The Shadow Queen
by J_L_Hynde

Summary

The world consists of two things: Light and Objects. Light passes through everything except Objects. Objects block, bend, and filter the Light and in their wake create shadows. But shadows don't really exist. They are tricks—illusions of the Light and Object. In the same manner, I was born as the object Sansa Stark—a girl of noble birth and daughter of the Lord Eddard Stark and Lady Catelyn Stark of Winterfell—but that wasn't who I've always been. I had another name, another body, another life—a life that is so long gone that it feels like a dream, but I still remember. I've seen into the void of death. I've been to the angles of space outside of time. I've spoken to that thing—that shadow—which exists there and it showed me the truth. I am a shadow. We are all shadows. But shadows like the angles of space don't exist which means that I don't exist. It means that no one exists. Life is nothing more or less than what you choose to see.

This is a retelling of Sansa's story from a wholly different perspective.

Notes

I'm starting another fic. I know, I know—I have too many already. Fair warning these chapters are going to be short and sporadic at best. Don't expect consistent updates.
I’ll be the first to admit that I’m not a perfect person. I have a rather twisted personality and I can be vindictive, resentful, and altogether a wrathful and unforgiving soul. My views on morality are skewed at best. At worst I am a borderline sociopath with little to no sympathy for the plight of others. That being said, at least I was better than the piece of human excrement sitting beside me in court today.

Charles Humphries Junior, or CJ as he preferred to be called, was a real piece of work. He easily encompassed everything that I disliked about the upper class: spoiled, cowardly, and obnoxiously full of himself in spite of having nothing to boast about that wasn’t coasting on the coattails of his father’s political accomplishments. His one redeeming quality was that he was a salesman at heart, silver-tongued and outwardly charming as they come. It was too bad he failed to properly utilize his talents by spending more time with his fraternity brothers throwing house parties than in the classroom. Perhaps had he spent more time in class, he may have learned a thing or two about dealing narcotics without being caught. Rule number one of being a drug dealer: Don’t partake of your own stash. Rule number two should’ve been: Don’t deal with rapists. It was only a matter of time before he was also implicated in their crimes and accused of assaulting those girls as well.

There were three of them. All of them minors. Each one drugged and raped by multiple assailants. And, of course, he was guilty. I knew it. He knew it. His Senator father knew it too.

You might be wondering how I could possibly defend someone who I knew as guilty? I suppose for the average individual it would be quite the moral dilemma...however if you want to be a great lawyer, or at the very least a competent one, you had to let go of such ideas of morality. As long as I was being paid, it didn’t matter to me whether or not my client was guilty. If a client stood accused of killing my own father, I wouldn’t have cared any more than I do now. Why? Because I’m a professional. And besides, the man would’ve deserved it. Whether or not this makes me a good person is debatable. I’m sure to many I’m wholly detestable. Yet I personally never espouse to the idea that you’re an evil person if you ignore people doing evil things. If anything you’re simply inactive, a third-party observer, a conscientious objector. Do you punish people who merely watch terrible things on the news and do nothing to stop them? Of course not. So why condemn a lawyer for doing their job—let alone doing their job well?

Waiting for the jury's verdict was nothing more than a formality. The evidence convicting CJ of any of the assault crimes was circumstantial at best. He was smart enough to know how to use a condom. And the girls were too incapacitated to identify him. He was only implicated at all because a witness saw him dealing at the party that the three girls had crashed. But without any clear testimony from any of the girls and none of his fraternity brothers’ contradicting stories, no one could place him with them at the time when the assault took place. Only the sixty-second video clip of the assaults placed CJ at the scene and that clip was deleted—I made sure of it.
In order to climb to the top, there had to be a few innocent bystanders as casualties. This case was a means to an end. Nothing more, nothing less. The goal, of course, being appointed to partner at the largest and influential law firm in the country. In time, I would get there and then it would be a straight shot from there to Attorney General, then the Supreme Court.

I knew better than to think that it would be that easy. But it was a step in the right direction. The verdict on the assault charges came back as I predicted, however, because CJ was only found with small amounts of heroin, and this was only his first offense, he able to scrape by with a conditional discharge. Not everyone was happy with that decision.

“This is outrageous!” A young man jumped up from the prosecutor’s side. I recognized his mop of brown shaggy hair and freckled complexion. It was the brother of one of the victims, Stacy Meyers. His name was Stephen or Steven—or maybe Stewart? “He did it! He did it!”

“Young man! I will not have you creating a scene in my courtroom. Contain yourself or I’ll have you held in contempt,” The judge boomed back.

Beside him, his sister, a frail timid little thing, put her hands on his arm. “Steven quiet,” she said. “You’re not helping anything.” He looked at her again then at the judge before grudgingly taking his seat again.

Good. Listen to your sister boy. She’s the smart one here. The judge banged his gavel, dismissing the court. Charles Humphries Senior looked somewhat displeased when CJ stood up from his seat. “Hopefully this experience has taught you something,” he said.

“It has…”

“Good.”

The Senator was far too lenient. It was bound to bite him in the ass during his reelection. “Thank you for all your hard work.” He addressed me now and I nodded.

“Of course, Senator Humphries. It’s my job.”

We shook hands; first, the father, then the son and they left soon after. I proceeded to gather up all my materials. It was good it was over and done with. I was growing bored with this case and these
people. But now I had a state senator who owed me a favor. Favors were such useful things. More so than money. A favor from the right person at the right time had the power to tilt the scales to your advantage.

As I left, Steven Meyers was staring at me, his expression contemptuous. Hopefully, he doesn’t do anything reckless. Most people would behave rationally in this scenario—most people, but not all. Rationalism and pragmatism are not the only things that drive human action. At our core, we are all still beasts—slaves to our baser instincts—without care for logic. No matter how much we believe we’ve modernized, no matter what social constructs we pledge to live by, humans will continue to prioritize emotion over logic. When a human being is overcome with hatred they’ll say things, do things, without any concern for self-interest of reason regardless of what they might stand to gain or lose. I saw that hatred in his eyes. There was no doubting it, he blamed me.

Like I said before, I am a heartless bastard. No doubt about it. Love me or hate me, the only thing that matters is that I win.

Should’ve known better…

Steven was the type of person who acts on his emotions and takes revenge. Two months later, while awaiting the light rail that would take me back home, Steven—the impulsive child—shoved me off the platform.

His face looked as it did then—twisted, distorted into something animalistic, his hatred turning him rabid. I couldn’t look away. The image was so visceral that the moment before I hit the tracks seemed to stretch for an eternity. They say when you die your life flashes before your eyes. That’s a lie. When you’re in your final moments, there is no light at the end of the tunnel, there is only you—frozen, suspended at that moment, falling to your death.

“This is getting very tiresome.”

Who said that?

I looked away boy’s face to the light rail operator. Through the glass of the windshield, his face was somber and expressionless. Were his lips moving or did I imagine it?

“Humans think they’re all-knowing but they’ve lost sight of what’s right and what’s wrong.”
No, I’m certain didn’t imagine it.

“They think the laws of the universe don’t apply to them.”

What is this man prattling on about?

“Humans no longer empathize with others and they’ve renounced their faith in their mighty creator.”

A creator? This is a bad joke, right?

“This is no joke,” the light rail operator glowered at me.

You’re asking me to believe that not only is god a real entity but that he also happened to stop time at the moment before my death in order to speak to me through a balding, overweight, middle-aged light rail operator?

“That’s correct.”

Bullshit. This is some kind of near-death hallucination. I’m an atheist. I don’t believe in God. I believe in logic and reason. Besides, why should I trust you? Aren’t God and the devil supposed to inhabit the spiritual world? Hypothetically, if a god did exist I doubt he’d do anything this absurd to get a point across. So you must be someone else…

“Like the devil?”

Or perhaps something similar. I caught sight of the man’s name tag. “I think I’ll call you Terry.”

“You really don’t want to believe? Even when a miracle is happening right in front of your eyes?”

This isn’t the time to lecture me on my lack of faith. Besides, I’m a bureaucrat—if you wanted to get my attention, you should’ve filed a subpoena. Perhaps then I would’ve taken you more seriously.
Terry’s eyes narrowed. “As the being that controls the cycle of reincarnation, there are firm rules I abide by. However, I’ll make an exception for you.”

Wait. Hold on. Did you say reincarnation? You mean after we die, we’re born again?

“That’s no longer your concern,” Terry said.

No—wait! Are you not familiar with the principle of full disclosure? Also if you’re really a god, shouldn’t you hold to your own rules and avoid heat-of-the-moment decisions?

“I manage over seven billion people on this planet,” Terry sighed. “I’m completely overworked as it is. Honestly, reincarnating people without any faith is a waste of my time.”

I hate to tell you this but being overworked is a sign of a flawed business model. You’ve failed to sufficiently analyze your clients’ needs. Of course, there is no faith in a world full of advanced science where almost everyone’s core needs are met. Here you only matter to the weak and desperate who look to someone to cling to when times get hard. An individual like me would never need you.

Terry hummed introspectively. “So you’re saying you have no faith because of the world you are in, all your needs are met here through technology, you have a high social class, and you’ve never been put in dire straights?”

Umm...well, technically—But hold on, I think you’re getting the wrong idea—

“What if I put you in dire straights? Do you think then your faith in me will be awakened?”

I don’t like where this is going—Hold on! Let’s not be hasty now. I don’t want to break any rules about reincarnation or whatever you said.

“Try to survive as long as you can.”
Wait!

“If you die again—”

Nonononono—

“—There will be no further reincarnations for you—”

*Wait! Wait! I said*—

“Good luck.”

*No!*
There are times that it feels like a dream. That memory, both so visceral and so distant… There are times I forget that I don’t belong here.

“Fine work as always. Well done!” Septa Mordane knelt before me to admire the needlework in my hands, temporarily distracting me. She traced a wrinkled finger over the stitching of vines with a smile. “I love the detail that you’ve managed to get with these flowers,” she said.

I smiled back and tried, as best I could, to look modest. “Thank you. But I fear that the colors are off. I ran out of the thread I was using before and the one I’m using now doesn’t quite match up.”

She shook her head causing the ends of her white headdress to rustle. “No, no. I can barely notice it,” she assured me. The old crone smiled again before she stood and retook her seat next to my younger sister, Arya. My Septa was a kind, simple-minded old woman, strict when need be, but ultimately loyal to my family and house Stark. That’s what I was called now. Stark. Sansa Stark of Winterfell to be precise.

After meeting Terry and the subsequent events that followed, I found myself reborn into a Tolkien-esque fantasy world set in the middle ages. I was born during end of spring, before the long summer, in the Northern territory of a country called Westeros at the castle of Winterfell. I was the eldest daughter of Catelyn Tully of house Stark and Eddard Stark Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. I had three brothers—Well, four if you counted Jon Snow, albeit no one ever counted a bastard— Robb, Brandon, and Rickon as well as my little sister, Arya.

And yet, I wasn’t convinced this was my new life. Or even a new life at all. What if this was just some near-death hallucination like I said before? What if everything that happen after the split second I was shoved in front that train was just simply the neurons in my brain firing one last time? I must say it seemed a far more reasonable explanation than the alternative. I had trouble believing...
that if the latter were real, there would be no way Terry would put me in a family with such a high social class. I should’ve been an orphan born in the gutters, living on the streets, and eating pigeons to survive. He said he would put me in dire straights...and yet I have every modern comfort this world would allow.

Alternately, if this world is imaginary, if I am to believe that I am the only real thing that exists here, then all these people, every single one, is nothing more than a projection of my own subconscious. They are shadows. Shadows have no feelings, no emotions. It was the basic idea of how a narcissist views the world. But am I a narcissist? I wasn’t convinced I was. And yet…

Arya sat quietly in her chair, frowning over her needlework. Wisp of brown hair fell on her face as she worked. I knew she would rather be anywhere else. Arya detested needlework and any activity that was befitting a daughter of a Lord. Perhaps that’s why the little beast and I didn’t get along. I excelled in everything she didn’t: reading, writing, singing, dancing, and, of course, needlework. There was also the small fact that Arya and I were constantly compared to one another in regards to our looks. Arya was the ugly one, the plain one, the one who took the most after our father, and, according to the insufferable Jeyne Poole, she had a horse face. Contrariwise, I took after our mother. I heard constantly about how I had the infamous Tully coloring—auburn hair and piercing blue eyes—as well as our mothers high cheekbones. People told me I would grow up to be a beautiful Northern Lady. They never said such things to Arya as far as I knew.

I wonder. Is she a shadow? Does she think as I do? Does she feel as I do? If I stabbed her with this needle would she bleed as I do? I do wonder...

Then there is a third theory that I scarcely want to consider. I am speaking in the case of the Chinese philosopher known as Zhuang Zhou. One day, Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly. For hours he fluttered to and fro until he forgot he was Zhuang Zhou. When he awoke he was Zhuang Zhou again, but in that moment he wasn’t sure. Was he Zhuang Zhou who dreamt he was a butterfly or, perhaps more frightening still, a butterfly who was dreaming about being Zhuang Zhou? Am I dreaming I’m Sansa Stark? Am I Sansa Stark who dreamt I was someone else?

A delusion starts like any other idea, as an egg. Identical on the outside, perfectly formed. From the shell you’d never guess anything was amiss and you wouldn’t know for sure until the egg was cracked open. It’s what’s inside the egg that matters. Let’s go on a little thought experiment here—One day, Joshua P, was taking a leisurely stroll through a park. As he is walking, he trips over a patch of uneven sidewalk. Logically, he should’ve assumed he tripped because of the sidewalk and yet, for the briefest moment, he considers that his left leg didn’t belong to him.

This is how it begins. The leg was clearly Joshua’s. It was attached to his body, and when he pricked it, he felt pain. Yet despite that, the idea grew. Such is the power of an idea. With every day that passed, Joshua became more and more certain that this was not his leg. So logically, he decided he didn’t want it anymore and went to the hardware store to buy a saw.
You see, an idea alone isn’t enough. People have ideas all the time, random thoughts, and theories. Most of them die before they can grow into anything more. For a delusion to thrive, other, more rational ideas have to thus be rejected. Only then can the delusion blossom.

I felt like I was Sansa Stark. This body moved when I wanted it to. I felt pain when I injured it. And yet, much in the case of Joshua P., there was this idea that this was not my body. I am not Sansa Stark, right? Or am I really Sansa Stark? Was I ever anyone else? Is China even a real place? Was Zhuang Zou a figment of my imagination? Is this world the real one or the fake one? Is Arya the shadow or am I?

These questions were beginning to churn my stomach. I brought my finger up to my mouth and licked it. It tastes like blood. But is it, though?


I popped my finger out of my mouth and smiled at her. “It’s only a little prick,” I said. “I’m fine.” I then showed her my finger that had already stopped its bleeding.

“You should still have that cleaned and bandaged, Lady Sansa,” Septa Mordane urged. She probably right. Knowing me, there’s a chance that I’d contract some flesh-eating virus and that would be it. Terry wins two to zero.

I put my needlework aside for now. “You’re right Septa. Please excuse me, Jeyne, Sister.” Arya rolled her eyes when she was addressed.

“You want me to come with you,” Jeyne offered.

Please don’t. I can’t take any more of your incessant prattle. I shook my head, “No, it’s alright. You stay here Jeyne,” I said.

“Just go already,” Arya glared. Mother could stand to discipline her more. Such blatant insolence was bound to get her in trouble one of these days. It’s not like she’d take any lessons from me. Shame.
I turned and left the room without another word. As I walked, my thoughts soon returned back to my previous ponderings. Since I am unable to truly determine what is real and what isn’t, I’m left with a bit of a dilemma. I don’t want to believe that what happened with Terry happened, but to assume otherwise would put me in a state of cognitive dissonance and dissociation. That being said, to remain in such a state would slowly but surely drive me mad. There’s a chance that I already could be mad in my thirteen years in this world. Therefore, in order for me to keep my sanity, or whatever remains of it, I have to accept that there was a malevolent higher being that is pulling all the strings.

It wasn’t God. Oh, no. Terry wasn’t Jesus. He was something else. Someone far more sinister sent to fuck with me. Well, I welcome him to try. You hear me, Terry. Give it your best shot! At the end of this only one of us will be standing. I don’t care if I have to burn down the whole world to get to you, I will. I promise you that.
2 chapters in 1 day—Whoohoo! This is another short chapter, but with a bit of dialogue. Hopefully, it sheds a little more light on Sansa's friendship with Jaine Poole as well as how Lady got her name.

“She’s so darling,” Jeyne cooed crouching down to pet the squirming pup in my arms. Father had just given me this direwolf pup after finding a litter of them in the forest. There were six of them in total, one for each of Eddard Stark’s children, including the bastard. I was given one of the females of the litter while Arya had been given the other. My pup was a stormy grey color with beautiful golden eyes. “What’s her name?” Jeyne asked.

“She doesn’t have one,” I told her. I had yet to come up with something appropriate. My siblings had already named their direwolves. Robb’s was Greywind, Arya’s Nymeria, Bran’s Summer, Rickon named his, simply enough, Shaggy Dog, and then there was Ghost the runt of the litter that Jon Snow received. I suppose it was a fitting, Ghost was the only one out of the litter than was pure white, what better to match the name Snow.

“She has to have a name,” the girl persisted while I stepped aside her to let the pup run around.

We were in my bedchambers, a place we often retreated to ‘play’. Jeyne was the only one who ever played, while I sat and read by the fireplace. We had worked out an arrangement years ago and Jeyne never seemed to mind it. She was allowed to play with all my dolls that went untouched by me. Why my parents kept insisting on buying me dolls, I’d never know. I had stopped playing with them as soon as I had learned to read the common tongue. From that moment on, I always had a book on hand or close by.

I sat down by the hearth and picked up one the tomes on the table there. Jeyne still stood there waiting for me to respond. She had her small hands on the hips of her grey dress and her dark eyes were steely, determined. She wasn’t going to let this go. “Alright, then Bones,” I said.

“Bones?” Jeyne made a face. “You can’t call her Bones.”

“Why not? She’s my pup. Besides, she seems to like them.”
“But that’s the name of a boy dog,” she argued. “She’s a girl. And a direwolf, not some mutt the groundskeeper feeds with kitchen slops. She’s the sigil of House Stark and she should have a name befitting a highborn lady—Oh! I know, what if you called her Lady?”

“Lady?” I thought about it. It had potential. It was short. Good for training. Plus it had the added benefit of shutting Jeyne up for the time being. “Alright. That’s a better name than Shaggy Dog,” I said.

Jeyne beamed widely and I looked away to open my book. You might think that I loathed Jeyne’s company, truly I wouldn’t blame you, considering how I often think of her. But she’s never done me any ill will. I didn’t hate her personally. I simply despise children; the irony isn’t lost on me having admitted that. My parents tried to force other playmates on me before, however, they were all twice as insufferable as Jeyne. At least Jeyne knew when to speak and when to leave me alone. It made her tolerable, and on the best days, I may be inclined to say I had some affection for her.

“How have you heard the news?”

Of course, that affection quickly ends as soon as she opens her mouth. “What news?”

“You haven’t heard?”

There were times it was difficult for me not to look at her like she was stupid. This was one of those times. “I guess not,” I said.

“Derek, the kitchen boy, told me that the King is riding for Winterfell,” she said as she crossed the room and sat beside me, uninvited. I tried not to let my annoyance show on my face. “He says that Lady Stark is all in a fuss preparing some huge feast.”

“Why?”

“For the King and Queen,” she said. “I heard he’s coming with his entire family. That includes the Princes, Joffery and Tommen, and Princess Myrcella as well as the Queen’s brothers.”

She misunderstood my question. “No, why is King Robert coming to Winterfell specifically?”
“Oh,” Jeyne’s expression changed and she frowned, “Jon Aryn died.”

“He did? How?”

Jeyne shrugged. “I don’t know. He was old,” she said.

“What about my aunt Lysa? Is she coming too now that her husband is dead? And is she bringing Robin?”

“Sorry,” Jeyne shook her head, “I haven’t heard anything about them.”

Jon Aryn had been the Hand of the King. In medieval-speak, that meant that he was the one to run the country while King Robert Baratheon drank and whored himself to an early grave. If he died and King Robert decided to come to Winterfell all the way from the capital of King's Landing, then that would mean he is going to ask my father to be his new Hand. King Robert and Eddard Stark had history together. They fought side by side in the Battle of the Trident; went to war to save my aunt Lyanna from Prince Rhaegar. They would’ve been brothers by marriage had Lyanna not died during Robert’s Rebellion. There’s no way my father would decline the King’s request, not that he could even if he wanted to, and he wouldn’t want to not if his friend needed him.

“This will change things.”

“How so?” Jeyne looked at me curiously.

“Think Jeyne,” I told her. “Why would the King come all this way from King’s Landing with such a large entourage after Jon Aryn died?”

“Well, both King Robert and Lord Stark were Jon Aryn’s wards. They were close to the man and —”

I sighed. She really is slow, isn’t she? “No, Jeyne. Think.” I fixed her with a look and her expression twisted up as she pondered it out. It felt like it took her at least five minutes before realization dawned on her and she gasped.
"The King wants to ask Lord Stark to become the new Hand!"

I nodded.

"But then what would that mean?" She wondered. "Are you going back to King’s Landing too?"

"It’s possible. Very likely, in fact.” If Prince Joffrey is coming, then it’s very likely that King Robert has plans to propose a betrothal between House Stark and House Baratheon. Since I’m the eldest daughter, I would likely be the one being sold off. If betrothed to Joffrey Baratheon, I’d have to leave for King’s Landing, there’s no other choice.

"But you can’t leave!" Jeyne looked at me with misty brown eyes. "If you leave, then-then what would happen to us?"

"I don’t know," I said because I truly didn’t know. "We can send ravens."

The girl’s expression turned from sadness to anger at my flat tone. "How are you so calm about this? Why aren’t you upset? You’re going to be leaving Winterfell! Your home."

"And what? It’s not like I’d miss anything here."

"Ugh! You’re unbelievable!" Jeyne stood up angrily and stomped across my chambers to the door.

"Wait. Why are you so upset?" I asked.

She whirled around, her black braids swing violently, and fixed me with a withering glare. "You know Sansa, sometimes you’re a really horrible person."

What is that supposed to mean? She’s saying it like I don’t already know that. I didn’t have the chance to say anything more before she opened the door and slammed it behind her. Teenage girls are so damn dramatic.

Lady whined at me. "Oh, don't get me that look," I said. The last thing I need is judgment from a
dog.
The Burdens We Must Bear

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments on this fic so far. This chapter will give some more insight into Sansa’s childhood as well as the protagonists past life. The arrival of the royal party will take place in the next chapter. Enjoy.

Jeyne refused to speak to me for two whole weeks after our subsequent argument—Could you even call it an argument? Blowing up and storming out of the room wasn’t much of an argument if you asked me. Nevertheless, Jeyne seemed to have taken great offense to what I had said avoiding me at meals and choosing to sit with Laria Cassel and Palla Rees during our embroidery lessons. Just as well, I suppose if she could enjoy the company of two insipid dimwitted girls, then she was welcome to do whatever she wished with them. The only downside is that I was left alone with Arya during these times and that was vexing.

When I could, most of my time was spent training Lady, studying in my chambers, or practicing my vielle in the library. Mother suggested that I play for King Robert and Queen Cersei at the feast and unfortunately I was in no position to refuse. So I was currently in Winterfell’s library, rehearsing a rendition of the Mother’s Hymn per Lady Stark’s request.

My musical aptitude was one of the few traits that I managed to carry over from my past life. My previous mother believed that music made children more cultured and refined. Tatiana would have me play the violin until I developed blisters and calluses, and those blisters cracked open to bleed and scab over. She said that there are two types of pain in life. The first was a useless pain that’s only suffering, while the second was the pain to make you strong. “I am making you strong, mal’yish,” she used to say.

Funny how I could still vividly recall the sound of her voice. Sometimes the memories of my past life were so fuzzy and indistinct that it was as if I was watching them on a bad cable network. Sometimes they were only static mixed with brief flashes of pictures, sounds, smells, voices of ghosts and past conversations. Sometimes the memories felt as real as if I had never left them. Information was either dribs and drabs or a waterfall of knowledge. I couldn’t seem to remember my old name, and yet I still knew how to dismantle and clean a hunting rifle.

That was the most disorientating part of all this. That’s what made it feel like a dream.

A vielle was the precursor to the violin and was designed in much the same way. Except for slight differences in the size and shape of the body, the number of strings, and the curve of the bow
playing it was more or less the same. Perhaps that’s why I started playing it to being with. Maybe I was chasing that sense of familiarity in a world that was so foreign to me.

It had started off as nothing more than simple curiosity. At Winterfell, there were often people coming and going. At any given time the castle would be filled with soldiers, or men of the Night’s Watch, or bannermen and their families sworn to my father. At times Winterfell acted more like a hotel or hostel for Lords and Ladies traveling through the North than a castle, offering a place to escape the muddy roads and summer snows and to rest and relax before continuing on their way. Once in awhile, there’d even be artists; painters, and poets, and bards that would travel through Westeros and stay for a time at every castle they passed.

They always such interesting stories if you could manage to get them going. They told me things about the North and the South and the Riverlands that neither my parents nor Maester Luwin would’ve otherwise taught me. From them, I learned about the geography of the country, where were the most dangerous places to travel, how the smallfolk lived—a miserable provincial life of poverty—and gossip of the other prominent Houses. Combined with my academic studies, I was soon able to learn about much of this world and how it operates.

There was one of the bards that I favored quite a bit over the others. He’d always seem to stop by Winterfell on his way to or from White Harbor as he was constantly sailing in and out and around Westeros and across the Narrow Sea. He’d stay for only a few days and sing those songs about the Age of Heroes that Jeyne was constantly gushing about. The ones with charming princes and valiant knights such a Florian the Fool sweeping damsels off their feet. I found them too idealistic to be taken as anything more than propaganda. Still, he had a rather nice voice and he played the vielle with an enthusiasm that I don't often see in people.

One day, I remember, I was young, no older than two or three years old, and I had wanted to test a theory. For years I had been swaying wildly between what was real and what wasn’t and I had proposed, as a means of figuring out which was which, to test my skill on the vielle. I thought that if my past life had in fact been a dream, there would be no way I’d be able to play it, much less play a song that only I had ever heard before. To my own surprise and the bard’s, I managed to bumble my way through the melody of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* before Lord and Lady Stark were thus pulled away from whatever it was they had been doing and watched me perform it again. Maester Luwin said that I was a prodigy and it was in the moment, I suppose, that Lord and Lady Stark fully realized my potential. They quickly had me begin my tutoring sessions with Maester Luwin.

I developed a reputation for being peculiarly precocious. Within a year, I surpassed my brothers, Robb and Jon, and my father’s ward, Theon Greyjoy, in our studies in spite of them all being four years my senior. The language barrier was the most difficult to overcome. The Common Tongue had similarities to English and the Latin languages, but it had some strange letters that resembled Greek and sounded more heavily accented. I was told it was a result of High Valyrian mixing with the native tongue when the Targarenys conquered Westeros. Everything else, I found, seemed to follow the same rules in mathematics and science. With my previous knowledge, it wasn’t difficult
to learn quickly and soon it led to a fair bit of teasing from the rest of my siblings when they realized they had no hope of catching up.

It was irksome, but I ignored it. And, eventually, my indifference led to their indifference. I couldn’t say that I was particularly close with any of my siblings. Perhaps if I had to choose a favorite it would’ve been Robb or maybe even Jon. Although, rarely did I ever show any special attention to the latter. He was a bastard after all, and mother was a jealous woman. Jealous of what, I’m not sure. But Catelyn always seemed to hold a special kind of contempt in her heart for Jon. I suppose it was because he reminded her that she was, at one time, inadequate to Eddard Stark so he went and fathered a bastard with some woman who was better.

Whatever the reason, it was safer for me to have a closer relationship with Robb. It was expected of me. And because I was often around them studying, it was easier to form a bond with them than the younger children. I also didn’t have much patience for children my own age or anyone younger.

The bow glided across the strings as I played the final note of the hymn. On the sofa, Lady lay, sprawled out with her front paws spread before her. She looked up at me as I finished, her head popping up from the cushion. After two weeks, she had nearly doubled in size from a large pup to a medium-sized dog.

How long before until she’s full grown?

They say direwolves can grow as large as a horse. I’d never seen them before, so I couldn’t say for sure whether or not that was an exaggeration, however with how things are looking I was beginning to fear that Lady may grow to such a monstrous size. A beast that size could easily overpower me and tear me limb from limb if not trained properly. I knew I had to take this seriously. I couldn’t be like my baby brother, Rickon, who at six years old was barely able to take care of himself much less a direwolf. Shaggy Dog was as wild and untrained as an undomesticated wolf and he was still only a pup. It wouldn’t be long until mother or father, likely mother, would order to have him put down for fear of Rickon’s safety.

That couldn’t happen to Lady. It would be such a waste of an opportunity. Nothing is ever more loyal than a dog. And a guard dog—a loyal direwolf—would be more beneficial to me than an armored bodyguard. Training a wolf was not dissimilar to training a dog. There had to be clear boundaries and a system of rewards and punishments. With that, training Lady was easy. She had already grasped some of the basic commands of sitting, laying down, and jumping up. I found that feeding Lady a little less than the others made her more responsive to the scraps of dried venison she received as rewards, and thus she was already becoming the best behaved of her littermates.

“Still practicing, I see.” Master Luwin entered the library, his chain jingling as he walked. He was
a balding older man, although blessed with robust health. In his arms, he carried a stack of heavy books. “Lady Stark asked me to come and fetch you for supper,” he said.

“Has It already been that long?” It seemed that it was only an hour ago that I had lunch.

“You’ve been here all afternoon.”

“Oh. I must’ve lost track of time,” I moved toward the small table where my vielle case sat. My parents had had it made special for my eighth nameday. It was a beautiful wooden box, ash tree protected by a hard resin, and soft padding of goose feathers and cotton lining inside to keep the instrument undamaged. It was one of the few gifts that they managed to get right. I placed the vielle and the bow inside the case, latching it shut, and turned back to him. “Has there been any more news on the King’s arrival?”

“There was a raven that arrived this afternoon,” the maester answered. He moved to dispose of some of the books he was carrying as he spoke. “It said that the King and his party are less than a day’s ride from Winterfell. They stopped at Castle Cerwyn and should be here sometime tomorrow around midday.”

“So tomorrow…” I sighed.

“Is there something troubling you?”

“Did I look troubled?” I considered it for a moment. I suppose I am troubled. I felt anxious. This new change that was coming, it didn’t sit well with me. And there was another thing about Jon Aryn’s death… I was told he died of a sudden illness. He was old to be sure, yet I heard that similarly to Maester Luwin, Lord Aryn was very fit for his age. The timing of it all seemed very peculiar.

“I suppose I am feeling anxious,” I said.

“Why?”

“It mostly preperformance jitters, but…”
The maester paused at one of the shelves and raised one of his thick, bushy eyebrows in my direction. “Go on,” he urged.

“It occurred to me that I’m getting older and I won’t be at Winterfell for much longer,” I told him.

“Getting older is a part of life. We cannot fight it any more than we could fight the change of seasons or the setting of the sun.” He placed the last book onto the shelf and moved to stand by the burning fireplace. The flames flickered and licked at the wood inside.

“How do you stand it?” I asked him. “Knowing that each day brings you closer and closer to your end… It’s daunting, isn’t it?”

Maester Luwin’s lips twitch upwards. “People don’t typically consider such ideas until they’re much older until they start to see the signs of age,” he said. “You’re too young to be worrying about it. You’re not even grown yet.”

“But I will be. Soon I’ll be a woman and I’ll have to marry and have children…”

I still wasn’t sure how I felt about that. The idea of marriage wasn’t pleasant, however the idea of childbirth was abhorrent.

“As is the custom,” Maester Luwin agreed. He was giving me a strange look, one that I couldn’t interpret. “You’re a Lady of House Stark. When the time is right your father will arrange a match between you and a Lord. If the gods are good, you’ll have children and lots of them and supply your husband with an heir. That’s the duty of a wife.”

It sounded like a bunch of total bullshit to me. Perhaps I’m comparing this world too much to the last one. I really didn’t appreciate it before; the convenience, the idea of equal opportunity, and democracy. “What if I don’t want to be a wife or a mother? What if I don’t want that responsibility?”

He took a moment to consider my words. “Some women who don’t wish to be wives or mothers join the Silent Sisters and devote themselves to the faith of the Seven—“

I scoffed. If there was any idea more distasteful than childbirth, it was that. I’d rather be married than be a nun.
“Although even as a septa, you wouldn’t be able to escape responsibility. It’s a part of growing up, much like aging, you can’t fight it nor run from it,” he said. “Whether you’re a wife of a Lord or a septa, you’ll still have to do your duty to serve.”

“Why is it women are always expected to serve?” I snipped. “It sounds like we’re no better than slaves. Like we’re property; bought and sold, used for political marriages or to be lusted after, and subjected and coerced into having children. Then what happens to us? We age, we’re no longer young and pretty, and we’re pushed aside like Old Nan and become nothing more than an old crone telling stories. I want more than that life. I don’t want to be limited in such a way.”

“You sound like Arya…”

“My sister isn’t wrong,” I said. “Can you really propose that men and women are treated fairly in this world? That one isn’t subjugated by the other?”

Maester Luwin didn’t respond—or more, I suppose, that he didn’t have a rebuttal to my argument. Instead, he looked grimly and asked, “Then what would you rather do?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? What would I rather do with the time I was given in this life? What would be the best method of utilizing it? “I want to study and invent and travel,” I said. “I don’t want to stay in one place popping out babies. There’s a whole world out there; so much of it is undiscovered and underdeveloped. I want to visit the Citadel and see the palaces of Yiti and find out what’s beyond the Sunset Sea.”

He looked sympathetic for a moment with his lips pressed firmly together and his brow furrowed in thought. “You would’ve done well at the Citadel,” he spoke solemnly. “I have never met anyone else so gifted at such a young age. I remember when you were a babe you never cried, yet you would scream and point when you wanted something. Then you were weaned you said your first word—milk.”

Ah, yes, my infant years—Those were frustrating times. It was a lot of lying around and doing nothing while incompetent nursemaids kept giving me the wrong things.

“Yo always knew what you wanted and you quickly learned how to get it. Yes, you would’ve gone far. Perhaps you would’ve even been the next grandmaester had you been born a boy,” the old man considered.
“But I wasn’t.” I met the maester’s dark eyes, frowning. “And so I’ve been doomed to a life of indentured servitude,” I sighed.

“We all have our burdens to bear,” he agreed. “Some burdens are heavier, some are lighter—yet we must bear them all the same. Now come,” he gestured with his hand, “your mother is waiting.”

I left the library with Lady on my heels and traveled to the dining hall for supper. I couldn’t say what I ate or whether or not I enjoyed it. I was too preoccupied with replaying my conversation with the maester. Mother sent all of us to bed early and warned us to rise early tomorrow to prepare for the arrival of the royal party.

I didn’t sleep well that night. It was the first sleepless night of many to follow.
The Royal Party

Chapter Notes

I managed to get another chapter done. My WiFi went out for a day so I had some time to work on it without distractions. I’m going to be somewhat busy for a time, so I can’t say when the next chapter will come out. Thank you for all the comments, kudos, and subscriptions!

The courtyard of Winterfell was in a state of organized chaos. People rushed this way and that, dogs were barking, horses were being led to the stables, and mother stood in the middle of it all conducting the chaos back into order. I stood there, where she instructed me to stand next to my brother Robb, watching this madness.

“It’s like watching animals freak out before a storm…”

Robb laughed. “Not far from it,” he agreed.

“Don’t understand why your mother is having us all get prissy for the king,” Theon remarked from behind me. He stood next to Jon who wasn’t looking at all happy about having his hair sheered. “He’s just a man. A fat man from what I hear.”

“A fat king.” Robb said pointedly. “Don’t forget it. Appearance is everything.”

“I heard he has a bastard in half the brothels in King’s Landing,” Theon said.

“Surprised it’s only half,” I said. Must be shooting blanks. King Robert had a reputation for being a whoremonger. Everyone knew it, although none dared to talk about it to his face.

“Sansa.” Robb gave me a reproachful look, but behind us, Theon snorted.

None of us had the chance to say anything more for Lady Stark soon returned with Bran and Rickon in tow. She posed them, in the same manner, she had posed the rest of us then left with instructions for Robb and me to watch them. “Make sure they don’t run off,” she said. “I have to go find Arya.”
“I saw the King! He’s got hundreds of people.” Bran was excited. It was the first time he’d seen such a large party visit Winterfell; not to mention such a prestigious one. “I saw soldiers on horses and the white cloaks of the king’s guard,” he said.

“I heard Jamie Lannister is coming,” I told him.

“The kingslayer? Really?”

“As well as Ser Barristan Selmy and the Hound,” I said.

“You’re better off talking to Ser Barristan than Ser Jamie,” Robb remarked. There was a hint of disdain in his tone when mentioning the latter; a trait he had picked up from father. Eddard Stark had no fondness for Lannisters, and Ser Jamie in particular, he thought to be especially dishonorable for stabbing King Aerys Targaryen II in the back after vowing to protect him as a member of the king’s guard. It didn’t matter that such action helped win the war for Robert’s Rebellion or that King Aerys was madder than a rabid dog and had both Grandfather and Uncle Brandon burned alive, Ser Jamie would always be a dishonorable man and that was that at least to my father.

In my past life, someone like Ser Jamie would’ve been considered a war hero for dethroning a dictator. But this was a different world. The rules were different. Kings were blessed by the gods and their word was law.

“Ser Barristan is said to be the best sword in the Seven Kingdoms,” I told Bran. “I’m sure he has some interesting stories to tell.”

Other people began to line up behind us. There was the steward, Jeyne’s father, and Maester Luwin and the kennelmaster as well as large majority of the household servants. Father and Mother soon joined us too, standing in between Robb and Rickon, with mother keeping the youngest closest to her side. She turned her blue eyes on me and asked, “Sansa where’s Arya? I sent her over here.”

I shrugged. “Haven’t seen her.” Just as I spoke, Arya ran past in her fur cape and a soldier’s helmet. Father stopped her, taking the helmet off her head to both Robb and Jon’s amusement, and passed it behind him to Ser Rodrick Cassel. He sent Arya to stand beside me and she shoved Bran out of her way.
The first king’s guard trotted through the gates on a pure white horse with silver hair. Then followed a young boy, no older than fifteen, dressed in dark red on a brown stallion. He had the Lannister features of his mother, blonde hair and a rather soft, almost feminine looking, face. Prince Joffrey, I suppose. Behind him was a guard dressed in black armor on a black steed with a helmet that looked like a snarling dog—that’d be the Hound.

They rode into the courtyard, looping around as they entered. The Prince looked at me and smiled rather smugly. Huh. Robb was looking between me and the Prince and didn’t look all too happy about the looks the younger boy was giving me. I’ll admit I wasn’t too pleased by it either, though I knew better than to show it.

The royal carriage came after a large cumbersome thing, with red flags of yellow lions and stags. Two more king’s guards followed it. Then finally came King Robert. King Robert was a bear of a man, black-haired and bearded and big, very big. It’s a wonder his horse managed to stand under the weight of such a large, burly fat man. The poor beast was probably dying.

Silently we all knelt in the dirt, bowing our heads. He dismounted from his horse and lumbered over to my father; his boots heavy on the ground. I peeked at him out of the corner of my eye. He had to be at least six feet tall if not half as wide. I suddenly felt pity for all the whores in King’s Landing. If that was the man that was flopping overtop of them, I’m amazed none of them weren’t crushed. He stood there in his brown leather and thick fur coat looking down at my father. With a twitch of his fingers, he gestured for him to stand and the rest of us followed.

“Your Grace,” Father greeted him while the King sized him up, looking him up and down frowning.

“You’ve gotten fat.”

Eddard Stark looked taken aback by the remark from the King. My mother didn’t look like she knew what to make of it either. Father quirked his brow and sized the King up incredulously. Of the two of them the King was by far fatter and he seemed to say this with his expression. King Robert cracked a smile and began to laugh along with my father and they hugged like brothers.

“Cat!” The King soon embraced my mother as well, kissing her cheek.

My mother smiled. “Your Grace.”
The King ruffled little Rickon’s hair before he turned back to my father. “Nine years I have not seen you. Where the hell have you been?”

“Guarding the North for you, Your Grace. Winterfell is yours—”

The doors to the royal carriage opened and came came the Queen and her two youngest children, all of them blonde-haired and wearing heavy fur cloaks. They were used to the Northern chill. Even in the summer, the North arctic winds chilled those from the South. Sometimes it even snowed, though it never stayed around for long. She came forward in her red dress looking over the group of us as she did.

She didn’t look impressed.

“Where’s the Imp?” Arya asked me.

“Not now,” I said.

“Who have we here? You must be Robb,” The King shook my brother’s hand. “Ah, you’re a pretty one,” he smiled at me then turned to Arya. “And your name is?”

Arya sized him up, squared her shoulders, and answered in a manner that almost sounded rude. “I’m Arya.”

This was going to be a long day if I was to babysit my sister and keep her from doing or saying anything inappropriate. Fortunately, the King didn’t seem to mind the clipped tone in which my sister spoke and proceeded down the line to Bran, who when prompted began flexing his arm. “You’ll be a soldier,” the King said.

“There’s Jamie Lannister, the Queen’s twin brother.” Arya pointed to a member of the king’s guard removing his helmet. Blond flouncy hair and a chiseled face belied another Lannister.

I pushed Arya’s hand down to her side. “Don’t point. It’s rude.”

The Queen came forward, offering my father her hand. He kissed it as was courtesy and both he
and my mother bowed in respect, “My Queen.”

“Take me to your crypt. I want to pay my respects!”

The Queen frowned at her husband. “We’ve been riding for a month, my love,” she said. “Surely the dead can wait.”

But the King didn’t listen, or more, he blatantly disregarded her and called for Lord Stark to come with him. Because Robert was King, my father was in no place to refuse and hurried to catch up with his old friend that was already halfway across the courtyard. For someone so large, he sure moved rather nimbly.

“Where’s the Imp?” Arya asked me again. However, this time I wasn’t the only one to hear it, for the Queen looked at both of us with a shrewd eye. If I could I would’ve smacked her right into a wall. “Where is he?”

“Would you shut up,” I hissed.

The Queen turned away from us and walked back to Ser Jamie. She said something to him, her voice and demeanor tense. Ser Jamie nodded and remounted his horse. I’m guessing the Queen asked him to go somewhere...The village perhaps? I could speculate as to why, although I was sure I had a fair idea considering who was missing from the royal procession.

The Queen’s youngest brother, Tyrion Lannister, more commonly known as the Imp, wasn’t in the procession. How did I know this in spite of never meeting the man? Well, it’s hard to miss a dwarf. Even riding on a horse, I would’ve spotted him immediately.

Arya was more or less disappointed by his absence. She heard stories about the Lannister half-man. I heard stories too. I heard that he was a grotesque, misshapen little man with vile inclinations. He had a reputation not dissimilar to King Robert in that he was a drunkard and a whoremonger. If he was in the village, then I had little doubt where he might be, visiting one of the brothels. Theon and Robb often snuck out during the night, without our parents' knowledge, to wet their dicks at these brothels. They even dragged a reluctant Jon with them once, although he didn’t seem to like it and never went again. I only knew about it because they used me as a cover, should mother and father awake and find them not in their chambers, which hadn’t ever happened up til now.
The Queen gathered her children and led them over to us. First, she introduced Joffrey who was overall charming and formal with my mother present. He smiled when he got to me, taking my hand to kiss it. “My lady, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve been looking forward to it,” he said.

“Have you?”

“I’ve heard stories about you.” He looked me up and down, his green eyes lingering on the curve of my hips. It was uncomfortable to be on the receiving end of such a look. I’ve been looked at like that before, more so in recent years as I’ve begun to physically develop more and more into a woman. It was usually Theon who looked at me in such a way, though I’ve caught others, kitchen boys, lordlings, men of the Night’s Watch, even some of my father’s own guards. Beauty was both a blessing and a curse, however in this world, it was more of a curse.

“I’m afraid to say most stories about me have been grossly exaggerated,” I said.

“I disagree. You’re far lovelier in person than people said.”

I laughed and looked away. “You’re quite charming yourself, my prince.”

“If my lady permits, I’d like to spend some time with you while I’m here at Winterfell,” he said.

“I’d like that very much. My family is hosting a feast tonight to honor yours. There’s going to be lots of food and wine and music and dancing. Should you chose to attend, I’d welcome your company,” I told him.

“Then it’s a plan. Save a dance for me, my lady,” he kissed my hand again, this time lingering longer. He left with the Queen and his siblings as the servants directed them to the guest quarters. As soon as they were out of earshot and sight, the sounds of disgust erupted from my siblings.

“Looks like Sansa’s got a crush,” Theon jested much to the chagrin of Robb and Jon.

“I think I’m going to hurl,” Arya gagged.
“That makes two of us,” Robb agreed. He looked at me perplexed as if he were seeing me for the first time.

“I was merely being diplomatic,” I said.

Robb scoffed. “To hell you were. You were flirting. Shamelessly,” he looked pointedly at the direction of where the prince disappeared.

“I suppose we know where he’s gonna stab it now—Ow!”

Jon slugged Theon in the arm. “Shut up,” he said.

We were fortunate mother had taken Rickon with her when she left or we would’ve all been boxed in the ears for talking so vulgarly in front of Arya and Bran. The latter of which was confused. “I don’t understand, who’s gonna stab what where?” He asked.

“It’s not important,” I told him. “Theon was making a bad joke.”

“Well, you’re all gross and I’m leaving before either of you say anything else!” Arya was matter-of-fact and took Bran’s hand, dragging him with her. “C’mon, you don’t want to stay back there.”

“You scared the children…”

“Seriously Sansa what are you up to?” Robb asked. He was skeptical of me. I could see it in his face. Jon and Theon were too. I didn’t blame them. Flirting was out of character for me and they knew me well enough to know that I never showed the slightest interest towards boys.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I feigned cluelessness. “I’m not up to anything.”

Of course, none of them believed me and rightfully so.
The dialogue for this one flowed out fairly quickly. I think this chapter gives an interesting look into Cat and Sansa's relationship as mother and daughter. Again thank you for all the kudos, comments, and subscriptions. I appreciate all the support.

“Will we be married soon or do we have to wait?” I asked my mother.

Mother met my eyes through the looking glass I was seated in front of. Her cool blues were darker in the light from the fireplace, more clouded in thought, her expression serious. “Your father hasn’t even said yes yet,” she told me.

We were discussing my betrothal to Prince Joffrey. As I suspected, King Robert had proposed the idea of uniting the Baratheon and Stark Houses hours earlier in the family crypt. Father then had discussed it with my mother and she subsequently has decided to discuss it with me before the feast.

“Do you think he’ll say no?” I sat still as my mother proceeded to twist and braid strands of my auburn hair into one of the fancier Northern styles. It reminded me somewhat of the way nordic Vikings used to wear their hair. It was a bit too ostentatious for my taste, but nowhere near as elaborate an updo as Queen Cersei wore from the South.

“Well, he’d have to leave home,” she said, her expression growing grimmer at the thought. “He’d have to leave me...and so would you.”

“You left your home to come here,” I countered, “and I would be queen someday, which would make father the second most powerful man in the kingdoms. Most lords wouldn’t pass up that opportunity.”

Catelyn begrudgingly conceded that point, “Although that may be true, your father isn’t most lords. He wouldn’t sell his daughters for a crown.”

“Because he’s an honorable man?” I asked.
“Yes.”

Honor… I scoffed at that word. Honor was simply nothing more than a kinder word for pride. It meant little to me. It was only a means for other more seemingly ‘virtuous’ persons to lord their superiority over those they consider lesser. I’ve never been much one for pride in any form. No, I have other vices.

“Honorable men are loyal, yes?” I reasoned. Mother nodded. “Then wouldn’t father be loyal to his friend? If King Robert desperately needs father to be Hand of the King, do you really think he’d decline? Have you ever known him to say no to King Robert?”

“Pass me that cord, Sansa,” Mother held out her hand for a strip of brown leather cord. I picked one off vanity table and hand it back. She tied the end of my braid with it and let it fall down my back, then taking more strands from the opposite side of my head, she began to braid again as she spoke. “Your father’s first loyalty is to his family.”

“Then why are we having this conversation?” I wondered.

“I wanted to hear your thoughts on it,” she told me. There was a sharp pain at my scalp as she pulled my hair tighter in her fingers. “Your father wouldn’t sell you off to a prince, even if it was requested by his friend, by his king, if you didn’t want this. Do you want this, Sansa?”

It seems I’ve reached a moral dilemma. Do I tell her the truth or do I lie? I didn't say anything immediately. There were certain advantages to be sure that would arise from this match. The main one being that I would be more or less a princess and later when King Robert passed and Prince Joffrey inherited the crown, a queen. I knew that royalty had more freedoms than nonroyalty, that as a woman I wouldn’t be nearly as limited as I am here. I would be able to finally leave Winterfell after years of requesting to go and see other communities in the North. Robb was often allowed, encouraged, and even forced to travel to the various castles for diplomatic meetings with the other Lords and Ladies of the North—it was his duty as heir to Winterfell. I, however, had never been allowed to accompany my father and brother. Mother said that a Lady’s place was at home managing the household. And as a Northern Lady, I was expected to serve as nothing more than a glorified steward when my husband was away.

I was barely even allowed to go into the village of Wintertown. Except for festivals and such, and even then I was still accompanied by a handful or so of my father’s guard and my siblings. I had more or less accepted this life of confinement within these castle walls. But I wished for more freedom to do as I pleased.
Marrying the prince would certainly be a way to get it, I suppose, and yet the prospect of having to marry in order to escape this place was dismal. Should I really trade one jailer for another? Would that be beneficial in the long term?

Can Prince Joffrey be trusted? Certainly not. No one can be. But can he be managed? Possibly.

“I’m not entirely sure. Prince Joffrey is a stranger to me.” I decided to go with the truth. After all, it was best that I didn’t sound too eager least my mother suspects me up to something. “He’s rather good looking and when I talked to him he was pleasant, but… Well, first impressions,” I said, “aren’t really good indicators of a man’s character, I’d say. Not to mention whether or not he’d be a good husband and I’m more worried he’d be like his father. I heard King Robert fathered a bastard at half the brothels in King’s Landing—”

My mother’s expression soured instantly and she stared me down through the looking glass. “Who told you that?” She asked, or more demanded.

“Sheon,” I said. There was no point in lying. It wasn’t my hide that was going to be tanned.

“That boy…” Catelyn hissed under her breath, looking extremely displeased. “Sansa those are rumors.”

“Rumors have merit sometimes,” I rebutted her simply, intentionally playing the devil’s advocate. “And can you really say that King Robert and Queen Cersei look happy together? I saw them today. I saw how she was ignored. What if, once we’re married, Joffrey won’t like me anymore? What if he’ll think I’m ugly after I give him sons? What if he thinks I’m ugly now?”

My mother scoffed. “Then he would be the stupidest prince that ever lived.” An affront to my beauty was also an affront to hers it seemed. I couldn’t allow my mother to get too worked up, however, as that would be detrimental to my plans. I wanted my parents to be suspicious enough of this betrothal to create an easy escape should things go south, but not suspicious to the point that they wouldn’t allow the betrothal to begin with. In this way, I’d be preparing myself for the worst depending on the kind of person Prince Joffrey was and I’d still manage to get myself to the capital.

Once there, I’d be able to network with other Lords and Ladies of prominent families. If this betrothal didn’t play out and I manipulated things just so, I might be able to convince my father to let me fostered with one of the other Houses in the South. The Hightowers would be ideal in Old
Town and close to the Citadel. I would be able to sneak away and visit the place and study the extensive collection of volumes there. Though I was under no misconception, things rarely worked out ideally, so as a backup I thought that the Martells of Dorne, with their cultural liberalism and progressive ideas on the treatment of women, would be a fine second choice.

“How old were you when you married father?” I asked suddenly, switching subjects to distract her. “It was an arranged marriage wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Originally, my intended was going to be your Uncle Brandon, however, he died as you well know.” My mother didn’t seem to suspect the sudden change in topic. I watched her cautious of how her eyes darken and fell closed at her words. She took a moment to collect herself and said, “We had brief courtship before his death and I fell in love with him, madly, the way girls often fall in love with a handsome boy. When he died I was devastated and I wept for weeks.”

“What was he like?” I was curious. No one ever spoke about Uncle Brandon or Grandfather beyond the facts of their death. I heard stories from Old Nan of Uncle Brandon as a boy when she’d confuse Bran for him, but otherwise nothing. It seemed, at least to me, that people avoided speaking of the ghosts that haunted Winterfell either for fear of being haunted themselves or respect for Lord and Lady Stark and oftentimes both. People as a whole were much more superstitious in this world, thus the dead and any subject pertaining to death wasn’t discussed.

I found that out the hard way when I scribbled down a verse poem of Emily Dickenson during my lessons.

*Because I could not stop for death,*

*He kindly stopped for me.*

*The carriage held just ourselves*

*And immortality.*

Maester Luwin’s reaction to it was less than encouraging. “Young children shouldn’t write such dark poems,” he had said.

The question brought a small smile to the corners of Catelyn’s mouth. “He wasn’t shy like your father,” she told me. “He was passionate, some would’ve called him hot-blooded, and when he wanted something he pursued it until he got it.”

“Sound like quite a man,” I said.
Mother nodded in agreement. “The first time I saw him was at a tourney at Harrenhal. Your uncle was an excellent jouster and even at such a young age, people often compared him to a centaur, however, he lost that tourney to Rhaegar Targaryen. I remember he was furious when the prince crowned your Aunt Lyanna as his queen of love and beauty, passing over his own wife, Princess Elia. He jumped to defend her honor as any good brother would. It was only later at Riverrun that I learned we were to be married.”

I have heard that story before in my history lessons with the maester. I didn’t know my mother had been there. But something else she said stood out to me as well. “So Uncle Brandon was an arranged marriage too?”

“Yes. House Tully has a long history of political marriages,” she said stretching her hand out for another cord, which I gave her. “It was expected of me and your Aunt Lysa.”

“I see. Then what happened? You didn’t marry Uncle Brandon?”

“I never got the chance,” Catelyn shook her head. “Prince Rhaegar stole Lyanna Stark and Robert Baratheon, your uncle, your father, and your grandfather started a war to get her back. He promised me we’d be wed after he got back from the war, although he never came back and I was wed to your father instead.”

War really is terrible, isn’t it? I myself didn’t look kindly on war which was together unproductive and wasteful. I found it inherently intolerable. Although, I consider myself fortunate to have been born into this world when I was. Robert’s Rebellion sounded awful from all accounts. It completely ripped the country apart and overhauled the government. No doubt if I had been an infant during such a time, I likely wouldn’t have lived long. Now the country of Westeros was in a period of relative peace and had been for the past seventeen years. I’m wondering why Terry decided to put me in this world at this time… Surely, there has to be a catch, right? As a rule of thumb, if something is too good to be true, it likely is.

“That must’ve been hard,” I said. “How old were you?”

“I was twelve when I was betrothed to Brandon—”

Shit. Twelve? Are you kidding me? That’s a literal child. I found myself disgusted yet again at this world and its treatment of women and children. How can you call a world like this just?
“—however I didn’t marry your father until I was sixteen. We didn’t love each other at first. In fact, our first years together were rather turbulent—

I suppose I have no place to judge. I am only thirteen. Not even a woman, by societal standards, because I haven’t had my blood yet—Fuck, I was not looking forward to that. I didn’t have those problems in my past life.

Mother let the next braid fall against my back bring me back to the subject at hand. “Marriage is not like the stories, Sansa,” she said, her voice as grim as her eyes. “Some couples don’t immediately love each other. It takes effort, lots of effort, and time for love to grow in a marriage.”

“Do you ever wish things had gone differently; that you had married Brandon instead of father?”

“No.” Mother’s answer was instant, firm and unchanging. “If I had married Brandon Stark, then I wouldn’t have had you or your siblings. And I wouldn’t trade any of you for anything.”

Still…

Catelyn stood behind me with her hands on my shoulders. She was smiling now, a loving mother’s smile. Tatianna never smiled at me like that as far as I remembered. It was strange seeing a smile like that. There were times when I wondered whether or not it was a lie on Catelyn’s part. Was she really happy with the life she lives? Or is she lying to herself because the truth would hurt far too much?

I didn’t know the answer. Although I wasn’t deluding myself into thinking she actually cared about me. She didn’t even know me. No one did. She only saw Sansa, her sweet, young, intelligent daughter. I was more than just Sansa. I was more than this life—and yet, no one would ever know that.

Sometimes the world felt to me like I was a person standing in a pond of goldfish. The fish swam around my ankles, under the water, unable to see what lay beyond their pond. But I saw it. I knew what lay beyond. It was a sea of goldfish ponds; each one small, insignificant, and indistinguishable from the rest. I wonder what the point of life is if it all just repeats? Why bother living? For what purpose should someone even try?

I had no answer. I doubt I ever will. Catelyn’s hand was warm under my own. I had to look away
and collect myself. “I think—” I paused searching for the right words. “I think I’d like to try to love Prince Joffrey. I think I could if father agreed to the betrothal. We may not get a better offer for my marriage. We should take it.”

Mother nodded in understanding. “If that’s what you think, I’ll tell your father,” she said. “Ultimately it’s his decision.”

“I know this is difficult for you, mother. Thank you.” I turned in my chair and smiled up at her.

“You’ve grown up to be such a kind beautiful, intelligent girl. I’m proud of you Sansa and the person you’re growing to be.” She stroked my face tenderly with her thumb. “You’ll make a fine queen someday.”

“You really think so?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind. You’d be the Good Queen Alysanne reborn.”

I laughed. What a ridiculous notion. The Good Queen Alysanne? Really? I was hardly that good of a person to be compared to one of the most beloved queens of all time. I wouldn’t grow to be someone who was beloved in this world. Feared? Yes. But beloved, my mind has been too warped for that.

“Sometimes I worry you put me on a pedestal,” I said. “You really shouldn’t though. I’m going to disappoint you eventually.”

Catelyn frowned. “Where ever did you get that idea?” She asked. “Sansa, you could never disappoint me. You’re my daughter. I’ll love you no matter what.”

“Family, duty, honor,” I said. “Family comes first.”

“Family comes first,” she agreed.
The Lost Prologue

Chapter Summary

Don't say I didn't warn you.

Chapter Notes

The next chapter is taking some time, but I wrote a prologue. I should put it at the beginning, but it'd mess up the order of the comments/reviews, so fuck it. I'm putting it right in the middle.

(Also I've changed the title of this fic and the summary to better reflect where I'm headed with my outlining of this story and what the theme of this story is going to be. I hope that didn't confuse you too much.)

The world consists of two things: Light and Objects.

Light is that which exists but is more or less invisible to the naked eye. The average human can only see a small range of this light and this small range is called, simply enough, visible light. But there is a light that exists which cannot be seen. I’m sure you’ve heard it, gamma rays, x-rays, ultraviolet, infrared, radio waves—even microwaves that heat your food—all of these are light in its various forms. There’s even light that doesn’t exist on that spectrum scale, light that has no words to describe it because no one has ever seen it or is capable of seeing it. Light exists always. Nothing can destroy light. It is constant.

Objects are that which controls the light. It bends, it blocks, it filters, and reflects the light however it deems fit. Objects pay a steep price for controlling light. Objects are solid. They are stable unable to pass through one another or disappear with the blink of an eye. They cannot simply flow and exist the way light can. They are limited by their own physical characteristics and thusly are bound to always be visible to the naked eye.

The interaction between light and object creates shadows. But shadows do not really exist. They are tricks—illusions of the light and object. They shift and they change and evolve with the object that casts the shadow. At times shadows can look almost alive, dancing, and eating, and creeping forward. But shadows aren’t alive. Shadows don’t feel. Shadows are Shadows and every shadow is the same shadow responding to a different environment.
In the same manner of shadows, this illusion of light and object, I was born as the object Sansa Stark—a girl of noble birth, the daughter of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn of House Stark—but that wasn’t who I have always been. Once, I had another name, another body, another life—A life that is so long gone that it feels like a dream, but I still remember. I remember the smells and the sounds, and the people—family, friends, enemies—I remember. Sometimes I remember so vividly that it almost feels like the life I am living now is the dream.

Am I dreaming? Am I living? Which is it?

I don’t think I know anymore. Or perhaps I do.

I’ve seen into the void of death. I’ve been to the angles of space outside of time. I’ve spoken to that thing—that shadow—which exists there and it showed me the truth.

I am a shadow.

We are all shadows. But shadows, as I said, don’t really exist. They are like the angles of space between time, only visible because of two intercrossing planes, which means they don’t exist. That means that I don’t exist. It means no one exists.

Life is nothing more than what you choose to see. The distinction between what is and what isn’t is nothing more than a stubbornly persistent illusion.

But don’t take my word for it. Let me tell you my story. But first, a warning.

A great philosopher once wrote; “In times of peace the warlike man attacks himself.” This is the root of all our problems, and by this, I mean we. We are the root of all our problems, our confusion, our anger, our fear of things we do not understand. To be human, in other words, is to be ignorant. Before we continue, I want you to know what you’d be sacrificing to know the truth: your ignorance and, by extension, your humanity. And I implore you to turn back now if the thought of losing your humanity gives you any pause, for it should for the rational being, and know that I will not hold it against you if you choose to follow my advice.

There was a time that I wished someone had bothered to give me that advice. Perhaps if they had I would’ve managed to save myself this misery. Perhaps not. Who could say for sure? I know I would’ve appreciated the choice had I been given one, but I wonder if my curiosity would have won out, in the end, resulting in the same fate? In that case, I’m going to say what I’d say to my
curious past self; “Be cautious. Think it through before you proceed. Once you go into the
labyrinth, once you’ve seen into the shadows, once you’ve known the truth know that there will be
no going back to a time before you knew what you knew. There is only forward—forward into
madness.”

If none of this makes you pause, then by all means—let us continue on with this tale. But don’t
come crying to me when all is said and done. You did this to yourself and I will take no blame.
Joffrey I.

Chapter Summary

Joffrey finds a new toy.

Chapter Notes

This is the first third-person POV chapter of many to follow and I decided to start off with the complicated characters first. It was a rather tricky chapter to write as writing Joffrey is rather difficult. I wasn't quite sure how I wanted to characterize him and it took me some time to figure it out. This version of Joffrey is not exactly canon, but I'd say he's a bit more like Ramsay Bolton (especially in later chapters I have outlined) than the foolish, sadistic King he was in the show/books. I made him a bit more intelligent and a little (a lot) more sadistic in this fic as I've decided I'll be combining the Ramsay and Joffrey storylines together. This chapter is just a taste of what's to come. Enjoy!

Northerns weren't well known for throwing outlandish celebrations. They were hardworking, solemn, stern individuals with a simple outlook on life. Joffrey thought they were all rather dull and uninteresting. The feast being held at Winterfell paled drastically when compared to the tournaments held at King’s Landing. The accommodations were modest, the music simple, the food though passable was lacking in refinement and presentation. Overall, the North seemed to lack all the usual pomp and circumstance of which he was accustomed.

The young Prince was seated at a table on the dais overlooking the great hall. From his position, he surveyed the tables below immediately picking out several familiar faces amongst the crowd. His father was making a drunken fool of himself again. After two casks of strong wine had loosened his lips and hardened his dick, he was reaching for anything with tits. Two of the Stark’s household maids were seated on each knee, laughing gaily, while the King kissed and groped and buried his face into their voluptuous bosoms.

Joffrey was so used to such displays from his father that he barely batted an eye. Though something always coiled inside him whenever he caught the cool glare of death from his mother that often accompanied his father’s antics. Cersei was glaring at King Robert now—Not that it would make any difference since the King was too drunk to notice.

Joffrey had grown rather annoyed at both his parents. Sure, his father was a drunken fool, however, his mother was no better with her love of Dornish Red. Both fools, both drunks, both too caught up with their own petty quarrels to rule the Seven kingdoms with any modicum of skill. They were
useless. He couldn’t wait until they were out of his way—Especially his father. The sooner the fat oaf died, the better. Then as soon as he was crowned King, he’d have his mother sent back to Casterly Rock to stop her from meddling.

The last thing he needed was a woman telling him what he can and cannot do. He wasn’t Tommen. He wasn’t weak like he was. He wouldn’t bend over backward to accommodate his mother’s wishes. When he was King, he’d do as he liked whenever he liked it and no one would be able to tell him otherwise.

It was a lesson that he’d be teaching his new betrothed as soon as they were back to King’s Landing.

The prince’s eyes fell on the girl in question. She had started the evening sitting with her family on the dais, but after the dancing had started she’d gotten up and taken a few turns with each her brothers, even the bastard, pulling him out of whatever conclave he had been hiding in. She was dancing with her brother, Robb, now and as she danced every so often her eyes met his after a spin and she’d smile. It was unclear whether she was smiling at him or if she was just simply smiling for her eyes never lingered on him. That was odd. Most girls lingered when they looked at him, their gaze feeling like a physical caress.

But Sansa…

Sansa’s gaze was, at most, nothing more than a fleeting interest, as if she was merely taking an account of who was still in the room. There was a calculated look about her, he realized, something in her eyes that made every step, every smile, every look, feel deliberate and so unlike all the other girls he had met before. It reminded him of his mother, although there was something colder about it, apathetic almost, whereas his mother’s eyes burned with a quiet, passionate rage.

She was a beauty, though, there was no denying that. While her eyes never lingered, his certainly did trailing over her lithe, graceful figure with a hedonistic hunger. Her dancing enticed him, the way she moved so nimbly, so self-assured as if she was gliding on air drew his eyes to the subtle developing curves of her hips and breasts. And when she spun, the skirt of her blue dress twirled outwards with her flashing the pale skin of her ankles to his eyes. It was like milk or freshly fallen snow, and Joffrey briefly imagined himself drawing up her skirts and exposing more of the pale skin to his viewing pleasure.

The song came to an end and with it, the dancers slowed and came to a stop as well. Sansa curtsied toward her dancing partner and laughed at something her older brother had said. Then as if she felt his eyes on her, Sansa’s looked up toward the dais and met Joffrey’s hungry gaze. She didn’t blush and shy away like most girls would’ve done, like he had seen other girls do, instead she turned and strode towards him, climbing the steps to the dais and sitting close to him with a laugh.
“Whoa, I think I need to sit down for a minute and catch my breath,” she said. “I’ve been dancing too much.” She turned to him and smiled in a friendly manner, tossing a thin auburn braid over her shoulder as she addressed him. “Are you enjoying the feast, Prince Joffrey?”

“Oh, my lady, more so now that you’re here.” He replied with a lazy, boyish grin that often caused the young ladies at court to swoon.

Sansa merely nodded and grinned back. “I’m glad to hear it! I suppose this feast is quite lackluster when compared to those that take place in the capital, I worried that you may have been bored sitting up here by yourself.”

He had been. Although it would’ve reflected badly on him to say it, so Joffrey kept his mouth shut for fear of reprimand from either of his parents. He wasn’t allowed to be rude to his betrothed and since he was prince he had to adhere to what King Robert wanted by courting the girl. “How can one be bored when you’re in the room? I was watching you dance,” he said.

“I noticed,” she tilted her head in question. “Did you enjoy the performance?”

“Very much so. You’re a good dancer,” he said because she was.

“Thank you,” she preened under the praise, “I’ve had a lot of practice.”

“I can tell.”

“So what do you like to do for fun, Prince Joffrey? Any hobbies?” She asked.

“I don’t have a lot of time for hobbies,” he told her. Between his lessons on politics and history and his training with the Red Keep’s master at arms in preparation for his rise to power, he didn’t get to enjoy a lot of free time throughout the day.

“That’s a shame,” she said, looking rather let down by his statement. But she seemed overall undeterred from the conversation as her eye caught something on his person. “Is that a dagger strapped there to your belt? It’s got an interesting handle...”
“Oh, this?” Joffrey placed his hand over the blade in question, wrapping his fingers around the curved, white handle of the weapon. Sansa nodded, her eyes light with something that looked like a genuine interest.

“It looks like a beautiful weapon,” she said. “Do you mind if I—Can I look at it closer?”

The request was rather unusual for a girl to make as Joffrey had never met a girl that had taken any interest in daggers or swords before, but he saw no harm in it and unsheathed it holding it up to the girl. “Sure.”

Joffrey watched the girl study the dagger. It had been a present from his father on his last name day and as such it was a beautifully crafted and ornamented weapon befitting a King or his son. Joffrey would’ve been impressed by the extravagant gift from the king and even swayed into liking the fat oaf a bit if he hadn’t been aware that the dagger was nothing more than a cast-off from the spoils of King Robert’s tournament bets. It was won by the King after betting against his uncle, Ser Jamie, in a joust with Ser Loras Tyrell and has remained the only time the Kingslayer was forcefully dismounted from his steed. He told Sansa this, although he rephrased it to make himself look grateful, his father generous, and Ser Jamie a fool.

Sansa’s eyes lingered on the glittering steel blade, the ivory bone handle, the elaborate steel engravings on the hummel. She outstretched a hand as if to caresses the sharp edge, then stopped looking at him for permission. “May I?”

“Here,” Joffrey handed her the weapon and watched as Sansa’s pale fingers wrapped around it gently, tentatively, as if she was unsure of what to do with it. She held it up toward the candlelight, studying the curved blade with her eyes, before trailing her fingertips down the center of the curved metal.

“This is Valyrian steel, isn’t it?” She asked surprising him.

“How did you know?” He wondered.

“It’s lighter than other daggers I’ve held in spite of the rather large size,” she traced a finger along its sharp edge. “And they say nothing is sharper than Valyrian steel. My father has a Valyrian sword called Ice, and I’ve seen it cut through wood as if it were butter. What’s the handle made out of? Bone?”
“Dragon bone,” he told her.

She looked impressed and tightened her grip on the handle, admiring the blade. “It’s a very handsome blade,” she said handing it back to him. Joffrey got the sense that she wasn’t merely talking about the dagger and it made something swell in his chest.

Perhaps it was because of that feeling that Joffrey fumbled when slipping the dagger back into its scabbard. Perhaps it was the intense way her eyes looked at him, piercing through his usual charming eloquence and rendering him without a single thing to say. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair she could look at him like that.

“I heard that there are dragon skulls in the Red Keep, is that true?” She asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Oh…” Her expression fell slightly and she nodded. “I suppose that makes sense. No one really
wants to remember the Targaryens or their dragons. I personally believe that that’s a bit of an oversight. Of all the Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, the Targaryens have some of the best stories and songs are written about them. I know they committed horrible atrocities at the end, but they singlehandedly reshaped the course of history. Sometimes severity is the price we pay for greatness.”

“I couldn’t agree more…” Joffrey looked at Sansa again—really looked at her. Her eyes were impossibly blue, as deep and fathomless as the ocean, and for a moment he felt as if he was drowning in them as the air left his lungs.

Then the moment was broken when a chunk of something brown, small, and possibly edible bounced off of Sansa’s cheek. They both froze, Sansa’s eyes fell closed and when they did something cold and icy passed over her face before she turned her away to look across the table. Joffrey followed her line of sight and saw the other Stark daughter, the ugly boyish one, with her spoon raised in the act of launching another spoonful of cooked sausage at her sister.

“Arya,” Sansa addressed her sister, smiling. It was a different kind of smile than before, Joffrey realized, something sharp and dangerous. “It seems you missed your mouth,” she wiped her cheek with the sleeve of her dress. “Sausage is easier to eat when you use a fork instead of a spoon—”

Arya opened her mouth to speak; but before she could get out even a word, Robb appeared, lifting her squirming body up from the bench. “Alright,” he said, “time for bed.”

“But I’m not tired,” she complained.

“Too bad,” he said and nudged the younger girl forward away from Sansa. It was clear that the cretan was being removed from the feast before she could make any more of a scene. Myrcella would’ve never dared to behave in such a manner, and yet Sansa seemed rather resigned to the behavior as if it wasn’t worth her time to address it.

Sansa rolled her eyes and laughed. “Sisters, you can’t live with them,” she joked.

“Does that normally happen?”

“Sometimes. Arya and I don’t get along much,” she said matter-of-factly. “But don’t worry, I’ll get her back. I always get her back.” There was something ominous about the way she said the last part, but before Joffrey was able to address it she began asking him about his travels from King’s...
Landing.

“What was the best place you visited on your way here and what was the worst?”

The answer came easily to him. “The Neck was the worst. Too much rain and mud, we were delayed a full five days because of it,” he told her. “I haven’t decided on the best.”

“What do you think of Winterfell so far?”

“Umm…” He hesitated.

“It’s rather boring at first glance, isn’t it?” She said sympathetically.

“That’s not the word I’d use, my lady.”

“No, go ahead. You can say it,” she assured him. “This place is dull when compared to the capital. Nothing interesting ever really happens here. The Red Keep is probably a lot more exciting.”

“Yeah, a bit,” he laughed. Joffrey found himself telling her some various gossip that happened around the Red Keep. Things that would’ve made a more demure girl blush as a lot of it had to do with the affairs of the noble Lords and Ladies, and the salacious acts they got up to when they thought no one was watching. “In the Red Keep, someone is always watching,” he told her.

Sansa asked him what he liked best about living in the capital and what he liked least. Joffrey told her about the tournaments that were often hosted by the King and how he wanted to ride in a jousting tournament. “Why don’t you?” She wondered.

“My mother says that jousts are no place for a prince,” he said.

“Well, that’s not true,” she frowned. “Prince Rheagar joused all the time according to accounts. So did your father when he was your age. If it’s something you want to do you should do it, forget what your mother says.”
“Maybe.” Her answer was one that he liked. “If I won a tourney, would you want me to crown you the Queen of love and beauty?”

“If that’s what you wanted,” she said, “I wouldn’t turn it down.” There was a glimmer in her eye, a teasing smile on her lips that he couldn’t help but return. The boy moved closer to her so that his leg brushed up against hers.

“I hear that you might be coming to King’s Landing when we leave Winterfell,” he whispered in her ear.

Sansa grinned. “I hear the same. What are your thoughts on that, my prince? Are you in favor or are you opposed?”

He thought about it. Joffrey imagined Sansa and him walking through the gardens of the Red Keep, him dressed in his fine doublets and her in the silk summer dresses of the other courtiers, and they’d be talking as they were now while the sunshine made Sansa’s hair glow like burning flames. It was a pretty picture, one that the prince quite fancied. When he had first heard about the betrothal, Joffrey had been less than thrilled, downright belligerent, until King Robert had backhanded him so hard it made his ears ring. He thought that there was no way that he would like some demure Northern girl, even if she was said to be particularly beautiful and intelligent, and he told himself that she was going to be boring. Then he met her…

And she wasn’t boring. In fact, she was anything but. From the first moment she walked into the feast, she was the one thing that had his undivided attention. And now… Well, now Joffrey was curious and he wanted to know more about her.

“I think,” he began brushing a braid behind Sansa’s ear, “I think it’d be nice to have you return to the Red Keep with me, my lady. I could show you around. I could show you the dragon skulls if you’d like?”

“Oh, would you? I’d like that a lot, Prince Joffrey—”

“Joffrey,” he said. “You can simply call me Joffrey, my lady.”

Sansa nodded enthusiastically and chirped, “Alright, then you’re welcome to call me Sansa, Joffrey. I hope we can be friends from here on out.”
“Of course, Sansa.” Her name fell from his lips like a purr and it seemed to have some effect on the girl as, for a moment, she looked flustered while her gaze fell to his mouth and heat rose to her cheeks. It was rather alluring and Joffrey leaned in closer as if to kiss her cheek before she stopped him.

“I seem to remember,” she said, raising her brows, “that you wanted me to save you a dance?”

“I did.” He stopped his pursuit and looked around the hall at the dancers. “Do you want to dance, my lady?”

“I always want to dance,” she said.

“You’re not still tired?” He asked.

“Not at all. I’m getting my second wind,” Sansa laughed and took his hand in her, standing from the table. Joffrey let her, his eyes sparkling with fascination while Sansa smirked back at him. “C’mon, Joff. Try to keep up, if you can.”

Her words were a challenge and it sparked something in him, something carnal. Yes, he thought, finally someone interesting.

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