story inspired - what an incredible compliment, to know that your work is inspiring others! Thank you to imjustalim for sharing :)

Wild Woman (Queensgate)
A woman as wild as the wolf within her blood
Her braided yet loose hair long with ice shards glinting alongside smudges of mud
The winter crowning her with breathtaking blue roses clearly past the phase of buds
Her sly smile sharp like the thorns that she adorns
Cheeks flushed red from the cold of the North
The air which she stands in from night to morn
The bow she holds with an arrow aimed at her unknown future beau
Fearless as her grey eyes stare into two pools of indigo
For she is the wild woman who never fears for she will forever be bold
The woman with blood that rings with the wildness of wolves

I'll be traveling for the next few weeks for work, but both my beta and I are working to push through the tournament chapters so we can get them out to you all :) happy reading!! xx
Meetings, Greetings, and Dances

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ashara

The evening was proving exceedingly interesting, with so many nobles gathered in one place. And the King’s presence had already manifested itself in its usual surprising manner.

First, there had been his drawn out speech about loyalty and the Targaryen dynasty - King Aerys, known for his addiction to fire and burning men alive, could not resist mentioning the fall of Harren and his sons in the very castle in which they all stood.

Next, the King chose to call Jaime Lannister into the Kingsguard. A boy of sixteen, Jaime stood in front of a room full of Lords and Ladies of Westeros and swore off lands, titles, wife, and children.

Ashara only wished Lord Tywin had been here so she could witness his face as his heir signed away his birthright.

In a stroke of cruelty, the King demanded Ser Jaime’s immediate departure to the Capital to guard Rhaella and Viserys - even Ashara could see the Lannister boy’s disappointment when he realized he would not compete in the Tournament.

Finally, there had been the King’s muttering and periodic shouts from the dais, where he sat with the Crown Prince and Lord Whent. The anger did not seem to be directed at either men beside him, yet Ashara could tell that other nobles closest by noticed the outbreaks.

Fortunately the King had not lingered overmuch in the Hall after the food had been cleared, allowing all in attendance to breath a tad longer and deeper.
Only one table had seemed to be raucous the whole night, on the other side of the room, at the furthest end of the high tables designated for the Great Families.

Ashara watched as the Stark siblings mingled among their key bannermen, even venturing further down the Hall to spend time with the other Northmen. The Starks were, indeed, the most boisterous table, with the exception of Lord Robert’s table, and that was due purely to the drunk Lord himself.

The Starks’ joy was less about heavy alcohol consumption, though there was undoubtedly that, but more about jokes, laughter, and camaraderie. It genuinely seemed like they enjoyed each others’ company.

Lyanna Stark was of course in the middle of all the commotion, the only female at a table full of men. But she seemed to shine all the brighter for it, with both big smile and big gestures as she told stories of unknown content.

“Try to be a little discreet, sister.”

Ashara smiled, not turning to her obnoxious brother who had sidled over from his place on the dais.

“Oh Arthur, stop being a bother. If you want someone to stare less obviously at a Stark, you should tell your dearest friend. He is certainly not being discreet, not at all.”

“I have already told him.”

“Alas then, it seems he has not heeded your advice. What a tragedy.”

“You both ought to listen to me more. It might save us all from heartache.”

“Oh, don’t be such a downer, Artie. The Prince is free to follow his heart in this case - he is fortunate that the woman is yet unclaimed.” She frowned, turning to face him finally, “Though I did imagine she would know him from the way he speaks of her?”

Arthur pursed his lips, “They met in unconventional circumstances. I do not believe she knows the man she met and the Prince are one and the same yet…”
“Oh goodness, how mysterious. And how did you not tell me this? Gods Artie, this is even better than I had expected!”

“Quiet down Ash. It seems you’ve attracted the attention of two other Starks.”

Ashara turned back to look at the Stark table; the two older brothers were watching her and Arthur. Ashara had noticed them earlier of course - the older, Brandon, of whom she had heard from Arthur and a few other knights. The Heir to Winterfell was ruggedly handsome, with a bright smile, an endearing charm, and an easy laugh. And well-built too - Ashara imagined he was quite the ladies’ man, a suspicion one might say could be easily confirmed if the attention he was garnering among the other women in the room was any indication.

The second Stark son, Eddard, Ashara had met briefly when he’d been with his friend, Lord Robert, in King’s Landing. It had been in her first moons at Court, and she’d initially been taken by the Storm Lord’s sad tale about his lost parents. Despite the man’s less savory qualities, Robert had been sweet to her at first, those blue eyes seeming to sear into her soul. Eddard Stark hadn’t shone very brightly when sitting next to such a man.

It wasn’t till after the fight between Robert and Arthur that Ashara had come to appreciate Eddard. It was the first time she truly learned that sometimes ‘tis better to look beyond a man’s good looks.

Ashara had watched Arthur beat the young Storm lord in the courtyard, heard Robert’s comments about her in an attempt to rile Arthur, and watched as Lord Baratheon stared after Arthur, anger in his eyes. And she had watched Eddard Stark kneeling at his friend’s side, calming him and helping him to an acolyte to patch up the scrape Dawn had left across Robert’s face.

Later that afternoon, Eddard Stark had found her in the gardens. There, eyes downcast, he had apologized for his friend’s behavior. The conversation had been brief; Ashara had been stunned that the man would seek her out to apologize for something that was not of his doing.

Watching the two brothers clearly debating some issue, the memory made Ashara smile. They appeared to be more similar as they stood side by side, different variations of the same pattern. Eddard was a tempered version of Brandon, not as tall, not as muscled, not as unruly. And he was certainly much more serious - Brandon seemed much more like his younger two siblings, quick to laugh and bicker.

Brandon seemed to notice her attention upon them and, with a quick slap to Eddard’s shoulder,
began the trek across the Hall towards her and Arthur.

While the Heir to Winterfell crossed the Hall, Ashara watched as Lyanna Stark asked Eddard a question before bursting into giggles. Whatever the question or response, the subject seemed to send Eddard into distress, a blush flaring upon his face.

Ashara heard Arthur chuckle at her side, presumably having watched the encounter as well. She grinned at her brother quickly before turning to the approaching Stark.

“Ser Arthur, it is a pleasure to see you again.” Brandon extended his hand to her brother, which Arthur took good-heartedly.

“Lord Brandon, I saw your name in the lists - ’tis good to see you have taken your vows.”

“Aye, I daresay it will be the only time I volunteer to speak of your Southern Seven.”

Arthur chuckled, turning to Ashara, “Dearest sister, may I introduce Lord Brandon Stark, Heir to Winterfell. Lord Brandon, may I present my sister, Lady Ashara Dayne.”

“My Lady,” Brandon bowed deep before taking her hand and placing a gentle kiss across her knuckles, “I believe I have heard stories of your fabled beauty.”

“And, my Lord, how do you find the veracity of these stories?”

Brandon flashed that smile she had seen from a distance and Ashara felt her heart lurch.

*Goodness, no wonder women speak so fondly of this man if he can make an impression in no more than two lines.*

“I find they do you a great disservice. Words cannot do reality justice.”

Ashara laughed, noticing Arthur roll his eyes. Brandon seemed to not take his own words too seriously, for he himself chuckled, biting his lower lip like a little boy who knows his compliment
has been well received.

“I did not know you Northmen were keen on such flattery.”

“Nay, my Lady, we do not care for needless flattery. Instead, we much prefer brute honesty. I speak nothing but the truth.”

Ashara shook her head but she could not help the smile forming upon her face.

“Well, I thank you for the honest truth then, good Ser.”

“Perhaps I shall continue with my honesty. My Lady, I have come over not only to meet you but also to request a small boon.”

Ashara raised an eyebrow, “A small boon, my Lord? But we have only just now met.”

“I swear on my honor, ’tis not overly burdensome.”

“Very well, what may I grant thee?”

“’Tis not for me, my Lady. I would ask but for one dance, on behalf of my brother.”

Ah, so that is what they had been arguing over. Brandon had chosen to ask on Eddard’s behalf.

Wishing to taunt the eldest Stark a bit, Ashara adopted a thoughtful mien, glancing quickly to the Stark table. Lyanna was off speaking with Catelyn Tully, while the youngest Stark, Benjen, was telling some elaborate story to Eddard.

“How kind - I do not believe I have yet met Lord Benjen Stark.”

Brandon paused briefly before breaking into laughter, the sound rousing the attention of several of
their neighboring nobles. Arthur joined him, shaking his head at the jest.

Ashara smiled sweetly, waiting for the men to calm themselves. It did not take long for Brandon to come back with his response, still chuckling between phrases.

“Nay, my Lady, you are mistaken. I’m afraid my brother Benjen is poor company for a Lady as refined as you. ‘Tis on behalf of my brother Ned.”

“Ah yes, my mistake. Very well, I should be happy to dance with Lord Eddard. With one condition.”

“Name it, fair Lady.”

“I request a dance with the Heir to Winterfell as well.”

Brandon smiled, “Consider it done. I shall excuse myself to inform my brother of the good tidings.”

“Very well, I look forward to granting this boon once the music begins.”

“Ser Arthur,” Brandon turned to her brother, “I hope to see you in the training yard this week.”

“A dance from both Dayne siblings, eh Stark? I fear our dance shall be far less pleasant.”

Brandon chuckled, “I daresay you shall be right. Lyanna claims I have only worsened, though I know not where she derives her reference. My Lady, Ser Arthur.”

As the Stark heir walked back to his siblings, Ashara turned to see Arthur shaking his head.

“What, brother?”

Arthur looked at her, his violet eyes darker due to the shadows in the Hall.
“Brandon is betrothed to Catelyn Tully. Do not make trouble where there should be none.”

“Arthur! I have no intentions of making trouble. ‘Tis simply a dance.”

“‘Tis never simply a dance with men like him.”

Ashara stared at him as he turned away from her, walking back towards where the Crown Prince sat with Lord Whent. A few Lords had approached the dais after the King had retired to speak with the Prince, but given it was the first night of the Tournament, the Prince would have to remain on the dais for the evening with the host.

Noticing the music pick up, Ashara decided to follow Brandon to the Stark table. It was high time she met this illusive Lyanna Stark after all.

Alas, that was not to be as Oberyn caught her just as she was beginning to cross the room.

“I do believe we should open the floor, darling?”

“Oberyn! I was just about to visit with new friends—”

Despite her words, she allowed herself to be swept into the dance, grateful for the lithe arms of one of her oldest friends. Her and Prince Oberyn Martell had spent much of their childhood together in Dorne with Oberyn’s sister Elia. It was rare for the Martells, the ruling House of Dorne to venture to such events, but Oberyn had always enjoyed debauchery, and Elia had been a long-time correspondent with the Crown Prince. For some time, it was expected that Elia and Rhaegar would marry, but…

Alas, it did no good to dwell on the past. As she had gotten to know the Crown Prince, Ashara had come to understand Arthur’s argument against the match. And indeed, having watched Rhaegar’s captivation when watching Lyanna Stark, Ashara could only imagine the sorrow a marriage between the Targaryens and Martells might have spelled.

Nonetheless, Ashara had been pleased to see her two friends, though Oberyn had been off adventuring during much of their free time.
“Who? Do not say those savage wolves, Ash, they are no better than dogs.” Oberyn growled, his eyes flashing over to the Starks table in time to see Brandon pulling Lyanna up to dance. Ashara watched as Oberyn’s eyes lingered on the She-Wolf’s slim figure, encased in a pretty grey gown.

“Is that so, Oby?” she questioned, her eyebrow crooked as she took in the smirk on his face, “You do not seem to mind the sight of savages.”

“I never said I do not enjoy wildness in my bed.”

Ashara rolled her eyes, “She is not for you, Oberyn.”

“Is that so, darling? If she takes after her brother, I think it matters not one whit to whom she belongs.”

The dance mandated they separate for a few paces, dancing opposite one another. Ashara glanced quickly at the Crown Prince when facing the dais, noticing his eyes were also following the rowdy Stark siblings, who seemed unable to do much of anything without laughter.

Oberyn had a smirk upon his face as he too, watched Lyanna Stark.

“Oberyn, I’d advise against such a path.”

“Ash, you know better than to speak such words. You know how I love the chase.”

Indeed, she did know. Oberyn Martell had never been one to shy away from a challenge. Which was exactly the concern.

“She is not some peasant woman to take as you wish. She is the daughter of the Warden of the North-”

Oberyn tsked as the dance came to a close, “My my, Ashara, the Capital has changed you. Laud ing the weight of titles, placing a maiden’s virtue on a pedestal. ‘Tis as if you have quite forgotten the
Dornish ways.”

“We do not live in isolation, Oberyn. We are all judged by the standards of the society in which we choose to reside. ‘Tis folly to think otherwise.”

“King’s Landing has made you too serious. And you know I was never one to care for society’s opinion of me.”

He released her hand with a flourish as the dance came to a close, flashing her a wink before he sauntered off towards the rest of the Dornish contingent, but not before sending another appraising glance at the Stark girl.

_Dear gods, perhaps it is no wonder the Starks remain in the isolated North if this is the reception they garner..._

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**Lyanna**

Lyanna collapsed into her seat, all sense of propriety lost as she sought to regain her breath from a rather lively set with Brandon - ‘twas a wonder how any man could have quite that much vigor for dancing.

She had danced several times with each of her brothers and a few of the other Northmen, and once with Howland, counseling him through the steps. Dance instruction had always been the one thing she had enjoyed in her “ladies lessons,” though she admittedly knew far fewer than most of the attendees. It seemed her education had been lacking in such Southron arts, but with the number of people filling the hall, she imagined few would be set on watching her stumble around. She herself had barely had time to take in the full measure of the crowded room, her attention being drawn by
the many Northmen and her brothers.

Several times, she thought she had noticed the Crown Prince’s eyes directed to her and she had worried he might ask her to dance. She was certain that she was already making somewhat of a fool of herself, but it would be much worse to do so in the arms of the man she was due to woo.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the Crown Prince remained removed from the festivities, watching the room from his perch on the dais with a neutral mask. Lyanna had even seen him turn down Cersei Lannister’s offer to dance, directing her to the arms of one of the Kingsguard. It seemed the Prince would not dance this night.

Lyanna wasn’t quite sure how she was to garner his attention when every lady seemed to seek it - and she certainly didn’t understand why he would choose to pursue her when there were plenty of beautiful, well-behaved ladies in attendance. But for the first time in her life, she was willing to make an effort, for the freedom from a less savory match and the potential it could provide to the North...

She watched the Kingsguard step to the back of the dais after his dance with Lady Cersei, strapping his sword across his back. He did not wear his full set of armor like his fellow Kingsguard, and Lyanna had seen him mingling earlier as well as speaking with the Prince. It seemed as if he was retreating back to his duty now, as his brother in arms handed him a helmet, which he slipped back on, covering his sandy blonde hair.

Hair that looked the same against the stark white color of the Kingsguard cloak as it did when surrounded by snow.

Lyanna frowned, confused for a moment. She could have sworn Maron was this man’s twin…

“Do you see Dawn across Ser Arthur’s back?” whispered Benjen in her ear. She jerked out of her revery, turning to look at her brother.

Benjen frowned at her expression, “Isn’t that why you were staring at Ser Arthur?”

Lyanna’s mouth dropped open as she quickly turned to look back at the Kingsguard. She couldn’t see much of his face now that his helmet was on, but she did see the hilt of his greatsword peeking from its sheath slung across his back. Maron had also wielded a stunning sword, milky white but sharp as the Stark ancestral Valyrian steel sword Ice….
“That’s Ser Arthur Dayne? The Sword of the Morning?”

Benjen knocked her shoulder lightly before leaning next to her on the table so they could whisper easier.

“They say he’s the greatest swordsman in the Seven Kingdoms.”

Lyanna snorted - she’d seen Maron make plenty of mistakes in the practice yard of Queensgate. No way could that same man be considered the best swordsman in Westeros.

“I heard it was because of Ser Jaime Lannister that Ser Arthur was able to defeat the Smiling Knight.”

“Aye, to be knighted by the Sword of the Morning - no wonder he was chosen for the Kingsguard.”

“Do they always stay with the Royal family?”

Benjen shrugged at her side, “I would think most of the time. You know as well as I do. Though I imagine they can go home sometimes.”

Lyanna tutted softly; Father always warned her that duty would come before family. It was one of the things she loathed about her future.

“In any case,” Benjen started, glancing around to check the location of Ned and Brandon - both were off with other friends - before gesturing for Howland to join them, “I thought we might discuss what you have in mind about Howland’s situation?”

Lyanna grimaced, forgetting all about her mysterious friends at Queensgate and Kingsguard duties.

“I’m sorry my Lady, as I already told Lord Benjen, I can’t seem to recall the squires-”

She shook her head, glancing down at the lower tables.
“There, they are sitting together at that table.”

Benjen snickered under his breath, as Howland grimaced. There sat the three squires, one with a sling and another with a black eye and a bruise across his cheek.

“Gods Lyanna, what did you do to them?”

“Nothing less than they deserved. Their knights ought to teach them some honor.”

“Howland, you should enter the lists and demand their masters teach them better,” suggested Benjen, but Howland was already declining with a shake of his head.

“I would only bring disrepute upon my House. I am not equipped to joust, and fear I would only make a fool of myself.”

“Oh, but it’s not that difficult,” she told him, “Bran taught me last year and I was able to knock targets within days. It’s mostly horsemanship after all.”

“We can teach you!” Benjen exclaimed, causing Lyanna to promptly clasp her hand over his mouth.

“Keep your voice down, Ben!” she whispered, “If Bran or Ned hear of this they will have none of it.”

“I fear I could not learn to joust in such a short time, my Lady. I am not a very accomplished horseman.”

“But we can’t just let them go,” complained Benjen.

“We won’t,” said Lyanna. Benjen and Howland both stared at her, so she continued, whispering, “I’ll do it. I’m the best horseman in the North, and Bran taught me how to joust himself.”
“Bran joked how you could knock him on his back.”

Lyanna glared at Benjen, “It wasn’t a joke, I’ll have you know I knocked him on his back twice at Moat Cailin.”

Benjen held up his hands in surrender before leaning back in.

“But you don’t have any armor. And you can’t use Bran’s or Ned’s, you’re too small.”

“And they would notice anyways. If we do this, we have to keep it among ourselves. Bran would never allow me out of his sight if he found out.”

Benjen nodded, knowing how wild their eldest brother could be when he was in charge. Her brother turned to Howland then, coming up with a plan as he spoke.

“I’ll find the armor - we are near the same size and it won’t be as noticeable for me to be carrying it. Howland, can you find lances? She’ll need a few to start, but then can use standard ones provided to hedge knights.” Howland nodded, so Benjen continued. “Lya, the horse will be up to you. You can’t use Silver, Bran would recognize her in a moment.”

Lyanna rolled her eyes, “Obviously. The horse will be mine to find. We’ll have to wait until the second day, as I’ll have to be in attendance tomorrow and we need time to assemble everything.”

“You really do not have to do this, my Lady,” said Howland, his eyes serious, “I would be very much in your debt, more than I already am.”

“Seven hells, Howland, how many times do I have to ask - call me Lyanna, I’m no lady.”

At that moment, Benjen decided he wanted more wine, attempting to grab her half-empty glass as he joked.

“Lya has always wanted to be a knight, Howland.”
She smacked his grabbing hand away, his reflexes slowed by the wine he’d already consumed, “That’s mine, you fiend!”

Howland smiled as Benjen struck his tongue out at her, “Certainly no lady!”

Suddenly the crowd hushed, all eyes drawn to the figure making his way to a small stool placed in the center of the Hall, a beautiful harp held in his arms.

Lyanna had not had the chance to get a good look at the Crown Prince during their audience with the King, so focused had she been on remaining demure and docile, and she had done her best to not glance too many times at the dais during the feast either. She had no desire to prompt the attention of the King again, and with the Prince sitting next to the King, she was granted little opportunity to stare.

But she now had to admit that the Crown Prince was quite a sight to be seen.

The man was not particularly close to them, but even from this distance, Lyanna could appreciate the way his silver hair glistened in the candlelight, the light color contrasting so strongly with his black apparel. Had he not been decked in silk and fine cloth, he could almost pass for a man of the Night’s Watch, his all black outfit a match for the Wall’s warriors.

Everything was still for a moment, as the Crown Prince’s fingers rested upon the delicate strings of his instrument. Lyanna briefly recalled another man who spoke of the harp on another night…

A single note rang through the Hall, the clear sound echoing off of the massive stone walls and filling the entire Hall.

And then the melody began, the notes falling upon the crowd like raindrops in a storm, lulling them into a dreamlike state. It was a melancholy tune, one unknown to Lyanna but no less beautiful for all it’s plaintive tones.

The Prince’s voice rose softly, unfurling to its full potential in waves along with the melody. He sung of mythical lands, of joy and doom, of bittersweet love and soulful betrayal, of a tale of majestic creatures lost to the ambitions of fearful men.

The song seemed to swell in her breast, the rhythm matching the beat of her heart. She couldn’t tear
her eyes from this man with his unearthly good looks and soul-searing voice.

It was hard to compare this man to the cruel madness of King Aerys. For a moment, Lyanna could well understand the rumors that were spoken about the Crown Prince, saying he was a true Targaryen, with all their former godlike qualities.

As the song dwindled, Lyanna felt the desire to urge him on, to hear more of the fate of those lost and not yet found. The final note rang through the Hall, reverberating through the silent room.

For a moment all was still - even the Crown Prince remained as he was, his fingers poised just above the strings, his eyes closed.

Applause broke out throughout the Hall, but the sound could not hide her face from the keen eye of her younger brother.

“Wait Lya, are you crying?” Benjen exclaimed, drawing the attention of several of the Northmen in close proximity.

Lyanna scowled instantly, wiping the moisture from her face hastily with the back of her hand, “Of course not,” she growled.

But Benjen had seen the evidence and thought it was quite possibly the funniest thing of the evening as he burst into boisterous giggles. No doubt the amount of wine he had drunk aided in making him so unbearable.

She smirked as she thought of her brother’s seemingly insatiable taste for wine this evening.

_He said he wanted my wine, so he shall have it._

Quick as a cat, she reached for her half-full goblet and upended her wine on the Wolf Pup’s head.

She exited the Hall to the sounds of Benjen’s sputtering and Brandon’s booming laugh from across the room, a smile on her face. Despite the scene she had inevitably caused, Lyanna didn’t even care about the gazes following her as she strode out of the room.
She certainly didn’t notice the indigo eyes which lingered on her departing figure.

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**Rhaegar**

Once more he found himself standing on the parapets of Harrenhal’s outer curtain wall, watching the mist roll over the fields of the Riverlands in the light of dawn. A lone figure rode on a grey horse in the distance, dark cloak flapping in the wind as she paused at the crest of a small hill a couple of leagues from the massive castle. Rhaegar had watched her ride out in the early dawn, but even without that, her shadowed figure was unmistakable.

“She didn’t realize it was you, did she?”

He didn’t need to turn around to know Arthur had joined him.

“No. She barely even looked at me.”

“You did agree with Aerys that she was pretty enough to drive Robert to assault her.”

Rhaegar glared at his friend, “Selmy?”

Arthur nodded, “You know we have taken to sharing information about who he attacks. It allows us to prepare as best we can.”
“Then you must be awfully prepared at all times.” He drawled dryly, “I don’t think there’s a noble in Westeros who my father hasn’t insulted personally once or twice.”

Then he sighed, remembering the horrible words his father had uttered to the Starks, particularly Lyanna.

“It’s like he wants to provoke them. Brandon looked like he was ready to cut all of our heads off. The Starks are not men to be trifled with.”

“I hear construction is underway at Moat Cailin. It’s a miracle the King hasn’t found out.”

“He knows Lord Stark is restoring parts of the castle. I’ve tried to downplay it, but it won’t stay silent for long.”

“As we noticed when we passed, it’s the perfect location, vacant for years. They say the North could hold off a ground invasion for ages once the castle is complete.”

Oh, Rhaegar knew. There were very few reasons to restore a castle like Moat Cailin after so many years. That Rickard Stark was pursuing the construction with relative haste was more than worrying. The only consolation Rhaegar could take was that the man couldn’t be completely against the royal family if he was willing to entertain a potential marriage with them. It gave him hope that perhaps Rickard Stark would be willing to consider taking Rhaegar’s side, should conflict arise.

And if her letters were any indication, Lyanna was quite familiar with the restoration of the ancient keep - she had spent several moons at the site in the year since they had last seen each other. It was yet another reason to have her by his side.

“We’ve left them for too long, and now we must deal with the consequences.”

“As long as your father doesn’t choose to burn them for insolence.”

Rhaegar shook his head. From what he knew of the Stark children, they were not known for their patience or holding their tongues. Mixing them with his volatile father was a recipe for disaster.
Rhaegar had not failed to notice Brandon Stark’s body vibrating with fury as Aerys had spoken of Robert’s assault on Lyanna, but thankfully the second brother, Eddard, had held him back. Lyanna herself had been incredibly lucky that the King had found her rebuttal amusing - Rhaegar’s heart had almost stopped when she had spoken so brazenly. Though the Targaryens no longer had their dragons to force the fierce Northerners to take a knee, it was incredibly dangerous to provoke a man who enjoyed burning people for fun.

“As Brandon Stark loves to yell, Winter is Coming.”

Silence fell upon them as they stared across the expansive landscape. Rhaegar had spent much time in the Riverlands, given his close friendship with Ser Oswell and the proximity of the knight’s home to King’s Landing. There was much to see, though Rhaegar always felt a pang of impending doom in the area. The tournament at Harrenhal felt no different - it was as if something heady was in the air, a sense of foreboding, the feeling that he had been here before, that something critical was on the verge of occurring.

Arthur broke the silence finally with a sigh.

“Ser Jaime left for King’s Landing last night.”

Rhaegar nodded, glancing at his friend, “So I heard from Ser Gerold. I’ve also received news that Lord Tywin has resigned as Hand of the King.”

Arthur looked surprised by that news, but all Rhaegar could do was sigh as he continued to watch the figure of Lyanna Stark riding in the distance. He yearned to ride to her and to share her joy - with all the misery around him, it was this small piece of happiness that he craved the most.

“The Spider is not the only one who has his sources,” he continued, his eyes never leaving the distant figure, “Tywin discovered the gossip around Jaime’s impending induction when we were still on the road. I did not expect his reaction to be so swift, though I suppose it is a better route. The raven arrived this morning. He intends to be gone from King’s Landing by the time we return.”

“I don’t suppose Lady Cersei will be staying in King’s Landing?”

Rhaegar shrugged, “I do not know, but without her father, she does not have a reason to linger. She does not have a formal place at Court, and I cannot imagine my mother will wish for her to be one of her ladies.”
“I’m sure she hopes to return from the tourney with a formal position beside a different member of the royal family.”

“‘Tis the destiny of maidens to dream of Princes, is it not? Alas, most will have such dreams dashed.”

Arthur chuckled, “Poor Lady Cersei.”

Rhaegar snorted, “I do not think any Lannister could ever be described as “poor.””

“Well, in any case, while you can’t trust Tywin or his daughter, Jaime seems a good sort. He doesn’t seem the type to scheme and he’s very committed to that sword.”

“That sword is exactly what I’m worried about.”

Arthur shook his head, “For a man who has been thinking of all you’ve been thinking about, I’m surprised you wouldn’t welcome such a thing.”

“Arthur, I’ll remind you we are speaking of the King. And he’s still my father – even if he hasn’t been the man I remember as a child in years.”

Arthur nodded, understanding the sentiment. His best friend knew all about Rhaegar’s conflicted emotions when it came to his father - it was a topic he hated to discuss, but which continued to drive his every move.

“Come, let us speak of lighter things. Like how you intend to woo the lovely Lyanna Stark without scaring her off into the Land Beyond the Wall.”

Rhaegar smiled instantly, images of the wild girl he’d fallen for at Queensgate driving away the thoughts of his father. Seeing her so poised and elegant in front of his father the day before had made him even more certain that she was perfect for him. Even though she had never been to Court, she had handled the King’s humiliation with grace. Then again, she had been lucky that Aerys had been amused by her comment.
Why in the name of the Seven had his father thought it appropriate to bring up the assault?

“The first step is to get her to speak to me, I suppose.”

Arthur looked at him strangely before realizing it was half in jest. He smirked at his friend as they both laughed lightly.

“In truth, I do not have a plan. I guess I am hoping an opportunity arises to interact with her less formally.”

“Perhaps having no plan is better.”

“What do you mean?”

Arthur shrugged, “If the way she acted at Queensgate is any indication, she seems to be a woman who values action and honesty. I think she would rather believe in a sentiment or an interaction if it is driven by natural forces, as opposed to some carefully crafted plan.”

“I imagine you are right. So, do I just wait patiently and hope for an opening?”

“Yes? What else can one do? It is an inconvenience that they are staying in the campgrounds, for it is harder to happen upon her by chance.”

“Alas, fortunately they are still quite close to one of the primary paths to the tournament grounds. We will have to be diligent.”

“We, your Grace?”

“Why, Ser Arthur, you did not think you would escape this task? ‘Tis of the utmost importance, given it pertains to the matter of my heart.”
The knight shook his head but his smile widened, “I should have guessed you would need my assistance in wooing such a lady.”

Lyanna

“Lady Stark.”

She whipped around to stare straight into the purple eyes of the Crown Prince.

She immediately dropped her gaze. “Your Grace,” she murmured, sinking into a deep curtsy.

In that moment, she was glad she had chosen a new dress over one of her typical kirtles – while less comfortable due to the corset, the light grey material hugged her slender figure better, flaring out into a full skirt at her waist. It wasn’t nearly as elegant as the dress she had worn to greet the King the day before and it was far plainer than anything in a Southern lady’s wardrobe, but still sufficiently pretty for public company, with its simple black embroidery along the hem and the neckline. Her hair was loose down her back in smooth waves, a few strands twisted up and out of her face – she thanked the gods every day for her thick, smooth hair, which fell in luxurious waves. She didn’t know what she would do if she had to style it with hot irons every day.

She rose and smiled at the Prince, who looked the perfect picture of royalty. Clad all in black, the only color in his attire was the crimson Targaryen three-headed dragon embroidered into the silk material of his tunic and the crimson silk lining of the black cloak that fell from his shoulders, which served to hide the sword hanging from his hip. His silver-blonde hair fell to his shoulders, a stark contrast to the dark clothing. A thin circlet of twisted black metal rested on the crown of his head. As she had thought last night, he was quite the sight, even more spectacular up close.
He reached for her hand, bringing it up to graze her knuckles with a light touch of his lips, his deep purple eyes sharp while his face remained a neutral mask.

“Do you make for the tournament grounds, my Lady?”

“I do, your Grace. It seems my dear brothers could not stand to wait another minute for their poor sister.”

The Prince shook his head, “Well that simply won’t do. Please allow me to accompany you in their stead - I would be remiss to allow a lady to walk across the camp with no escort.”

Lyanna fought the urge to scowl. She did not need an escort at all, but it would not do to say such a thing to the Crown Prince. Moreover, it was the first time they had spoken alone despite months of exchanged letters, so she did her best to eliminate any sarcasm from her acceptance.

“Your Grace is kind to offer – I would be most grateful.”

He offered her his arm, and she allowed him to guide her through the camp towards the main tournament seating. They spoke of trivial things, such as the layout of tournament grounds and the upcoming events - she had informed him in her last letter from Moat Cailin that this was her first tournament, so he was happy to inform her of all matters relating to the event. From what she was learning, Harrenhal was shaping up to be the grandest tournament of their time, complete with a seven-person team melee and days of jousting.

Such events were rare in the North. The cost tended to be prohibitive, the fanfare was considered unnecessary, and the sport itself seen as dull compared to the raucous Northern melees. Nonetheless, the experience was proving quite enjoyable for a young woman who thrived on activity and life.

She couldn’t help but steal a glance or two up at the Prince as they moved through the crowds. Not only was he captivating to look at, there was something so familiar about him. And this, in and of itself, was confusing; she knew that she had never met a Targaryen, especially not the Crown Prince. He wasn’t the sort of man you forgot.

"Is everything okay, my Lady?"

"Jay. He reminds me of Jay. It must be the eyes."
"I, yes, I'm sorry your Grace," she mumbled, blushing, "It's just... you just remind me of someone I know. A Southerner."

He raised an elegant eyebrow, "Did you also openly stare at him when you first met?"

Her cheeks flushed further, and she glanced down to hide the smile she couldn't contain, thinking of the first time her and Jay had met.

"Not quite, at least not in such a manner. Your Grace." She silently reprimanded herself for her casual speech and hoped he saw her bowed head as an act of deference.

Brandon would die if he witnessed the scene, either from laughter or exasperation at her poor manners.

She needed to extricate herself before she said anything truly embarrassing. To her good fortune, they had reached the tourney stands and she spotted Catelyn Tully at the foot of the stairs leading to the Stark seats.

When Lord Tully had chosen to depart early this morning, Lyanna had offered to have Catelyn sit with the Starks for the duration of the tournament, as a future member of House Stark. The Lord of Riverrun had taken the appointment of Jaime Lannister to the Kingsguard as a slight, given he and Tywin Lannister were in discussions to finalize the betrothal of Jaime and Lord Tully’s younger daughter, Lysa. While Lord Tully refused to remain at the tournament and demanded Lysa join him in returning to Riverrun, he had accepted Lyanna’s argument that Catelyn remain in an effort to get to know her future House.

Secretly, Lyanna also knew that without Catelyn’s presence, she would have absolutely no control over Brandon’s behavior. If last night’s feast was any indication, the tourney presented too many opportunities for distraction - hopefully his betrothed’s presence would keep him relatively in line.

In any case, Lyanna hoped to become better acquainted with the girl who would soon be her good-sister. She had always wondered what it would be like to have a sister.

For now, the opening jousts would undoubtedly begin shortly, so spotting Catelyn presented an opportune moment to withdraw from her present predicament. Not that the Prince was ill-company, she just seemed unable to present a composed image of a proper Lady at the moment. The prospect
of this man courting her made her strangely uncomfortable.

*Just keep yourself together. Remember, this will keep you away from Robert.*

She turned back to the Prince. Keeping her gaze at chest level in an attempt at being demure, she barely noticed the amusement dancing in his eyes.

“Your Grace, thank you again for escorting me – I shall be sure to reprimand my brothers for shirking in their duties, so as to not inconvenience you again in the future. If you’ll excuse me, I ought to greet my future good-sister before the opening festivities begin.”

“Ah yes, Lady Catelyn Tully – she’s to marry your brother Brandon, correct?”

“Aye, your Grace,” she confirmed, allowing her eyes to shift to Catelyn, “My Lord Father and Lord Tully finalized the agreement over a year ago.” She smiled shyly then, adding, “It will be nice to have another female in the family.”

The Prince gave her a small smile at that, “Tired of being surrounded by men, my Lady? I’ll admit, I’m surprised, as you seem to do quite well in the company of men.”

They had stopped walking, as the stairs to the royal box lay in the opposite direction. Lyanna’s smile faded a bit, as she thought of her deceased mother. “Only because it is all that I grew up knowing, your Grace.”

Noticing the sadness seeping into her voice, the Prince took her hand to place a gentle kiss on her knuckles.

“My Lady, I should allow you to see to your future good-sister.”

“Thank you, your Grace,” she said, as she curtsied deeply.

As she turned to walk towards Lady Catelyn, the Prince called to her quietly.
“Lady Lyanna?”

When she turned back to face him, he simply added, “You are never an inconvenience.”

And then his back was to her as he moved into the covered patio that led to the royal box.

Lyanna gaped at his retreating figure, temporarily frozen. How could a man such as this, composed and smooth, be interested in a wild girl like her?

Straightening, she grasped the folds of her skirt to hustle over to her future good-sister. Catelyn, dressed in a beautiful light blue gown that brought out the color of her eyes, smiled at her approach.

“Lady Catelyn, my apologies for my tardiness. Have my brothers not yet arrived?”

“It is not a problem, Lady Stark. Only your younger brother and Lord Reed have arrived. It appears Lords Brandon and Eddard made a stop to speak with Lord Arryn.”

“Please, you may just call me Lyanna. Or Lya, since we are to be family after all. The title of Lady Stark will soon be yours - I only go by Lady Stark when I am serving in my father’s stead.”

Catelyn flushed, looking down at her hands as the ascended the steps into the box, “Not for some time still, Lady Lyanna.”

Lyanna laughed, “Just Lyanna please, no need for the Lady. I can assure you, I am nothing like what a Lady should be.”

“Then I suppose you must call me Catelyn. Though my family calls me Cat.”

“Excellent, I find titles and all of these manners quite loathsome frankly. Everyone is so proper here, I feel as though I’m constantly going to embarrass myself.”

“You seemed to be doing quite well with the Crown Prince a few moments ago.”
Lyanna laughed, “Oh goodness, you witnessed that?”

Catelyn smiled, “I do believe many people saw him escort you across the camp grounds.”

Lyanna rolled her eyes - gods, she had no desire to become fodder for camp gossip.

They took their seats in the Stark box behind Benjen and Howland, who were currently standing at the front barrier discussing the various sigils posted on the champions board. For a moment, she smiled, imagining her own mystery sigil posted up there. Sighing at the thought, she returned to her conversation with Cat.

“Well, I couldn’t very well refuse his offer.”

Catelyn looked surprised, “Why would you? It’s quite an honor; it’s not often the Crown Prince offers his company to young ladies.”

Lyanna couldn’t help but glance towards the royal box, turning quickly back to Catelyn when she noticed Prince Rhaegar looking towards them.

“Indeed, quite the honor. He certainly is the very image of a Targaryen, at least by the descriptions the books give.”

“Oh, I’d quite forgotten, this must be the first time you’ve seen a Targaryen! Yes, they are quite arresting. Queen Rhaella is stunning as well. They say the King was very like the Crown Prince in his youth.”

Lyanna furrowed her brows, “That is not necessarily a comforting notion.”

Catelyn seemed to miss the displeasure on her face, responding solely to her muted words, “Well, though he may be the very image of a Targaryen, they say that looks are where the similarities end. His Majesty was a very outgoing youth, whereas the Crown Prince is said to be more thoughtful. Some say he loves his books more than his sword, though you would never guess it from the way he jousts. ‘Tis a shame he cut off so much of his hair, I swear all the Ladies of Court were more in love with his long locks than with the man himself.”
She chuckled, looking at Catelyn with wide eyes, “How do you know so much?”

Catelyn blushed, folding her hands in her lap. Gods, even embarrassed, Catelyn Tully looked proper. “My Lord Father brought my sister and I to Court a few times over the years. There is not much to do in Riverrun. Lysa loves Court gossip.”

“Not much Court gossip reaches Winterfell, and I must admit I’ve never felt as though that was something lacking. Now, however, I feel at a disadvantage, for it seems that everyone knows everything about everyone.”

Catelyn smiled, reaching out a tentative hand to pat Lyanna’s hands where they fidgeted in her lap. “You will learn quickly, I’m certain, Lyanna. In truth, I think most of Westeros is quite happy the North decided to attend the tournament – the Starks are one of the few families about whom no one knows much of anything.”

“Why does that not sound like a good thing…”

Catelyn let out a soft giggle, “You don’t wish to be the focus of Court gossip? Many women go to great lengths to be the center of attention for a mere moment.”

Lyanna rolled her eyes, “On the contrary, I’d much rather be the furthest thing from the focus of Court.”

Catelyn smiled and shook her head, “I’m afraid ‘tis too late for that. Your walk with the Crown Prince will be enough to set the courtiers tittering for hours.”

“My goodness, seriously? All he did was escort me to the tournament grounds!”

“Lyanna, not only is he is the Crown Prince, but he is still unmarried. He is the most sought-after bachelor in all of the Seven Kingdoms. For him to single you out on the first day of the tournament is most definitely cause for tongues to be flying.”

Suddenly, Lyanna felt as though many eyes were watching them. Even at Winterfell, where Lyanna was oft the center of business, such attention was rare, and it was disconcerting, and a tad surprising.
Of course, Lyanna had known accepting even an informal courting period with the Crown Prince would bring some attention, but she had not anticipated this level of scrutiny. After all, she and the Prince had spoken no longer than a few minutes.

She sighed, for to pursue this path would only mean the attention would grow. If this was the attention simple courting interactions caused, Lyanna could only imagine what an actual marriage with the man would be like. He seemed a nice enough sort, but she was not at all certain this was a life she was willing to subject herself to.

Than again, she didn’t have much of a choice. In spite of their physical altercation, Robert’s extremely generous offer was now serving as a point of reference - Lyanna knew that her options had been limited as soon as the idea of a bride price had been introduced to her father. Even she knew such an opportunity would be hard to pass over, from a purely financial perspective. In a noblewoman’s life, happiness was worth far less.

Lyanna was pulled out of her darkening thoughts by a musical voice from behind them calling her name.

Well, her formal name for now.

“Lady Stark?”

Her and Catelyn both turned to take in the newcomer.

The voice belonged to the beautiful Dornish lady that Lyanna had met the night before – Ashara Dayne. The woman had caught the eye of poor Ned, yet he was so painfully shy that Brandon had asked her to grant Ned a dance. Lyanna wasn’t sure that was less embarrassing, but seeing Ned infatuated with a woman was treat enough to hold back her teasing. Brandon had also danced with the Lady, something Lyanna had liked a good deal less.

In any case, Lyanna had agreed to extend an invitation the night before to Lady Dayne to join them in the Stark box sometime during the tournament, mostly in an effort to give Ned a chance at wooing the girl. She had not expected the offer to be taken up so promptly.

“Lady Dayne! I didn’t think you’d want to join us already!”
“I’m afraid Princess Elia is feeling too weak to attend and Arthur is on duty. I’d feign not sit alone with Prince Oberyn and Ser Baelor Hightower, as amusing as they can be. Plus, your brothers both spoke so glowingly about you last night that I couldn’t bear to wait. I hope you do not mind?”

“Of course not - you don’t mind, Cat, do you?”

Catelyn shook her head demurely, but Lyanna thought she noticed a bit of wariness in her future good-sister’s eyes at Ashara’s presence.

Lyanna could understand why. Ashara Dayne was said to be the most beautiful maiden in Westeros, perhaps second to only Cersei Lannister, though their beauties were startlingly different. While Cersei was all golden hair and bright green eyes, Ashara had long dark hair and golden skin. One could even mistake her for a Targaryen, with her stunning facial structure and piercing violet eyes. Ashara was also quick to smile, courteous and playful - she was charming in a refined way Lyanna thought she herself would never possess. She was much more approachable than Cersei, who all but refused to even look at anyone she deemed beneath her.

Ashara’s good looks had garnered the attention of many a gentleman, including both of Lyanna’s older brothers. Given Brandon’s predilections, Lyanna could easily understand Catelyn’s discomfort - Brandon’s actions towards several ladies the night before had raised her own guard.

Having considered all of this, Lyanna still wasn’t sure why a lady like Ashara would wish for her friendship. But she was thrilled nonetheless. From their limited interaction the night before, Ashara was quick and witty, her Dornish sarcasm and Court knowledge making her an enjoyable companion. She was also one of the Queen’s ladies, so she would be in King’s Landing during Lyanna and Brandon’s stay. Lyanna was beginning to realize how few people she knew in the South, and was wary of the impending trip to the capital.

But besides the offer of potential female companionship, Ashara was also the sister of Ser Arthur Dayne, who was said to be one of the greatest knights of the time - and the man at the feast last night who had looked suspiciously like the hedge knight Maron she had met at Queensgate.

Lyanna and Benjen had spent several nights on the trip to Harrenhal debating as to whether they might be able to watch the knight in action - perhaps in the melee or in a practice spar. Jousting was of course admirable, but it was more a sign of good horsemanship, and rarely like what one would face in battle. Surely if Ser Dayne was as good as they said he was, he would be unstoppable in a melee situation.

As if he heard her thoughts, Benjen turned around from his conversation with Howland, noticing
who had joined them.

“Wait, you’re from House Dayne, aren’t you? Are you related to Ser Arthur Dayne?”

Lyanna smiled at her brother - of course Benjen would be more interested in Ashara’s brother, instead of the beautiful woman herself.

Ashara smiled as she took a seat at Lyanna’s other side, “Aye, I have the misfortune of being related. He is the more wearisome of my older brothers.”

Benjen’s eyes widened, his face brightening immediately. “He’s your brother? Truly?”

“Yes, truly. Though I pray you not fawn over him.”

Benjen frowned, “Is he not as good as the stories say he is?”

“On the contrary, he most certainly is. However, he does not need more of an ego boost, he is unbearable as it is.”

“Does he plan to ride in the joust?”

“Oh yes, he would never miss an opportunity to prove his martial prowess. In fact, I’m counting on him crowning me the Queen of Love and Beauty.”

Lyanna watched as Catelyn got a starry-eyed look at the mention of the title sought after by every maiden. In addition to the monetary prize, the winning knight of the joust was granted the honor of crowning his “Queen of Love and Beauty” with a laurel of flowers. To Lyanna, the title was as trite as it sounded. Ashara seemed to find some amusement in the whole affair, but watching Catelyn’s carefully curated expression turn to one of hopeful longing, Lyanna could only laugh softly, absentmindedly twirling a curl around her finger.

Ashara glanced at her questioningly, “Don’t you wish for the crown as well, Lady Lyanna? ‘Tis generally most maidens’ dream to be crowned by their knight in shining armor.”
Lyanna smiled, “Please, just call me Lyanna. And Bran will crown Cat if he wins, as is proper as her betrothed, and Ned has never been one for the joust. Why would anyone else crown me?”

For a second, the image of the only situation she could dream of receiving such a wreath appeared in her mind - a crown of red roses, placed on the end of her own lance, a smirk plastered to her face underneath her helm.

The Dornish woman looked at her with a sly smile, “Who knows, maybe you’ll catch the eye of some gallant knight.”

Lyanna shrugged, “If he’ll keep me away from Robert Baratheon, that’ll be enough gallantry, no need for a flower crown.”

“Lya would rather ride in the tournament than get a silly crown of flowers.” Benjen exclaimed, garnering a light slap and a glare from Lyanna.

Her older brothers took that moment to arrive, Brandon guffawing at Benjen’s statement.

“Aye, and we would all end up on our backs! What was it that Lord Bolton said when he last visited? That you’re half-centaur?”

“Indeed, I do recall you spending quite a bit of time on your back at Moat Cailin, Bran. You’re lucky I shan’t be riding, maybe you’ll actually have a shot at winning the crown for dearest Catelyn.”

Brandon plopped on the bench behind them, taking up Catelyn’s hand to place a kiss on her knuckles, “It would please me greatly to honor such a fine lady.”

Pink blossomed across Catelyn’s face as she managed a demure smile in response to Brandon’s flirting. Flashing his betrothed a smile, Brandon reached out to imitate the gesture with Ashara.

“Lady Dayne, I’m pleased to see you took up our offer so quickly.”
Ashara smiled sweetly back at him before offering Ned a smile as well as he took his spot next to Brandon.

“I could not imagine delaying taking you up on the privilege. I must tell you, the Starks are still quite the mystery around Court - I daresay I shall be the envy of many.”

Lyanna and Brandon both chuckled, shaking their heads, while Ned looked slightly embarrassed at the notion. But it was Benjen’s reaction that made her howl with laughter.

“Why would Court be interested in us when we aren’t interested in them?”

Ashara smiled sweetly at Benjen, raising her voice only slightly to be heard over Lyanna and Brandon’s barking laughter.

“Why, little Lord, that is precisely why Court is curious. Court cannot imagine why someone would not be interested in them. It intrigues them.”

The mischievous twinkle in Lady Dayne’s eye made Lyanna like her all the more, some of her earlier worries easing. The Dornish woman seemed to be a good fit for their jovial party, her cutting wit a nice compliment to Catelyn’s demure kindness.

With such company surrounding her, Lyanna had a feeling this event would be very much to her liking. Very much, indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Ah my lovely readers, we are SO CLOSE! I even compressed two chapters to get us closer to the moment we are all awaiting - which will come next chapter, I promise! Also welcome to the new readers! Thank you for your support, whether continued or new - you all make this story what it is!

I'm sorry for the delay, but I've been traveling a ton for work and we had two deals closing, so there was literally no free time. I'm hoping things will slow down a tad over
the summer - but know that your continued comments make me yearn to write and keep me committed to getting back to it whenever I possibly can.

Also, I am going to try to catch up with the comments from last chapter - sorry if I haven't responded yet!

Finally, a brief word on the show: I have few words which can adequately express my feelings regarding the final season of Game of Thrones. It has long been a separate entity from the books for me (ever since they killed Ser Barristan for little reason *sob*), but as an ardent fan of the world GRRM has created, the writing in this past season (and Season 6 and 7 to an extent) was utterly discouraging. There are many in this community alone who take more care and put more thought into the writing we do for a fan fiction site than was seemingly put into a show which reaches millions of people (and costs millions of dollars). My disappointment is by no means directed towards the actors or hundreds of crew members who have brought these characters to life - on the contrary, I could not have been more thrilled by the acting and the cinematography. They did a magnificent job making something incredible out of writing that would likely not pass muster on this site (for OOC, for poor timelines, for confusing plot, for blatant disregard for physics or functioning of medieval war weaponry...). I'm encouraged by the continued engagement on AO3, and continue to look forward to GRRM's future books. The show brought to life a world that existed only in words for us - showing us the cities, people, and creatures in living form (makes writing a scene with dragons much easier when you have amazing CGI to base it off of!). So for all of that, I will always be grateful.

Alas, to all my fellow writers out there (whose stories I likely follow!), let us not be discouraged but continue to enrich the body of written work in this universe - I certainly never get tired of reading all of the new material :)

xx
Cersei

Cersei plucked an errant golden thread from her skirts as she arranged them about her legs, ensuring the golden fabric lay perfectly amongst the crimson pillows of the Lannister box. Jaime would have scoffed at the ostentatious nature of her attire, the golden skirt with a fitted crimson bodice that barely covered her bosom, the ruby necklace chosen to accentuate her decolletage. Alas, Jaime was no longer around to pester her about what he deemed her ridiculous attempts at garnering attention.

Of course, Jaime was so short-sighted - he had even gone so far as to complain the night before about being sent back to King’s Landing after his induction to the Kingsguard. Cersei would miss their forbidden kisses in the shadows of her tent and she had hoped he would grace her by crowning her his Queen of Love and Beauty; however, his absence also gave her more time to focus on the true prize: the affection of the Crown Prince.

Hence the golden gown and necklace of rubies. Rhaegar Targaryen had certainly seen his fair share of ladies in gorgeous gowns from his years growing up in King’s Landing, but he had always had a kind word for Cersei. Jaime claimed it was only because the Prince wouldn’t dream of shunning the daughter of Tywin Lannister. Nonetheless . . .

Well, it didn’t matter to Cersei why the Prince granted her his attention. It was more than he granted any other lady, and the man would have to marry someone. Why wouldn’t he choose the one with whom he had shared the most? The one to whom he had become accustomed over the years at Court?

Obviously his interest in Ashara Dayne had been a set back, but it was clear that he had lost interest in the girl already. Likely he had found the woman far too broken in for his liking - Cersei had no proof that the Dayne girl was loose, but how could she not be, being from Dorne, with those revealing dresses and that propensity to flirt with every living creature?
Cersei understood men had needs - she herself had her own, though she was fortunate to have a brother who could meet them in a discreet manner. She would never begrudge the Crown Prince his pleasures, so long as he kept to her bed once they were married. Then again, Cersei had little concerns about that - if Jaime’s reactions were any indication, Cersei was more than capable of maintaining a man’s singular interest.

Movement in the royal box caused her to glance up. The object of her affection took his seat. Cersei stared at the Crown Prince intensely, hoping he would feel the weight of her gaze and direct his attention towards her. She had noticed the stares her attire had garnered on the way through the grounds; Rhaegar was a man like any other.

And yet, his attention seemed to be engaged by a box on the other side of the arena, where the sound of laughter seemed to rise above the din of the crowd forming in the stands. Leaning forward over the barrier, gracefully elongating her neck in the process, Cersei sought to determine the direction of the Prince’s gaze.

Cersei frowned upon noting the figures in the box designated for the North - it seemed the Starks weren’t afraid to invite strays into their midst. She noted the stiff figure of Catelyn Tully and the easy smile of Ashara Dayne amongst the savage Stark siblings.

Cersei turned back to watch the Crown Prince, noting his neutral expressions. Obviously he would be happy his former mistress had found a welcome community - her Rhaegar was a kind man, always thinking of others. Perhaps the middle Stark son, Edward or Edwyle or something, would take Ashara to wife. ‘Twas a far better match than the woman could expect after her shame, but Northerners cared little for the gossip of the South.

Allowing herself one final glance at the Stark box, Cersei had to grudgingly admit that the Stark girl was pretty. Her dresses were awfully boring, but the girl was not unattractive, with those dark brown curls and flashing grey eyes. She was flat-chested and petite, and her manners seemed unrefined, particularly when seated next to the prim and proper Catelyn Tully. Yet there was something else, something that made Cersei dislike the girl immediately. Perhaps it was the way she laughed without restraint, or smacked her brothers’ arms playfully. There was a confidence in the girl that was off-putting. And the fact that the girl had served as the Warden of the North for her father for more than six moons still plagued Cersei. How such a creature had ruled a region was beyond belief – Lyanna was only a few moons older than her, and Cersei had certainly never been granted such power.

Cersei was not used to being envious of anyone, least of all a petty savage from the North.

Alas, Lyanna Stark was not the only pretty product of the North. The eldest, Brandon, was quite the man. He too had a wild quality, like his sister, but his brutish savage image only enhanced his charm. Cersei had even allowed the man a dance the night before, hoping a twirl around the room
on the arm of Brandon Stark would motivate Rhaegar into asking her for a dance.

True, that plan had failed, but the Prince hadn’t danced with any other ladies either. Cersei took comfort in that fact. He was likely unwilling to display his affections so openly.

Her musings were interrupted by the sudden arrival of a Lannister man, dirt plastered upon his legs and cloak as he clambered into the box. Cersei recoiled, hands gesturing for him to remain in the corner so as to not spread his filth upon her fine dress.

“My Lady Cersei,” he bowed hastily, causing her to frown, “I bear a letter from your father that requires your immediate attention.”

Cersei let out a scoff, before indicating the seat in the row behind her. “Very well, place it right here. Come no closer though, I shan’t have you spreading the dirt from the road about the box.”

The man dutifully obeyed, and Cersei promptly ripped open the wax seal bearing the sigil of her father.

Tywin Lannister was a man of few words. The letter was brief, yet distressing nonetheless. Cersei glared up at the Lannister guard, who remained standing a few feet away.

“This says I’m to return to Casterly Rock after the Tournament.”

“Indeed, my Lady. Your father has sent me and twenty guards to escort you there.”

“Why? It was never the plan for me to return to Casterly Rock. Not now!”

“Your Lord Father has resigned as the Hand of the King, my Lady. He intends to return to Casterly Rock in a few days and expects you to join him there.”

“Resigned as Hand? Whatever for?”

“I do not know, my Lady, but he bid us remain with you during the tournament. We will escort you
back to your home immediately once the event has concluded.”

“But surely he wishes me to return to King’s Landing with the royal party?”

“I know only my orders, Lady Cersei. We are to return to you Casterly Rock after the tournament. He did not mention returning to King’s Landing.”

Cersei scowled, but the man would not budge. She recognized him as one of her father’s personal guards, and Tywin’s personal guards were as loyal to him as the Kingsguard was to the Crown. if her father had sent his own man to escort her home, Cersei knew the order could garner little push back, yet she wished she’d bothered to learn the names of these loyal men, if only so she might better tell this particular guard off.

“Fine. Get out of my sight.”

The guard bowed, but Cersei did not like the small smirk she thought she saw as he took his leave, “My Lady.”

Cersei turned back to face the arena. Her gaze lingered on the figure of the Crown Prince, who was now engaged in conversation with one of the Kingsguard, as she remembered the last conversation she had with her father before leaving King’s Landing.

“Have you made any progress with the Crown Prince?”

“More than any other lady at Court.”

“Is that so?”

“He has not been at Court much. He hardly spares the time - you know how hard he works. I am doing all that I can.”

“You must do more. The King has given the Prince an ultimatum.”
“An ultimatum?”

“Aerys is growing impatient. He would have his heir married by the end of the year. The King has informed his son that he must choose a bride by the end of the Tournament, or Aerys will marry him off to whomever he wishes.”

This was her last chance, her opportunity to take what should be hers.

And if Rhaegar chose her by the end of the event, Cersei could return to King’s Landing at his side instead of complying with her father’s tiresome demand for her return to Casterly Rock. Retreating to the Lannister holdfast would do little to advance her influence at Court, and the Crown Prince would no doubt wish for her continued presence. It would be much easier to plan their glorious wedding from King’s Landing - she would need all the resources she could find if it were to be the affair she envisions, an event to be documented in all of the histories.

Cersei was roused from her thoughts by the sounds of her ladies arriving to sit in her box. With Jaime’s departure, Cersei has extended an invitation to a few of the flighty girls who were constantly dogging her heels at Court. They were tiresome, but they could prove themselves useful as sources of gossip - Cersei prided herself on her knowledge of all the activities of Court members.

The ladies were chattering like birds as they filed in to sit behind Cersei, who had long learned to allow the hollow words to pass by her, tuning in only to catch the critical pieces of information.

“She’s nothing like I expected.”

“Nay, I had heard she had fangs like a wolf!”

“I love her dresses, there’s something so simple about them. No one ever spoke of how beautiful she was!”

“I heard that the King yelled at her when the Starks were presented yesterday.”

“Mayhaps that’s why the Crown Prince was walking with her.”

Cersei turned abruptly to stare at the girl who’d spoken. “What are you talking about?”
The girl frowned, “What do you mean?”

“Who was walking with the Crown Prince?”

“Oh, Lady Lyanna Stark - the Crown Prince escorted her to the tournament grounds just now.”

Two other girls added commentary, seemingly eager to share information with Cersei.

“It caused quite the stir around the camp, as it’s so rare to see him alone with a lady.”

“If only he would ask other ladies, I’m certain it would not be so rare!”

Cersei scowled in the direction of the Stark box, where Lyanna was smacking her youngest brother, causing raucous laughter to echo from the box’s other occupants. “Why would the Prince wish to walk with Lyanna Stark? She is nothing more than a savage Northerner.”

Her ladies paused, looking at her. She knew the anger and disdain were plain in her eyes, but how could she help it? The wolf girl couldn’t just flounce into the South and steal her Prince.

“I thought she was quite kind - I spoke with her only briefly this morning, but she doesn’t seem at all savage. Perhaps the Prince wished to get to know her-”

Cersei pinned the girl who had just spoken, some lesser lady from the Reach, with her fiery glare.

“If you think her so kind, then perhaps,” she sneered, “you should watch the tournament from Lady Lyanna’s box, as you are no longer welcome in mine.”

The girl’s face transformed into despair, “I meant no disrespect, Lady Cersei, I just -”

“Spare me your excuses. I’m sure the savage Northerners will welcome you, they seem to enjoy the company of strays. Now get out of my box.”
The girl’s lower lip trembled as she rose from her seat, dipping quickly into a curtsey before hastily exiting the Lannister box.

“Does anyone else wish to share their sentiments on the Stark girl?”

Chastened, the remaining girls all shook their heads. Cersei turned back to look at the royal box, refusing to look back to the Northerners. The sight of her prince settled her mind, as she hummed a tune as familiar to her as her own hand.

Cersei whispered the song’s words as she watched the Crown Prince glance back towards the Stark box.

“A coat of gold, a coat of red,
A lion still has claws.
And mine are long and sharp, my Lady
As long and sharp as yours

And now the rains weep o'er her halls
With no one there to hear.”

Rhaegar would never fall for the stupid Stark girl. Cersei would make certain of it.

Rhaegar
Rhaegar shifted restlessly in his seat on the dais, cognizant of the many eyes watching him.

He had always disliked how on display members of the royal family were at these events - not only was it isolating to sit here away from the other nobles, but they all were given a prime view of the royals’ every movement. To make matters worse, the King had demanded that Lord and Lady Whent sit at a table below the dais tonight, leaving Rhaegar alone with his father.

Rhaegar had long ago perfected the art of keeping all of his emotions from his face, but even he struggled to maintain a neutral expression while in hearing distance of the vitriol spewing from the King’s lips.

It seemed Aerys couldn’t decide who he despised the most tonight, whether it was Hoster Tully, for leaving the event without the King’s leave, or Rickard Stark, for sending his boisterous children without bothering to attend himself, or Robert Baratheon, for being a poor substitute for his father Steffon, or Rhaegar himself, for being “a treacherous imbecile.”

After excoriating every major Lord across Westeros, including those in attendance and those missing, Aerys’ attention had shifted to an equally uncomfortable topic.

“So Lord Tully allowed his welp to stay while he ran off to Riverrun?”

“Aye, your Grace. Lady Lyanna Stark offered to take her under the care of House Stark for the duration of the tournament, given her betrothal to Lord Brandon Stark.”

Catelyn Tully was a pretty girl, with the typical auburn Tully hair and blue eyes. She seemed a meek creature, particularly sitting next to the wild and vivacious Lyanna Stark. But even from a distance, Rhaegar could tell that Lyanna brought the Tully girl out of her shell. It was impossible not to smile around Lyanna, something Catelyn Tully seemed to be learning firsthand.

It was refreshing watching Lyanna interact in public. He had admittedly been worried about whether the same woman who could be mistaken for a wildling could manage to behave in a manner befitting a woman of her status at Court. Yet here she was, clearly trying to maintain some image of decorum. He’d noticed that in her responses as he escorted her to the tournament grounds.
Of course, he couldn’t help the tinge of disappointment that he felt when she failed to recognize him yet again. He had thought for a moment that she was putting together the pieces, when she had said he reminded her of a Southerner she knew… but then she had withdrawn.

“At least Lord Tully left us something nice to look at.”

Rhaegar did not believe that had been a goal of the Lord of Riverrun in his haste to depart.

“I believe Lord Tully was eager to return home after the betrothal between his younger daughter fell through and was pleased by the prospect of Lady Catelyn spending time with her betrothed.”

“Ah yes, the fish was trying to marry the lion. The Tywin Lannister I used to know would have never allowed such a thing. What peasants. That boy should be glad I saved him.”

“I’m sorry, your Grace?” Aerys’ logic was not always easy to follow, even for Rhaegar who spent far more time with the man than any other.

“The Lannister boy! He should be grateful I saved him from a marriage to that girl.”

“I am told Lady Lysa is quite a lovely lady.”

Aerys scoffed, “Lovely? Boy, don’t get any ideas, that girl is weak willed on top of being unattractive.”

“Your Grace-”

“Don’t give me that look. She should know by now, she’s far less attractive than her sister. The older one is the real beauty.”

“Aye, but Lady Catelyn is already set to marry Lord Brandon Stark.”

Just as he mentioned the name, a wave of laughter could be heard from the Stark table, where Brandon Stark stood gesturing wildly to the enjoyment of his siblings and friends.
“Those Starks!”

His father was practically spitting as he leaned forward in his chair, his gaze fixed on the Stark table.

“They’re too wild! I don’t trust them, Rhaegar! It has been too long since they have felt the heat of a dragon’s fire.”

Rhaegar shivered at the wording, but calmed his voice when responding.

“Fear not, your Majesty, I am watching them and their bannermen carefully. We will ensure their loyalty to the Crown.”

“Good!” Aerys’ voice had risen to a yell, some of the hall quieting at the sudden interruption. “No wolf can withstand the power of the dragon - all will kneel before the might of the Targaryens once more. Now that that traitor Tywin has resigned, we shall restore the might of the Crown without his meddling!”

Rhaegar noticed the stares intensifying as those at the tables nearest the dais overheard the King’s words. Tywin’s resignation was not a well-known fact as of yet, though the animosity between the King and his now former Hand had been displayed at Court on more than one occasion. It was not the mention of Lord Lannister, however, that had Rhaegar cringing internally.

As Rhaegar noted the looks on the faces turned towards the dais, he recalled Arthur’s words from a few weeks ago.

“All is not lost, Rhaegar,” Arthur assured him, having just delivered the news that the King intended to join the tournament, “The one thing we can count on is the King’s propensity towards threats and vicious words. He will reveal who he truly is to all in attendance, and you will be sitting there next to him, a poised and well-loved alternative. It shall make convincing the lords all the easier.”

Rhaegar did not feel comforted by these words. They said that whenever a Targaryen is born, the gods flip a coin to determine their mental state. It was obvious which side his father’s coin had landed - but would people really see him as an alternative? Who knew how Rhaegar’s coin would land. There were certainly times, deep in his sleep deprived state while staring at an ancient Valyrian text, when he considered himself mad.
Perhaps there is no coin at all. Perhaps all Targaryens are born with a dose of madness which manifests itself in different ways.

“Your Majesty has the right of it,” Rhaegar said, in a measured tone, hoping to close off the conversation. “We are blessed with the support of the many Lords and Ladies in bringing Westeros into a new Golden Age.”

The King sneered at him, but lowered his own voice before speaking again.

“You’ve always been naive, boy. Let us hope it is many years before you ever sit on the throne, else our family will end in ruins.”

_Nay, father, it is you who is destroying our House. Let the gods grant us but a short time of you remaining King._

Aerys stood suddenly, slamming his goblet on the table and causing silence to descend the room.

“I grow tired of this noise. Ser Barriston, you will stay and watch my treacherous son. Ensure he does not do anything which would displease us.”

Rhaegar stood to bow as the King departed the room, silence the only noise accompanying his exit. Only when the massive doors to the hall slammed shut behind the monarch and his Kingsguard did the buzz of voices recommence.

Rhaegar raised his goblet, pitching his voice so as to be heard by most in the hall.

“Let us give thanks to the Lord and Lady Whent for their hospitality in continuing the celebration of being here together.”

Cheers echoed through the room, and the tension of the past minutes faded. The King’s departure seemed to shift the environment, from one of muted celebration to rowdy debauchery. Rhaegar watched from the dais as calls for more wine echoed around the room and the musicians began playing an upbeat tempo. The dancing would undoubtedly begin soon, with the alcohol flowing and inhibitions lost.
Rhaegar felt Arthur approach the dais, where Rhaegar now sat alone. No one dared to sit in the King’s empty seat, and with the Lord and Lady of the hosting house sitting below, the only other individuals close to him were the Kingsguard who remained, Arthur and Barriston.

“It seems my sister has made some new friends, your Grace.”

Rhaegar glanced at Arthur, stoic in his white armor, before glancing out into the sea of tables to search for the figure of Ashara.

He found her not far from the dais, though she was currently seated far from the Dornish table where she had started the evening.

Arthur continued as a means of explanation, though Rhaegar had already seen Ashara with the Northerners at the opening jousts earlier.

“Ashara met the Starks last night, having shared a dance with both the elder brothers. She seemed to enjoy their company so much that she has spent the entire day with them.”

At the moment, Ashara was speaking with Lyanna, their heads huddled close as the men around them joked around as they drank.

“She knows you intend to court Lady Lyanna discreetly.”

Rhaegar looked back at Arthur, raising an eyebrow. Arthur just shrugged before returning his gaze to the two women.

At the moment that Rhaegar turned back himself, Ashara caught his eye, her face still caught up in laughter from some occurrence at the Stark table. Noting both his and Arthur’s attention, Ashara glanced at Lyanna and then back at Rhaegar before a smirk appeared on her face.

Arthur, who had clearly caught the interaction, chuckled beneath his breath, “I swear she is the Stranger himself when she so chooses.”
Rhaegar sat back, taking up his wine though his eyes returned to Lyanna. “Lady Lyanna will need friends in the South, so I can only be glad for that.”

Arthur paused, his voice shifting lower. “It seems the golden lioness has not noticed your overt interest elsewhere.”

Rhaegar dragged his eyes from the Stark table to notice the approach of Cersei Lannister, who ventured gracefully up the stairs to the dais.

“Your Grace,” she murmured, dipping into a low curtsy, her shimmering dress splaying out across the floor.

“Lady Cersei. I hope you are enjoying the evening?”

“Indeed, it has been lovely. Though it seems there is but one thing missing from the evening.”

“And what is that? I will ensure Lord and Lady Whent are informed, should it be something one can remedy.”

“Actually, your Grace, I believe you are the most capable of remedying it.”

“Is that so?”

“I believe it would be well received if your Grace were to open the dance - many a couple await your sign, and I would be happy to serve as your opening partner.”

Rhaegar sighed to himself - Cersei had proposed the dance in front of the wider public, making it nearly impossible to refuse her.

“A splendid idea, Lady Cersei. I thank you for being so thoughtful.” He rose out of his chair to move around the table, offering his arm to her.

“It is my wish only to serve you, your Grace.”
Rhaegar did not deem that statement with a response, instead leading her to the dance floor to line up for whatever tune the musicians chose. Several other couples joined them as the music began.

As Crown Prince, Rhaegar had been taught all manner of Court dances, so the moves came naturally. Cersei Lannister had clearly been brought up with them too, for she found more than enough energy to maintain a conversation throughout the dance.

“I did so enjoy your playing last night, my Prince.”

“I am grateful for your praise, Lady Cersei.”

“I still remember the first time I heard you play. Do you recall?”

“Unfortunately, I cannot say that I do.”

“Of course, of course - I’m certain you meet so many young ladies, and it was an awfully busy tournament. My father spared no expense for the celebration of Prince Viserys’ birth.”

“Oh, the tournament at Lannisport.”

*Your father spared no expense, thinking that my father would agree to a betrothal between us.*

“Indeed. You rode so splendidly then,” Cersei let out a giggle, “I was totally besotted.”

*Besotted with me, or with my title and the image of a Prince?*

“It is kind of you to say so. I fear I have always been more talented with a lance than a sword - tournaments are no test of a man’s true value in battle.”

“Then you must simply avoid battle and continue the joust!”
“If only one could just wish away battle.”

“Oh but surely there are ways to avoid battle.”

“And pray, Lady Cersei, what ways do you know of?”

“Why, through alliances! And what better way to affirm alliances than through marriage?”

_A bit heavy handed, even for you, Lady Cersei._

“Indeed. Something all Great Houses must consider with care.”

“And has your Grace thought of it?”

“I have.”

Cersei’s smile dimmed at his lack of detail, but he took her momentary silence to attempt a shift in the direction of the conversation - there was still time remaining in this rather long dance.

“I heard your father makes for Casterly Rock?”

The girl’s face fell immediately upon the question. “Indeed, your Grace - unfortunately, he has demanded I meet him there directly after the tournament.”

“You are disappointed to return to your home?”

“The Red Keep has felt more like home than Casterly Rock ever did. I only wish there was a way to remain at Court.”
“You may be one of the few who lives in the Red Keep who feels that way.”

“I have always found Court life invigorating - ‘tis as if I was born to it.”

“Then it is surely a shame you will not be returning. I am certain another occasion will arise for you to revisit.”

“Your Grace has the right of it. I was hoping you might be able to help me.”

“I’m afraid I am not well acquainted with the needs for ladies at Court. It is possible my lady mother has need of another lady. Or my future wife.”

Cersei’s eyes widened again, her smile brilliant as she confirmed his words, “Your future wife?”

“Aye, she will undoubtedly need ladies to attend to her. You could ask your father to send the Queen a letter - she will likely arrange for my future wife’s ladies.”

Rhaegar watched as Lady Cersei blanched, having clearly thought he was about to propose she be his future wife.

Fortunately, the dance was finally at an end, so Rhaegar bowed and granted Cersei a brief kiss on the knuckles before retreating towards his table on the dais. His eyes immediately sought the image of the woman he did in fact hope to make his future wife.

He frowned when he found her, on the dance floor further down the hall, breaking away from a drunk Robert Baratheon. She quickly disappeared, her slender figure exiting the hall out one of the side entrances.

Rhaegar moved to follow, but he caught the eye of Arthur, who signaled that his friend would follow her and allow Rhaegar to make a more subtle exit.

By the time Rhaegar had made his way out of the side entrance, Arthur was waiting for him with dark cloaks.
“She ran in the direction of the godswood.”

“Of course she did.”

“May the Old Gods protect you, my friend.”

Rhaegar shook his head as he donned the plain black cloak, moving steadily towards the trees of the godswood.

“Let us hope the Old Gods’ protection is not needed.”

And may Lyanna be more forgiving than the Gods seem to be.

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Dusk clung to the edge of the godswood, the darkness of night seeping around the trees.

Greens and browns blurred as Lyanna ran, her skirts bunched in her hands to allow her legs to move more freely upon the narrow path. The hem of her dress would be ruined with dirt from the stumbles she’d taken in her haste, but only one thought echoed in her mind.

Blinking away the moisture gathering at the corner of her eyes, she finally caught sight of her destination as her feet met the soft give of grass.

The Harrenhal weirwood tree stood like a beacon in the heart of the massive godswood, the light of the moon illuminating the carved face of one of the few weirwoods still standing in the South. Lyanna had seen many weirwood trees in her years, yet this one seemed the fiercest. A mouth twisted in hatred with those unseeing eyes was only made more pronounced by the thirteen deep gashes carved into the trunk during the Dance of the Dragons over a hundred years ago.

In spite of the hateful visage, Lyanna felt a connection to her home once she entered the clearing. She slowed to a walk, her heart pounding in her ears as she allowed the single-minded desire to run fade away.

Approaching the giant tree, Lyanna knelt to rest a hand on the gnarled roots. She felt Nymeria approaching, so she allowed her mind to wander to the moment which had prompted her escape.

It was that damn Stormlord again - it seemed she could not escape Robert Baratheon and his wandering hands no matter what she did.

Lyanna sighed as she moved to sit with her back to the roots, her skirts arranged around her legs.

She should have denied Robert the dance, but she had been so sure he would never risk attempting something in such a public place.

If the stench of wine and sweat hadn’t been miserable enough, it was his words which had hurt the most.

“Your Father will come around to the idea, just as I know you will. Besides, it is only a matter of time before Court learns that you have been claimed by me.”

“I beg your pardon, my Lord? I do not believe you have any claim upon me.”

“That Maester of your father’s told me you would be mine,” Robert’s words slurred, “it was simply a matter of signing the contracts. I can give you a good life as the Lady of Storm’s End.”
“Unfortunately, my Lord, I have no desire to be the Lady of Storm’s End. Maester Walys is a maester no longer, for the lies he told.”

“Do not get me wrong, Lya. I will have you. You are the only thing I’ve ever wanted like this. Who would marry you after hearing that you have been mine already?”

Lyanna pulled back from him as the dance finally came to a close. “You know as well as I do that your heinous attempt was unsuccessful.”

Robert had stepped closer to her, the heat from his body crushing her air. “What does the truth matter when gossip will trump all? I love you, Lya, and I will not let another man have you.”

She had escaped the wretched man and run all of the way here, sick to her stomach at the thought that Robert would allow gossip to ruin her and push her into his arms. She had already heard enough gossip during the first few days of the Tournament to know that Robert was right - what was the truth in comparison to the power of scandal?

His words had struck more than one cord with her in that regard. Despite enjoying Ashara Dayne’s presence, Lyanna had already heard the rumors that she was the Crown Prince’s mistress, or had been. Lyanna understood that many Lords and Kings took mistresses, but she had never wished to have a husband who would flaunt it in the open. In any case, could the Crown Prince be courting Lady Ashara herself, a truth hidden in the gossip?

And if he wasn’t courting Ashara, if all of the gossip was false, there were also the tales of a marriage between the Prince and Lady Cersei Lannister. Lyanna had seen the golden-haired girl in her beautiful gowns, with her gaggle of pretty girls. Having never spoken to her, Lyanna didn’t know what type of woman Cersei was, yet even she had to admit that Cersei Lannister would fit the mold of what a Queen should be: beautiful and refined, from one of the wealthiest families in Westeros, and with the power of her father, the Hand of the King…

Lyanna sighed, shaking her thoughts away. She had interacted with the Crown Prince only a few times and found it difficult to read his intentions. It did little good to belabor the point beyond continuing to act like the perfect lady she was most certainly not.

A rustle of leaves and a feeling of belonging only just preceded the appearance of Nymeria, who bounded across the opening to sit next to where she was sprawled. Lyanna buried her hand in the fur of her direwolf’s neck, allowing her eyes to drop closed and to focus simply on the breath of her
She did not know how much time passed before Nymeria’s head shot up, rousing Lyanna out of her rest. A branch rustled in the trees behind them signaling someone was there, but while Nymeria was attentive, she was not defensive.

*The scent must be familiar.*

For a second she contemplated slipping into the direwolf’s mind - she had gotten much more skilled at warging with Maester Luwin’s assistance - but she discarded the thought, since the figure would be in the clearing shortly anyways. Instead she stood up, dusting off her dirty skirts and facing the approaching figure.

“I should have known you would wander off into the dangerous godswood alone in the middle of the night.”

It was his voice, the voice that, even after a year, had filled her dreams to chase away the nightmares.

Forgetting herself for a moment, she asked, “Jay? Is that you?” She could hear the hope in her quiet voice, and she silently scolded herself for sounding so desperate.

The figure had materialized among the trees closest to the clearing, his graceful and languid movements covered by a cloak of pitch black. His pants and shirt were black as well, with no sign of a sigil. While she had expected such up in the North, it was unusual at a tournament. Typically, all tourney goers wore something of their house at all times - Lyanna’s dress for instance, was in the grey and white of House Stark, a direwolf pin fastening her grey cloak across her shoulders.

His hood was up, shadowing his face, but the features were familiar. She took a few steps forward before realizing what she was doing.

She paused, thoughts racing.

*How is he here? Will he remember me? Is this real or am I dreaming?*
He stopped a few steps from her and his hand moved to push off his hood.

She flinched as she caught sight of that silver hair in the weak evening light, those eyes which had been such a unique shade of purple the day before. She lowered her gaze almost immediately, taking a step back.

_I must be going mad. My mind is projecting his voice on the Crown Prince._

“Your Grace,” she dropped into a curtsy, not nearly low enough but all she could muster, “I’m sorry for not recognizing you. I thought perhaps you were…”

Lyanna paused, realizing too late that it was impossible to describe Jay without implying some sort of impropriety. To be in a clearing alone in the godswood at night, her dress dirty, waiting for a man…

The Crown Prince noticed her internal struggle, providing a solution, “A friend of yours?”

Hoping she would not regret taking the offering, Lyanna grasped it with both hands. “Aye, your Grace. Just a friend of mine.” She forced her lips to pull into a small smile and dropped her chin slightly, so that she was just barely gazing up at him through her lashes.

_Just pretend you are demure, deferential, and innocent. You’ll have plenty of time to be yourself once this is over._

The Prince raised a well-sculpted eyebrow at her, his indigo eyes shining with amusement.

Jay’s eyes.

_No, no, no, it’s not Jay._

She shook her head to clear her thoughts, before returning her gaze to the future King. He was watching her as he followed-up on his earlier suggestion, “Should I be concerned that my potential betrothed is planning secret rendezvous with unknown male “friends” in the middle of the night?”
Lyanna felt herself blush furiously, realizing she had walked right into a trap. She cursed for the way her voice rose in pitch as she responded, “No, your Grace, I swear I would never dishonor your name or that of my family’s. I can explain,” she thought furiously, staring at the grass beneath her feet, trying to think of the best possible explanation, “you see-”

She stopped abruptly as the Crown Prince burst into laughter. She looked up, frowning – why was he laughing? Did he find the situation or her embarrassment so amusing? She looked over at Nymeria, who remained sprawled on the grass next to the weirwood tree, eyes watching her and the Prince lazily.

Her gaze returned to the Prince as he took a step forward, his laughter dying down. A smile had taken root on his horribly attractive face. It made Lyanna want to slap him.

“You really still don’t know, do you?”

Lyanna scowled, not understanding the vague question. He took another step forward as she tilted her head to the side, her brows furrowing as she tried to puzzle out what he was asking.

He was close now, an arm’s distance away, and she had to look up to see his face.

“You Grace, I - ”

His hand rose and her mind yelled to pull away. But her body refused to listen as his fingertips trailed down her face.

“Lyanna…” he murmured, staring at her with those beautiful eyes.

And suddenly it all fit.

The voice, the eyes, the familiar features, how he moved, the way he stared at her as if he was waiting for something, for her to realize something, for her to put the pieces together.

Jay. Like Jaehaerys.
As in the name of several Targaryen kings.

And Rhaegar Targaryen’s grandfather.

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**Rhaegal**

Rhaegar watched with bated breath as realization dawned in Lyanna’s lively grey eyes.

Gods, he wanted to kiss her, it had been so long and she was so close now—

“Is this some kind of trick?” Lyanna whispered as she swatted his hand away, stepping away from him.

Nymeria’s head lifted, hearing her mistress’ distress.

Having not expected such fury – well, expected, but he had dearly hoped for a more positive reaction – Rhaegar stood gaping at her for a moment.

Her face was twisted into a scowl. “What is this? It was you? In the North in disguise? For what purpose? For how long?”

“I—” was all Rhaeger managed to say before Lyanna went on, her face flushed. “And you just
happened to meet the daughter of the Warden of the North at the Wall?”

Recovering slightly, Rhaegar tried to remain calm in the face of her anger, “I assure you, Lady Stark, I had no idea who you were at Queensgate.”

“You expect me to believe you just happened to be at a deserted castle along the Wall, a castle that everyone knows I have been restoring?”

Lyanna’s restoring the castle? No wonder she was so at ease there...

“I can assure you, we had no indication that anyone used the castle.”

“Oh, so you were looking for an isolated castle. Of course you were, since you couldn’t very well stop at any lord’s keep since you weren’t supposed to be in the North. I can assure you, my father did not know the Crown Prince was riding around in his lands, nor did I ever receive any missive stating the fact while I was serving in his stead. But you never sent anything, did you? That’s why your hair was black, wasn’t it?” Lyanna shook her head, her eyes darkening. “You didn’t want us to know you were in the North.”

“Lyanna, if you’ll just let me explain—”

But she was having none of it. She waved away his attempt with a hand, continuing to spit words like venom.

“Explain what? Were you spying on us? Was that why Myles and Richard were in Wintertown? Did you send them there to convince Brandon to invite them up to stay? I should have guessed that was the business they were on for the Crown Prince. Gods, I knew it was strange that they would pick up and leave all of a sudden after giving that letter to Brandon. How did I not realize?” She threw her hands into the air exasperatedly before turning away to walk towards Nymeria, her hands clenching at her side.

Rhaegar stepped to follow her, trying to keep his voice calm, “I can assure you that Myles and Richard ended up in Winterfell by no orders of mine – I was surprised to hear they were staying there when we returned from the Wall.”

“Oh really? But how convenient that you ran into Lord Stark’s daughter alone.”
She paused her pacing to stare at him, her jaw clenching, “Did I foil your plans to dishonor House Stark by not allowing you to take my maidenhead? I’m sure those beautiful eyes and words work wonders. Much more effective than Lord Baratheon’s violent approach.”

Rhaegar growled at the comparison, “I am nothing like Robert. I swear none of us knew who you were. Had I known—”

“What, you would have stopped because I was highborn?” she asked, the very image of a wounded animal lashing out. “Do all of you seduce every unknown maiden you come across? Or was I just one of the unfortunate fools to fall for the melancholic self-pity?”

“It wasn’t like that at all!” Rhaegar exclaimed, his frustration bubbling over, “What happened at Queensgate, what I felt for that girl, for you, what we shared, that has never happened to me before.”

Lyanna stared at him, emotions moving across her face. Her hand tightened into a fist and released.

“I’m sorry your Grace, but I find that incredibly difficult to believe.”

“Why? Because the other men in your life treat women like property, taking whatever they want?” She flinched, and he knew he had hit a sensitive spot. A pang of guilt shot through him as he saw the flash of pain cross her face.

He softened his voice as he continued, stepping closer with his hands raised in a peacemaking gesture, “Lyanna, after we left Queensgate, I considered throwing duty to the wind and searching the entire North to find that girl. For a moment, I didn’t care if it won my house an alliance or whether it would piss off my father or Tywin Lannister...”

“But you didn’t. You didn’t even speak to me when you stopped at Winterfell, once you knew who I was. You went to Brandon, didn’t you? I was there too!”

“You left Queensgate without a trace! I thought that maybe you regretted it, that you ran away to escape, that you never wanted to see me again. Why else would you leave without even saying goodbye?” He’d never heard his voice sound so vulnerable, “When we saw you that day in Wintertown, I thought that you wouldn’t want to see me, even if you knew who I was. Especially knowing who I was.”
“Why? Because perhaps I might be angry or upset? Because you were sneaking around the North in disguise, which is certainly enough cause for me to be furious!”

She paused, taking a deep breath while gazing at the face of the weirwood tree. He waited, knowing it was better to allow her to speak her piece.

“I’ve spent the last moons writing formal letters to an unknown man, hoping he was kinder than my other option,” Rhaegar watched emotions play across her features, vulnerability masked in hurt. “I sat there coming to terms with the idea of being caged in a land I don’t know by a man I don’t know. I fought through the pain of realizing that no matter what I do, I will never be free. No matter how much responsibility I take on, no matter how much I do for my House, I will still be sold to some Prince or Lord who makes the highest bid. I’ve spent the last moons wishing I’d never met Jay, so that I’d never know...”

Rhaegar reached out to try to comfort her, but she pulled back viciously, shaking her head.

“No, I may have left you at Queensgate, but you left me at Winterfell.” Her eyes were fire, burning his soul, “You left me to Robert Baratheon.”

Now it was his turn to flinch. He knew her accusation was unreasonable, but he couldn’t help but feel another pang of guilt at the words.

“Lyanna, please you have to believe me, I would have never left you with him if I’d known he would do what he did.” This time when he reached out, she didn’t pull back, “I would kill him for what he did, if I could.”

She let out a joyless chuckle but she let him pull her closer, “You would never be able to. Brandon would certainly beat you to it. Father and I were shocked he didn’t do it anyways.”

“I knew I liked Brandon for a reason.”

Her expression changed as she paused, her body inches from his. She looked so innocent as she looked up at him, those big wide eyes shining in the moonlight, so reminiscent of that night last year when he’d kissed her in the snow for the first time.
“So… you don’t think I’m ruined property?”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise at the question, “What?”

She looked down at her hands, secured in his own, “That is certainly how Robert portrayed me, tonight, during the feast… before… He said no other suitors will want me once it comes out that he…”

He brought his hand up to tilt her chin so that she was looking at him. He could see unshed tears glistening in the corners of her eyes, those eyes that were usually so strong, so playful, so defiant.

Yet again, he found himself wishing he could kill Robert, if for no other reason than for causing her pain.

His next words were serious, as he tried to convey his sincerity.

“Lyanna, even if I didn’t know you before, I would never think you were ruined. What my cousin did was repulsive - it was his action, not yours. Even if he had succeeded, which has been firmly refuted, I would not think of you as ruined. And I would never, and will never, think of you as property.”

She let out a trembling breath, some of the tension leaving her body as she looked back down at their entwined hands.

“I will never own you, Lyanna.”

He watched her, waiting for her next words.

When she looked back up at him, her face was calmer, that hint of curiosity returned.

“Is this real?” she asked in a small voice, almost a whisper, “Or is this just an elaborate dream my mind has created?”
He smiled softly, leaning a hair closer so that he could smell the perfume she still wore from dinner. He watched her eyes widen at the proximity.

“Do you often dream of me?” He heard her quick intake of breath and saw the light blush coloring her skin even in the dark, but he never took his eyes from hers. “Because almost every night, I dream of a certain Northern girl who showed me there was more to the North than endless snow.”

Her lips parted in silent surprise at the frankness of his words but she did not resist as he released her hands to gently cradle her face between his palms.

“Lyanna…” he whispered, feeling her hands coming to rest upon his chest as he bridged the space that remained between them.

He kept his eyes open as he paused just before their lips met, watching as her eyelids fluttered shut while he granted her one final opportunity to push him away.

Unable to resist any longer, he breached the final inches, brushing her lips with his. It seemed Lyanna was in no mood for simple gestures, as she followed his retreat, her fingers flexing in the fabric of his tunic as she sealed their lips together once more.

It was a fiery kiss, one which fed off of all the emotions spilled over the last minutes, the moons away and the pain they had endured, the dreams they had to hold onto in the darkest moments. It was his hands weaving in her hair, feeling the heft of her curls, it was her hands clutching his tunic keeping them flush against one another. It left them both breathless when they finally took a pause, though there remained but a smidge of space between them.

Her breaths fanned across his face as she gazed up at him, wonder and joy crinkling the edges of her eyes. His fingers danced lightly along her jawline, but before he could join their lips once more, a heavy body nudged against his side.

Giggles filled his ears as he glanced at the large animal who had made herself known once more.

“Nymeria!” Lyanna exclaimed, the name garbled by the giggles falling from her lips. She released her grip on him to address the black direwolf who stood staring at them. Unwilling to let go of her quite yet, he allowed one of his hands to rest on the small of her back.
At this angle, he could truly appreciate how large the wolf had grown - Nymeria and Tor were already larger than the typical wolf when he had seen them at Queensgate. But seeing the shorter stature Lyanna next to her enormous direwolf was certainly a sight to be seen. Their heads came to almost the same height, the direwolf’s body the size of a pony.

“I wasn’t sure you would bring them along.”

Lyanna sighed, “I did not intend to, but Nymeria insisted upon not being left. Tor is still roaming the Wolfswood though, keeping Father company. For once, he is listening to instruction.”

Rhaegar wondered at her wording, unable to ignore the way in which she spoke of the animals as if they were human. He watched Lyanna stroke Nymeria’s black fur, whispering words of comfort and love.

Suddenly, the wolf’s head turned towards the way he had come, prompting him to follow the creature’s gesture, the darkness of the forest greeting his gaze.

“Someone is coming.”

He turned back to Lyanna, hearing the certainty in her voice.

“How do you know?”

Lyanna merely gestured to Nymeria, watching as the animal padded away towards the path leading back towards Harrenhal.

“It’s a familiar scent, so it must be a friend.”

Rhaegar stared at her, wondering how Lyanna could possibly know such a thing. A faint memory of words spoken by Maester Aemon tickled the edge of his mind; he recalled ancient stories he had seen at Castle Black about humans who could bond so closely with animals, that they could inhabit the skin of the creature. Before he could consider this further, his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a familiar chuckle.
“Os will be terribly upset to have missed this reunion.”

Arthur’s figure materialized from among the trees, his white cloak having been replaced by a traveler’s cloak. But even that could not hide the glint of white armor or the greatsword hung across his back.

Rhaegar glanced back at Lyanna watching her mind work through the situation. He decided to aid her in making the connection.

“Lady Lyanna, may I present my best friend and longtime confidante, Ser Arthur Dayne.”

Lyanna laughed then, shaking her head.

“Thank the Gods, I’m glad I am not going crazy - last night, I could have sworn you were the long lost brother of a certain Maron I met last year.”

“Alas, I have to disappoint you, my Lady, but Maron and I are one and the same.”

“You shall hear no complaints from my lips. Gods, Benjen will be immensely jealous when he hears I spent a week with the Sword of the Morning.”

Arthur chuckled, “Perhaps we should keep the details of that adventure to ourselves awhile longer.”

“I think that would be best given my Father’s state.”

Lyanna frowned at the mention of the King, so Rhaegar quickly moved to pull her close again.

“I apologize for his words yesterday. I couldn’t stand to let him speak to you thus, but I didn’t want to reveal our previous encounter. Often my words only make situations worse.”

Lyanna grimaced but shook her head before looking between him and Arthur. “Nay, you are right. My brothers do not know of our acquaintance, and I cannot promise I would have taken it any better in the King’s presence than I did just now.”
“Ser Barriston said you were quite poised in the presence of the King, my Lady.”

“Ser Arthur, I do hope you will drop any pretense of me being an actual Lady and just call me Lyanna.”

“As my Lady wishes.”

Lyanna rolled her eyes at his friend before turning her gaze back to Rhaegar.

“I suppose we must return to the feast.”

“Not if you do not wish to. I would not mind some time alone with you after so long.”

She blushed again, shooting a glance towards where Arthur stood petting Nymeria. “Isn’t this… scandalous for the Crown Prince to be wooing a lady without her brothers to serve as guardian?”

Rhaegar leaned in closer, his lips grazing her ear, “If you wish it, Ser Arthur and I will gladly see you safely back to the watchful eye of your brothers, and we can be limited to supervised walks in the public eye.”

Giggles filled the air once more as Lyanna pushed him back so she could look up at him. Rhaegar couldn’t help but smile at the mischief shining in her eyes.

“I’ve never been much for the proper way of behaving. I am sure a knight as gallant as Ser Arthur Dayne will come to my aid should your Grace attempt anything unseemly.”

“Ah, but Arthur is my sworn sword, a Kingsguard, and my best friend. Do you truly feel safe with such a man?”

Arthur scoffed, but Lyanna’s voice answered quickly before his friend could intercede.
“I believe Ser Arthur is a smart man, who is capable of understanding a threat to his own person when he sees one. Considering he is doing his best to become friendly with the most dangerous party in this clearing, I have a feeling Ser Arthur is fully aware of the consequences should he not choose to prevent harm from reaching me. Even,” she pressed a finger into his chest, “if that harm comes from the Crown Prince of Westeros.”

“Lady Lyanna has the right of it, your Grace, I fear she has won the hand with her trusty companion.”

Nymeria let out a yip as if in response to Arthur’s proclamation, and Lyanna smiled up at him.

“Alas, then I am duly notified. Perhaps Arthur and Nymeria would allow us some time to re-acquaint ourselves?”

“I saw a clearing just beyond that stream, ‘tis out of sight from the weirwood’s stare yet still within yelling distance.”

Arthur bowed before gesturing for Nymeria to lead the way. The direwolf moved to lick her mistresses hand before lopping off in the direction of the clearing, a bemused Arthur following.

“We cannot linger long, Rhaegar. But perhaps a few minutes.”

Rhaegar nodded, watching the figure of his friend disappear among the trees. Movement drew his attention back to the woman next to him, who seemed to be moving away from him. He reached out to grab her arm, pulling her back towards him and offsetting her balance so that she stumbled into him with a yelp.

“I’m not ready to let you go yet.”

Lyanna chuckled, smiling up at him as she relaxed into his hold. “I was just going to move to sit down, but I shan’t move if you do not wish it.”

“I was rather hoping you would grant me a dance.”
“Your dance with Lady Lannister did not fulfill your needs for the evening?”

Rhaegar raised an eyebrow, “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you sound jealous.”

Lyanna scowled, before she moved her gaze away from him.

“Your Grace is welcome to bestow your attention on whomever you deem worthy.”

“It is kind of you to give me such permission.”

Lyanna’s eyes remained distant, her lips turned down into a frown.

“Lyanna,” he placed two fingers beneath her chin to turn her face back to him. “Lady Cersei requested the dance, in an effort to gain my interest. She has been doing it for months without success. I do believe she is getting desperate.”

“She is very beautiful.”

Rhaegar nodded, “She is. But there is more to a person than his or her looks.”

“As in family ties, money, connections.”

Rhaegar chuckled, “I was more thinking her love for my title, her desire for power, and her underlying cruelty.”

Lyanna gasped at this honesty, but he continued in the hopes of assuaging any fears she had about Cersei Lannister’s appeal to him.

“Cersei Lannister has grown up believing herself to be my future wife. But in this, she will be like every other woman at Court - disappointed.”
“So you don’t intend to marry her?”

“I did not know such gossip could reach the stoic Northerners.”

Lyanna shrugged, though a blush colored her cheeks. “I’ve heard talk here at the tournament.”

“If my mother has the right of it, it was Cersei herself who started those rumors. But they are nothing but that - rumors.”

“And what of Lady Dayne?”

“Ashara?”

Lyanna nodded, looking up at him with big eyes.

“Ashara is a dear friend of mine and the sister of my best friend. She has been a close confidante of my mother’s as well. The Dornish do not mind rumors of scandal as much as the rest of us. In fact, those rumors were her idea, to deter Court from discovering my true intentions.”

“So she was not . . . your mistress?”

Rhaegar chuckled, “No, she was not. Nor will she ever be.”

“Oh, good. I have never seen Ned so infatuated with a woman, it would have been a shame for him to have to compete with you.”

“He will likely have to compete with every other man in Westeros, though.”

“Aye, she is beautiful,” Lyanna sighed, “I hope she actually likes Ned and is not playing with his heart.”
“I do not think Ashara would do such a thing. Your brother is truly interested in her?”

“So much so that I think he would stare at her all day, if it were appropriate. As it is, I’m amazed he has spoken more than two words in her presence.”

“A beautiful and strong-willed woman can be an intimidating thing. Though he should have experience having been around you.”

Lyanna laughed, shaking her head. “Strong-willed I may be, but I am not half so beautiful as Lady Ashara.”

“You are wrong.”

“What?”

Rhaegar tucked a loose curl behind her ear, before leaning down to whisper in her ear. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Now dance with me, my beautiful wildling.”

Chapter End Notes

:) :) :)

I just love these tournament chapters - there are plenty of fun ones to come! But WOW they get long fast LOL.

Cersei’s little song - if you're not familiar - is called the Rains of Castamere, which immortalizes Tywin's destruction of House Reyne.

Thank you as always to my faithful readers; you guys are so amazing! Thank you for being patient with me <3 I think I finally responded to all of the comments from the last chapter last night ha!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!