Promise Me
by Mizu_umi

Summary

"Promises are sacred, promises must be kept, even after thirty years."

An Alternative Universe in which there was no war of the five kings; Robert Baratheon remains on the Iron Throne and Eddard Stark lives to fulfill the Promise he made to his sister.

Russian translation by Efremova ongoing.

Notes

This is something that came to my mind while a did research for another fanfic and kept developing in my head until I couldn't do anything but writing it. This work is mainly based on the books and makes reference to some characters that don't appear on the TV series. As an Alternative Universe, it is mostly free from spoilers beyond the first book and first season of the show.

It starts three years after the original work, so just for reference, Arya is 12 and Jon is around 17.
Disclaimer: I own nothing from the series A Song of Ice and Fire or its universe nor Game of Thrones; all the characters, names, places, etc belong to great George R.R. Martin. I did this just for fun.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Lord Eddard Stark was sitting in front of the heart tree in the godswood cleaning Ice. He had just come back from an execution.

The rapist had gone unpunished for almost two years until Rickard Karstark captured him. The man had committed dozens of crimes, and still, it hadn't been easy to pass sentence upon him. It was never easy.

He heard the sound of steps softened by the layer of fallen leaves. He knew who it was.

"Catelyn, love," he said before seeing her.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," she hesitated before continuing, "A raven arrived from King's Landing."

Dark wings, dark words. Receiving a letter from King's Landing couldn't be good.

Every time he received a letter from Robert, it was to request his services to face yet another war. The last one had come only three years ago when the King discovered that his children weren't his.

Jon Arryn and Stannis Baratheon had presented the King with the evidence that proved Cersei Lannister and her twin brother had been insulting the Crown and laughing at the King’s back. Robert, explosive as ever, exposed the twins, their children and their transgression to the rest to the Seven Kingdoms. Obviously, Tywin Lannister was furious, and he started a Rebellion against Robert. Robert called his bannermen, and Ned followed his King and friend as he had sworn he would.
However, their friendship suffered a fatal flaw after the war ended. Robert won and crushed Tywin, but he didn't stop there. Ned told him to send Jaime Lannister to the Wall, and allow Cersei and her children to return to Casterly Rock. There Tyrion Lannister, the new Lord of the Rock, would keep them under control. Robert ignored him and sentenced the twins and their children, to death. Ned wouldn't forgive Robert for ordering to kill the children.

He had allowed something similar to happen following the Rebellion. After all, it hadn't been Robert who killed the Targaryen children, but not again. He had kept as far away as he could from the Crown during the next years. Now, the perspective of receiving a letter from the King, filled him with dread, not the joy he had experimented in the past.

He took the parchment from his wife's hand, trying not to show his fear. He read and confirmed his suspicions, awful news.

"What is it, Ned?"

"Jon Arryn is dead."

"I'm sorry. I know he was like a father to you."

"He was," he admitted, "but that it's not the worst. Robert's coming to Winterfell."

When he saw his wife's face, he knew she was as worried as him. She was aware that their friendship no longer existed in his heart; he had confessed it himself. If he felt something for Robert Baratheon, that was revulsion and dread.

"Why would he come after so many years?" Catelyn asked hesitantly.

"I have no idea, Cat," he lied.

Eddard Stark knew perfectly what his old friend wanted, and it wasn't pleasant.

Winter is coming.
Chapter End Notes

The beginning was pretty similar to canon but that will change from the next chapter on. It was also a really short chapter but I tend to increase the length of the chapters as I advance in the story.
Please comment.
For the Old Gods and the New

Chapter Summary

Jon makes a promise to his sister.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the comments you have left. I'm really glad you have liked the first chapter.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon

"Arya, wait, you're about to tear off my arm."

His little sister was decidedly pulling him towards the godswood. She had an incredible strength for a twelve-year-old skinny girl.

"I waited for you all the morning. I had to listen to Sansa and Jeyne Pool speaking about gown fabrics during an eternity." Jon was right behind her, but he could already see her rolling her eyes in exasperation and he smiled.

"It was not my fault. Father went to attend an execution, and I had to go with him. You know I couldn't just walk away from that, little sister."

She stopped suddenly and turned to give him a scowl.

"I hate it."
"What is it that you hate, Arya?" He asked patiently, although he already knew the answer.

"That I couldn't go with you. You get to do all those great things, like hunting or attending executions. Meanwhile, I have to seat beside the chimney trying to correct unfixable embroidery stitches and hear Sansa speak of how happy she will be at Highgarden. If she likes it so much, she should go already." She resumed the walk and the pulling of his arm.

Jon understood Arya's feelings; everyone at Winterfell had been listening the same over and over again during the last two years.

His father and Mace Tyrell had passed a considerable amount of time together during the campaign to crush the Lion's Rebellion. Apparently, they had forged a friendship that had ended in the proposal of uniting House Stark and House Tyrell. Sansa couldn't be happier; Highgarden seemed the right place to fulfill all her fantasies, even if she had never seen Willas Tyrell before.

"I'll get you a pair of ear plugs for your next name day, little sister. We'll have to endure the torture another two years."

According to the betrothal, Sansa wouldn't marry the heir to Highgarden until she turned six and ten.

"Whatever, I'll keep running away from her."

They got to their usual place, and Arya ran to fetch the tourney swords they used for every practice.

"Ok, let's see what you got, little sister."

"I'll kick your ass this time," she said with determination. He laughed.

"Do you want to bet then?"
Arya scowled.

"What do you want?"

"Your dessert ration," he grinned. "I heard today they're serving apple tart."

"Jerk."

"What would Lady Catelyn say if she heard you pronouncing such words?" He asked clicking his tongue.

"Shut up!" She snapped before charging against him.

Arya was a natural at learning the techniques; most of the times he didn't need to give her instruction. And even if she wasn't as strong as a knight, she was amazingly fast.

She hit him a couple of times, but even if her strikes hurt, they were nothing compared to Robb's.

*If Robb were as fast as Arya, I would never be able to leave Maester Luwin's chambers.*

They continued sparring for a while until he unarmed and defeated her. Arya threw herself on the snow, still trying to recover her breath. Jon sat by her side, observing her. He had to tell her.

"We can't continue doing this, little sister."

Arya sat up immediately.

"Why not?"

"Lady Catelyn knows about this and she doesn't like it."
Sansa had seen them the last time and told her mother. Jon didn't tell Arya because she would immediately go and pick up a fight with Sansa. Things would go out of proportion if she did.

"It's not like we're doing something bad."

"It's inappropriate for a Lady," he paused. "Lady Catelyn believes this kind of behavior could ruin your marriage prospects." That made her get even more furious.

"I don't want to be a Lady and I don't want a match!"

Jon knew Arya better than anyone. The kind of life Lady Catelyn wanted for her didn't suit his little sister. It would only make her miserable, yet he couldn't do anything about it. It made him very sad.

"Even if you don't like it, you were born a Lady, Arya. You can't do anything about it. The same way I can't do anything about being a bastard."

"I wish that I had been born a bastard. That way I wouldn't have to be a Lady."

"You don't know what you're saying, little sister. Some things are unavoidable, and it's better to accept them."

"I will never accept becoming the property of some unknown Lord."

"If you were to show some interest in the matter, instead of plainly rejecting the situation, maybe you could choose for your convenience. Robb told me father has some options. I'm sure he would allow you the last word between those."

It wasn't fair, it wasn't enough for Arya, but it was better than nothing.

"Choosing would make no difference. Anywhere would be the same."
"That's where you're wrong. I heard they were talking about a Blackwood, a Frey, a Hightower, and a Dayne. If I were in your position, I would go for Edric Dayne."

"Do you know him or something?" Arya had a curious expression on her face.

"No, but he's from Dorne."

"So what about it?"

"Women have more rights at Dorne. Have you heard about the daughters of the Red Viper? They say they are some of the most lethal fighters in the Realm. Plus, their next ruler is a princess, not a prince."

Arya bit her lower lip, and he knew she was considering it.

"You could even become good friends. You just have to meet him."

"And what if it's not like that. What am I supposed to do then?" She had an unfamiliar expression on her face, one he had never seen her show before, fear.

*You deserve better than this, little sister.* He regretted trying to convince her of something she didn't want to do.

"I would do anything in my power to stop the wedding." He forced a smile. It was a reckless thing to say, but Arya was the person he loved the most. Jon didn't want her to be unhappy.

"Do you promise?"

"For the old gods and the new ones," he motioned towards the heart tree. "Even if it gets me killed, I won't let them marry you against your wish."
Her expression changed to relief and she smiled.

"You will keep teaching me, right?"

"You want everything, Arya," he sighed. "I will, even if Lady Catelyn gets me flayed for it." He knew he could never deny her anything.

"And you will let me have my dessert, right?" Apparently, Arya knew it as well.

"Only if you get to the kitchens before I do."

As he sprinted out of the godswood with Arya cursing behind him, his resolution strengthened. He would do everything in his power to keep her happy.

Chapter End Notes

Longer chapter, perhaps not long enough, but I tend to increase the length as I advance in the story.
Eddard Stark was not a man who could be surprised easily. He had been through battles, rebellions and witnessed the things some wildlings were capable of doing. However, none of those had ever been enough to prepare him for his youngest daughter's crazy ideas.

She had burst like a summer snowfall into his solar to announce him she wanted to have a word regarding the selection of her betrothal. She had quickly explained what she thought of her marriage prospects and made clear that if she was to get sent off to some unknown place she rather been sent off to Dorne.

"Of course, I'm not saying I'll go willingly to the godswood to recite the vows. I want to meet that Dayne, and if I don't like him I'll send him back to Dorne myself." She had said with a scowl on her face.

"And where did you hear Edric Dayne's name, Arya?"

"I... " she didn't know how to answer.

His Arya had always been short-tempered and rarely considered the consequences of her words. She had just revealed him that Robb had been divulging the council matters to his other children. He should have been angry, but it just made him shook his head with a faint smile. If anything, he had done it for Arya's sake.

"I overheard one of the council meetings," she offered as an explanation.
"And when was that council meeting you speak about Arya?" He said trying to add some anger to his voice.

Arya bit her lower lip, as she did whenever she doubted about something.

"It was Robb, wasn't he?" Eddard sighed. "He told you about it."

"No, he didn't, well he did. Not to me, to Jon, and then Jon told me about it. You're not going to punish them, right?"

"They shouldn't have told you, but I guess there's nothing else to do about it. May I ask why would you consider Edric Dayne and not the rest?" He was sure Arya had some hidden reasons to say that.

"I don't care about Edric Dayne, I don't know him. But Jon told me that we could become friends, and he might allow me to do the things I like because he's dornish. The dornish don't think you need to have a cock -"

"Arya!" He reprimanded her not with real anger. Something like that was just like her after all.

"The dornish don't think you need to be a man to be a warrior or a rider," she corrected as she fiddled with the hem of her tunic. "And maybe I could have a sand steed if I went there."

That was his Arya, only concerned about swords and horses, just like Lyanna. The thought made him sad because Arya looked more and more like Lyanna with every passing day. Arya was not Lyanna, but there were still some remarkable similarities between them.

"So you're saying you would willingly meet Edric Dayne and have an open mind to accept a betrothal with him."

"Only meet him."
"I understand." That was already better than running away to live with the wildlings as she had expressed she would do if they forced a marriage on her. "Is there something else you want to add?"

"I would like a sword for my next name day."

He tried hard to repress his laughter and failed.

"Your mother would stop speaking to me if I were to give you a sword."

"She doesn't have to know."

*How convenient.*

"I'll consider it if you promise to obey Septa Mordane until then."

"For real?" Her eyes were full of excitement.

"If you behave, I'll even ask Ser Rodrik to teach you the basics."

"That won't be necessary."

"What?" Of course, he was aware that Jon had been teaching her, but he wanted to know what she would answer to that.

"Nothing. Thank you, father." She ran to kiss him and hand him a winter rose before leaving as abruptly as she had entered.

Eddard stared at the flower for a long time. Winter roses invariably made him think of Lyanna... and Jon. He always wished he could have given him a better life, the life he deserved. But a bastard's life was still better than no life at all.
Perhaps Jon could go with Arya to Starfall. Bastards were better accepted at Dorne, and Arya would have someone to take care of her there. It was a thousand times safer than the fate Cat wished for him. First I'll pray for Edric Dayne to be clever enough to win Arya's heart.

That morning Winterfell was a complete chaos. Servants ran from one place to the other to prepare everything for Robert's arrival, and the kitchens couldn't be busier. Eddard had decided to leave everything in Robb and Catelyn's hands and escaped to look for the peace of the godswood. He had always preferred silence over the ruckus of the castle, and he needed to think.

"You have to lift the shield, Arya," he heard when he was approaching to the heart tree. He stopped and approached more silently to watch the scene.

Arya and Jon had tourney swords on one hand and shields on the other. Arya was having trouble to lift her shield enough to protect herself from Jon's attacks.

"It's too heavy," she said with a scowl. "I know, I know, it's heavy to resist the strokes of a sword, but I don't need it."

"How do you plan to block the strokes of your opponent, little sister?"

"I don't have to block them, stupid. I can dodge them easily."

To prove her point, she tossed the shield and started to attack Jon. She hit him on a shoulder, a shin, and right forearm before moving right in time to avoid his stroke.

Eddard was astonished for what he had witnessed. Jon would never hurt Arya. He would never use his full strength to fight her, but her speed was something serious. And she made good use of the technique. She was a natural with the sword.

If she ever marries Edric Dayne, he will have to be careful not to make Arya angry. According to Lord Beric Dondarrion, the boy was a good squire and would become a great knight, but if Arya continued her training, she might be on pair with the daughters of Oberyn Martell. A fearful little she-wolf. Cat is going to love it.
"I told you," Arya said satisfied of herself.

"I'll never disagree with you again, little sister," Jon answered as he rubbed his shin. "We should..." Jon noticed him.

"Jon, Arya, what do you think you're doing?"

"Father, we," Jon lowered his gaze. "I didn't want to cause trouble."

Maybe Cat already told him something. Ned loved his wife a lot, but the one thing he had never liked about her was the way she treated Jon. The lessons surely had been Arya's idea. And Jon loved her too much to deny her anything, even if it caused him trouble. The way I loved Lya. It was so touching and painful at the same time.

"I wasn't talking about the sword lessons. The King will arrive soon; you both have to go and prepare to receive him and the court."

"Yes father," Jon retired silently and Eddard stopped his daughter. "Arya, give him a break. He never says a word, but I'm sure your mother has scolded him for this."

"Yes father," she gave him an ashamed look. "I didn't want mother to reprimand Jon."

"I know, Arya. Now go."

Arya lingered by his side, "Do I have to wear the stupid gown?"

"Arya."

"I don't like it. I can't move or run or even breathe properly when I wear one. It makes me look stupid."
"It makes you look beautiful and you are not going to run, Arya. We need to receive the King correctly," he tried to be patient and avoid a discussion with her. "You promised you would obey."

"Fine but don't forget about my sword," she said with her characteristic smile.

*How does she manage to take advantage of the situation even when she's getting scolded? His daughter was one of a kind.*

The firsts to disturb the main yard of the castle were the Karstarks. Robb would marry Alys Karstark by the end of the year, so it had been necessary to summon them to receive the King. Catelyn had wanted Robb to marry a Southern Lady but after Sansa's betrothal, he had decided to reinforce their ties with the Northern Houses.

"Lord Eddard, it has been some time."

"Welcome, Lord Rickard."

Robb moved forward to receive his betrothed. He smiled at her, and Eddard could see Alys blush. Robb was more Tully than Stark in his treatment towards Ladies; the girl was crazy for him. Eddard hoped that meant they would be happy together.

Just then, the guardians announced the Royal procession would arrive shortly. Eddard gave orders to the servants and urged his wife and the rest of his children to get outside the main building.

Jon rushed out followed closely by Bran and Rickon. Catelyn came out accompanied by Sansa who was smiling brightly; the perspective of meeting the King and part of the court filled her with emotion. The last one to made her out was a scowling Arya; she hated the new gown Catelyn had had made for her. Jon and Bran must have commented on her appearance because each one of them earned a furious kick from her. Ned could only shake his head, and smirk at the scene.

The King made his way through the gates of Winterfell on a huge palfrey; he was if possible heavier than the last time Ned had seen him, and drunker. There was little if not anything left of the man who grew up with him at the Vale. The only thing Ned could see now was the man that had
given the order to behead children that he had believed his for years.

*I can't hide anymore.* He knew what Robert wanted, and he had no other option but to give it to him to keep the peace at the North, perhaps the whole Realm.

"Your Grace," he kneeled when Robert dismounted in front of him; everyone else imitated his action.

"Stand up, Stark," he roared. "I hate your honorable ways. Forget the ceremonies."

Ned stood up.

"It's good to receive you here, Robert," he forced a smile.

"What a poor excuse for a smile, Ned," he burst into laughter. "The weather must have frozen your sense of humor. Although there wasn't much to freeze in the first place."

"There aren't many reasons to smile when we're in the middle of winter, Robert."

"I know. It was almost impossible to get there with all those fucking snowfalls," he laughed yet again. "Whatever, let me see your family."

Robert embraced Cat as if she were his sister before examining his children.

"And you are?"

"Jon Snow, Your Grace."

"Hah! The bastard!" he turned to Ned. "He looks exactly like you when we were at the Vale. Are you sure he's the bastard one?"
Jon blushed and lowered his gaze and Catelyn looked as if Robert had slapped her. That was the worst thing anyone could ever dare to tell her.

"That was unfair for Catelyn, Robert."

"Oh, sorry Ned. I meant no offense," he said nonchalantly before proceeding his examination. "You must be the Rose of Winterfell, am I right? The heir to Highgarden is pretty lucky."

"You honor me, Your Grace," Sansa curtsied gracefully.

"Finally..."

"Arya, Your Grace," his daughter said with a poor courtesy, and a frown still married to her face.

"The Others take me, you look just like her," the King whispered.

Eddard Stark felt a chill run down his back when he saw the way Robert stared at Arya. He prayed to the Old Gods it had only been his imagination. She didn't want to use the gown; I shouldn't have forced her. However, a voice inside his head told him it wouldn't have made any difference. Arya resembled Lyanna, no matter what she was wearing. Why didn't I see it coming?

"Robert, we shall enter the Great Hall; the feast must be ready," Eddard said trying to compose himself. Nothing had happened.

"First take me to the crypts."

Ned nodded and took a torch to direct him to the place where the Kings of Winter rested. They walked in silence until they reached Lyanna's statue. Robert stared at the statue intensively, as he had done the few times he had been there.

"So many years," he said as he caressed the stone. For a moment, the King looked like his old friend again, the one who had loved Ned's sister enough to start a war. "She was meant to be mine."
"The gods are cruel," was all he could answer.

"They might not be that cruel. They have given us a second chance. They sent her back to me."

"Robert..." The chill had returned to his body and refused to go.

"Have you made a match for her?"

"She's not Lyanna."

"You didn't answer my question." The King had returned, and his voice was ominous, demanding. It was the man that had ordered the murdering of children. The one who made him worry for his family and the Realm.

"I've been speaking with Starfall. Edric Dayne is the most appropriate match for her. They have already accepted," he lied.

"I'll take care of that," the King turned to see him. "You know why I came here. You're going to be my Hand, she's going to be my Queen, and things will be as they were supposed to be before the dragons got in our way."

"No, Robert. She's not Lyanna. I'll serve as your Hand for the rest of my life, but you won't have Arya," he said firmly.

"I'M THE KING!" his roar reverberated in the crypt's walls. "You're going to be honored because your daughter will be Queen if you don't want the North to suffer the same fate of the Western lands," Robert narrowed his eyes. "I'm going to overlook your little defiance because of our friendship Ned, but it better doesn't repeat in the future."

The King took the torch from his hand and furiously walked to the exit of the crypts. Eddard stood still in the middle of the darkness. He could feel the stare of the Kings of Winter and the previous Lords piercing him; it was cold.
What am I supposed to do, Lya?

Chapter End Notes

Once again, longer chapter. Was it enough? I think the chapters will keep growing. I'm not sure of how much.

Ser Balon Swann one of your guesses was right. :)

*The updates will remain irregular. Sorry.*
"Raise your cups for your King and future Queen!" Robert roared at the end of his drunken speech at the feast.

The attendants cautiously raised their cups. They weren't sure whether the announcement had been a prank or the real deal. Lord Eddard could feel the stares of the guests upon him, questioning, waiting for his confirmation. His children and wife were astonishingly staring at him as well. He had hundreds of eyes fixed on him, yet the only stare that he found unbearable was Arya's.

She had gone pale and had put little resistance when the Ser Meryn Trant escorted her near the King. For the first time since she pronounced her first word, Arya had run out of them. His daughter was only looking at his eyes, demanding an explanation he was unable to provide her.

"King Robert honors House Stark," he felt the throat dry and his voice was impossibly hoarse. "The wedding will take place after Arya turns six and ten."

'You lied to me,' Arya's gray eyes screamed in desperation. Even when Robert took her hand to kiss it, she didn't retrieve her eyes from his.

Eddard had to deal with Arya's disappointed gaze, piercing him until the end of the feast. He couldn't start to imagine what Arya was thinking of him at that moment. He had not felt that impotent since the day Lyanna died in his arms.

On another time, he would have rejected Robert in front of everyone. He would have opposed him directly. But that was before he knew what this man was capable of doing. He only had to
remember the sight of the six lion heads on the walls of the Red Keep. As dishonorable as it was, for the time being, he had to make the King believe that he would get what he wanted. He needed to prepare and bide his time.

It was nearly dawn, but he was still pacing incessantly in his solar; trying to order his ideas. After the feast, he had looked for Arya, but for the first time in her life, she had refused to listen to him. She had shouted at him as if she had wanted to compensate for her silence during the feast and closed her door in his face. Her eyes were full of hatred towards him.

He had obtained a similar reaction from Robb, and Catelyn when he had tried to talk to them. Their silence made Eddard feel weak and lonely, but that was not the time to think about it. He had more important things occupying his mind.

Am I truly going to act against my King? After their fatal interaction in the crypts, Eddard had remained there, considering his options. He had looked for a way to get Arya away from the fate Robert wanted to force into her. There was only one option that would allow him to save Arya and protect the North from Robert's rage. It would be a fulminant blow for his honor, but he couldn't think of anything else. Is it dishonorable to depose a King if he is an unworthy man? Wasn't that the reason they had fought against Aerys Targaryen?

But overthrowing a King wasn't an easy venture. He would need help, alliances. He had stayed up the whole night looking for allies for his cause, and still, he was full of doubts. The Northerners would follow him, but they could not do it alone. The Riverlands and the Vale. Would blood ties with Cat be enough to convince them? Would Sansa's betrothal drag the Tyrells to his side?

Then, there were other possibilities, but those were as unpredictable as they were dangerous. If he offered to return Theon to the Iron Islands, Balon Greyjoy could send his fleet to help; not impossible. Would the promise of revenge make Tyrion Lannister and the Westerlands rise against Robert? Or would the fear for the last result turn them against him? And the same applied for Doran Martell and Dorne.

There was one more thing. If the Gods were merciful and he succeeded what would happen with the Iron Throne? It was not like he could offer it to Stannis Baratheon after removing his brother.

Time ravages everything. Twenty years ago, he had put Robert on the Iron Thorne. Now, he was planning to overthrow him. The only justification he could find was that Robert was no longer the
man he had been. *Perhaps make him King was a mistake from the very beginning.*

A knock interrupted his inner turmoil.

"What is it, Jory?"

"Forgive me, Lord Eddard. We found Jon in the stables; he was preparing two horses."

*Good grief.* Eddard knew his children. All of them would look for a way to stop what was happening, but he couldn't allow them to be reckless. That was why he had ordered the guards to keep an eye on each one of them. Well, except Sansa who found marvelous the idea of Arya becoming Queen. *I should have foreseen Jon would be the first.*

"Bring him, Jory."

"What were you doing, Jon?" He asked once they were alone.

Jon wasn't looking at him. Eddard couldn't elucidate whether it was due to shame or resentment towards him. Jon didn't pronounce a word.

"Do you understand you're defying the King?"

"It isn't what Arya wants. It isn't what she deserves."

"Do you think I don't know it?" He said calmly.

"Then, why?" Eddard felt a shiver when Jon finally lifted his eyes. It felt as if Lyanna was the one questioning him.

"The King is dangerous. It is unwise to defy him boldly."
"Lord Eddard," Jon started and he was surprised; it was odd for Jon to call him that way. "You have given me more than I deserve, but I have never asked you for anything," Jon dropped to his knees and Eddard had to fight the urge to tell him what he was planning. It wasn't the right time. "Please let me take her away from here. The King won't find us, and you can blame me for everything," he begged.

*The gods like to make fun of us.* That was what Eddard thought as he pictured Jon taking Arya away from Robert.

"I can't allow you to do that, Jon," he prompted him to stand up. "I have to think about the welfare of the North as well. It is my duty."

"I understand, Lord Eddard." Jon stood up, fists and jaw clenched. He left without directing Eddard a second glance.

"What do you think, Ben?"

"The Night's Watch doesn't take part in the issues of the Realm," his brother reminded him.

"I'm not asking you to take part." He sighed; he felt totally wasted. "Do you think I have any chances?"

"I think you have," Benjen scratched his head. "But it's not something you can do from one day to the other. You have to secure your potential allies. That will take time."

"I know. That's why I accepted, but I'm not sure if three years will be enough time to establish those alliances."

"Three years?" Benjen frowned. "How can you be so sure you have three years?"

"Arya turns three and ten next fortnight. I convinced Robert to wait until she becomes sixteen."
"If I were you, Ned, I wouldn't consider even a year. Your drunken friend isn't the patient type."

He hasn't been my friend for a long time. He massaged his temples.

"I can't believe I'm going against him. All the things I'll do just to protect Arya. I feel like I'm casting a grudge upon the whole Realm for selfish reasons."

"It could be true, but I'm in no position to judge you," suddenly, Benjen's eyes were reflecting a great sadness. "The last time, it was me who casted the grudge upon the Realm," his brother looked away. "I'm not proud of it, but I wanted her to be happy."

"I wanted the same."

"What a failure we are, Ned," Ben gave him a wretched smile. "I can only wish you luck, brother."

I'm going to need that and more.

"When do you leave, Ben?"

"In a few days. Why?"

"I need to ask you something."

'Promise me, Ned,' he heard as clearly as he had at the Tower of Joy. I'm sorry, Lya, I need more time. He was doing it to protect him as well.
"I can't believe you will be Queen, Arya. You'll dress the best fabrics, have all the jewelry you want and the court will be at your feet."

"If you find it so fabulous, go and become his Queen. You would be doing me a favor," Sansa had recoiled at her hostile tone.

"The King doesn't want me as his bride."

_No, he wants Lyanna Stark._ Arya had never loathed looking so much like her father until that fat King decided he wanted to marry her.

"I always knew you were stupid Sansa, but you have surpassed my guesses."

"You're too rude with me, Arya. I was only giving you my best wishes," Sansa told her in the polite tone she always used.

"GET OUT OF HERE!" Arya had reached her limit.

"Father asked me to keep you company all the time."

"I don't care. Get out or I'll strangle you. I swear," her voice was barely audible.

"Arya!" Sansa said with a scandalized flinch.

"I'm serious."

Sansa rushed out of the room and Arya hurried to lock the door. She rested her back against the wood, then collapsed on the floor. She hated to shed tears since she considered them a sign of weakness and stupidity. However, at that moment, she couldn't stop herself from crying out her
frustration and disappointment.

She had been shocked when the King made his announcement, but she had not been scared nor feel desperate. She had had the certainty that her father would never allow that sort of thing. Therefore, when he didn't oppose and even further, confirmed the situation, her world had sunk into darkness.

Traitors. She never thought a day would come when she felt she hated every member of her family. No one had moved a finger for her. Only her father and Sansa had visited her. But her father had betrayed her and Sansa was... Sansa.

"GO AWAY!" She shouted when she heard the slight knock at her door.

"Open, little sister, please."

Her heart had started to beat impossibly fast when she heard Jon's voice. She felt her fingers numb as she tried to open the door. The moment Jon stepped into the room, she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. She didn't feel that despairing anymore.

"I knew it. I knew you wouldn't abandon me. Are we leaving now?"

"Arya, I," Jon tightened his arms around her. "I'm sorry," his voice broke. "I came to say goodbye."

What? She broke their embrace and retreated from him. The words she was unable to pronounce were choking her.

"I'm going to the Night's Watch. Father decided it's time for me to leave Winterfell."

"You promised..." she felt a lump in her throat.

"I tried Arya," he moved forward and took her hand. "I swear I had a plan, but father discovered me. He assigned men to follow me day and night. There's nothing I can do."

Tears blurred her vision once again. Jon put a strange package in her hands.
"I won't be here for your name day," his voice thick with emotion. "but I brought you a present," he finished after a long breath.

Arya opened the package. It was a sword; thinner and lighter than the ones they had been using to practice at the godswood. When she had the sword in her hands, she understood. It meant Jon wasn't going to help her either. And that realization was worse than anything.

"LIAR!" She tossed the sword to him. "You lied to me, you're like everyone else."

"There's nothing I can do, little sister," Jon looked as if he were about to cry, but she didn't care. She was too hurt and disappointed.

"Don't call me that," she slapped his hand when he reached for her. "I hate you," the words slipped from her lips without a second thought.

"Arya..." Jon's expression became unbearable for her. She felt even angrier because of that.

"Get out of my sight," she snapped at him. "I don't want to see you again or I swear I'll ask the King to behead you."

Jon merely nodded and left. He took the sword with him. It took her a couple of seconds to regret what she had said, but it was too late. He was gone.

She received another visit that night. It was her mother.

"I don't want to see anyone," her voice was hoarse from crying the whole day.

"We need to talk, Arya."
"About wedding gowns? Since you don't give a damn about my opinion, choose whatever you want."

For one time, Catelyn Stark didn't chastise her way of speaking. Her mother limited to sigh and sat beside her on the bed.

"Do you think your father and enjoy seeing you like this?" Perhaps her mother's tone pretended to be soothing, but it only made her more upset.

"It certainly seems that way," she spat.

"It's not that way," he mother took her chin to force her to look at her. "This is more complicated than it seems, Arya."

"How is complicated, mother?"

"Your father loves you very much. He insists he loves each one of you equally, but I know better," he mother smiled sadly. "He loves you so much that he is considering to rebel against the King."

*Is everyone going to lie to me?*

"He accepted right away."

"He did because he knows the King dangerous and is even more dangerous to defy him."

"You just say he was going to rebel." She didn’t understand.

"He hasn't slept ever since the feast trying to figure out what to do. He wants to protect you, but he has to think about the rest of us and the North."

"Did the King threaten father?"
"Robert told him the North would suffer the same fate as the Western lands. He is forced to choose who he will protect."

Arya had heard stories of how the King had devastated the Western lands after Tywin Lannister raised his banners against him. Was the same going to happen to the North? Were the heads of her siblings and parents be exhibited at the Walls of the Red Keep?

"You're saying I would save the North a lot of troubles if I don't refuse." Arya was feeling more trapped than before.

"You're a Stark, but you also have the blood of the Tullys of Riverrun. Do you remember the words of my House?"

"I do," she whispered. That was it. She was going to become the sacrifice to secure the welfare of her family and the North. It was her duty. "There was nothing to do from the beginning, mother."

"I love you, Arya," her mother embraced her.

There were no more tears, desperation or hate inside her, not even the bitter sense of betrayal she had been feeling. Only a void.

_I wish I had been born a bastard, that way, I wouldn't have duties._ She thought of Jon and realized she had been awfully unfair with him. Even her father dreaded the King. Jon had tried; he had been the only one. _And I won't see him again._ That was more depressing than marrying Robert Baratheon.

**Chapter End Notes**

The end of this chapter was pretty despairing, but it won't remain like that for long and some things will be better explained.

I have finished the general outline for the story, so from now on, I can announce the title of the next update.

For the time being, Next Chapter: "The Bastard's Privilege"
The Bastard's Privilege

Chapter Notes

Enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon

'I hate you.' He kept hearing Arya's voice.

No matter how far they were from Winterfell or how many days had passed, he could still hear it. It was his last thought when he went to sleep, and his first when he opened his eyes.

_I failed her._ His conscience tormented him incessantly. _But what could I do? I'm completely powerless compared to that damned, sick, fat King._ And his father. He couldn't believe his father had acceded to that wicked deed. Lady Catelyn had surely talked him into it. What could have been a better match for her daughter than the King? _Damn woman. Now Arya will be miserable for the rest of her life._

"You couldn't sleep, Jon?"

"I won't be able to sleep again, uncle."

His uncle sighed and sat beside him, in front of the extinguished campfire. Jon had sat in front of it the entire night, but the world had never seemed colder for him.

"Are you still thinking of her?"

_There's nothing else inside my head._ Arya was the most important person in his life. _And I disappointed her._
"The memory of my betrayal will torment me until the day I die. I'm sure."

"You made a reckless promise, Jon. If the King had discovered you, the heads of you, your father, and siblings would be decorating the Walls of Winterfell now."

Then Arya must be sacrificed for the sake of everyone else? He didn't believe that was a proper justification.

"What would have you done in my place?" He had had a sister. Perhaps the memory of Lyanna Stark would make him understand Jon's feelings.

Benjen Stark looked astonished because of the question. Then he fell silent. Jon had never seen him make an expression like that. After some time, he looked Jon directly in the eye and faintly smiled at him.

"I would have done the right thing."

That was an ambiguous answer.

The right thing for whom? Jon was about to ask, but his uncle didn't give him the chance. He was already shouting orders to the brothers of the Night's Watch.

Jon took Needle and observed it. As if the thin sword could provide him the right answer. He was not sure why he had kept it. I was just another reminder of his failure and impotence. He stood up and went to help to the others.

The next days he tried to distract himself from the thoughts related to Arya. What surrounded him, didn't make him feel better. Every day he grew more insecure about taking the Black.

The tales Old Nan told them and the stories they had learned from Eddard, and Maester Luwin always magnified the Night's Watch. All of them said it was an honorable choice for life, and the members of the organization deserved the respect from the whole Kingdom. Jon had always seen the Watch as his alternative to making Eddard Stark proud without stealing anything from Robb.
However, now that he had spent time with members of the Watch he had realized all were lies. The Wall was more like the place where all the outcast of the Realm ended so that they wouldn't cause trouble. He knew his uncle wasn't like that, but he was an exception.

_To think that father willingly sent me with them._ It occurred to him that, in the end, he had always been a vexation. What happened with Arya had been the perfect excuse to get rid of him.

"Did Lord Stark tell you whether he will send his host to end that King beyond the Wall?" Yoren's question caught Jon attention.

"Eddard has other things occupying his mind at the moment," Benjen Stark gave Jon a side stare. "But if Mance Rayder decides to attack Castle Black, Winterfell will help without a doubt."

"Well, I guess there's no reason to doubt the word of Eddard Stark." The man coughed up a red phlegm. "So lad, are you ready to protect the Wall against wildlings and Others? Most of the summer smelling brats that I take to the Wall freeze even before reciting the vows," the man laughed.

Jon wasn't able to answer because his uncertainty had nothing but kept stacking up with every passing day. His uncle and the rest of the black brothers interpreted it as fear. He could see it in their faces.

"Don't scare him Yoren." Benjen turned to regard him. "The Others are a myth, and we have nothing to fear from the wildlings. Even if they attack, we'll repel them in no time. You have nothing to worry about, Jon."

"I'm not scared," Jon spat and left the campfire.

That Night he couldn't sleep again. Sometimes, when he closed his eyes, he could hear Arya crying. Others, he saw Cersei Lannister's rotting head transforming into Arya's. He awoke panting and sweating, scared as if he had been running away from something.

_Fuck the Watch, fuck the King, fuck my honor._ One of the reasons he had not made a second attempt to help Arya was that he didn't want to disappoint his father and uncle, but he didn't care about their opinion anymore. _I can't let them do this to her._
'Even if it gets me killed.' He had promised her, and he hadn't sworn anything to the Watch yet. What he was about to do would bring trouble for the whole North but it was unimportant. Maybe I should start honoring my position. After all, he had been considered treacherous for being a bastard, his whole life.

‘I'm sorry, uncle. I don't want to deal with the wildlings. I guess I'm a coward after all.’ He wrote to Benjen Stark as an explanation for his actions.

During his guard, Jon took most of the supplies, the two best horses and released the rest to gain time. The rest would be fine because Last Heart was only a day's journey from their current position. Before dawn, he was already riding South.

Winterfell was a strong castle that could resist almost any kind of assault, but it was also his home. He knew the place better than any guard or servant, so it wasn't difficult to sneak into it. He had used one of the passages Bran had discovered while climbing the Walls and Towers of the castle.

Once inside the broken tower, Jon considered his choice. At first, he had wanted to ride day and night to catch up with the Royal procession but he needed more supplies and resources to rescue Arya. There was only one person who he trusted enough to ask for help. As dangerous as it was to return to Winterfell, it was also his best chance.

Jon had planned to wait until dawn before looking for Robb, but he fell asleep without warning. Jon cursed his weakness when he awoke. He had lost his opportunity. Now, he would have to wait until the next day.

He heard a noise outside and directed to the window. He leaned out, to find himself face to face with someone. It took him a moment to realize it was Bran. The boy gasped and lost grip of the stone of the tower due to the surprise. Jon grabbed the neck of his tunic just in time to prevent him from falling.

"That was dangerous Bran," Jon told him once they were safely inside of the tower. "You could have fallen."

"I never fall," Bran grinned despite being completely pale. "I thought you were at the Wall." Bran didn't seem surprised to see him there.
"I deserted," Jon confessed.

Bran raised a brow, "How can you be a deserter if you haven't pronounced the vows?" Jon didn't answer, and Bran sighed, "They left last week." He wasn't grinning anymore.

"I know."

"You didn't come for her?"

"I'm going after the Royal Procession, but I need some help. I thought maybe Robb would lend me a hand."

"Robb will be more than satisfied to do that."

"I thought father would prohibit him to do something. The way he did with me."

"Well," Bran scratched his head. "Lately, things have been difficult here. Robb fought with mother and father the day he left with the King. He hates them for acceding to the marriage with the King. Now he barely talks to anyone. Mother has been directing Winterfell without Robb's help."

"And what do you think about it?"

Bran didn't seem to be angry at his father and Lady Stark.

"I understand they couldn't refuse the King. And I'm also worried for Arya, but there's little I can do," he shrugged. "That doesn't mean I wouldn't help if someone has a good plan."

Bran was only older than Rickon, but Jon had always thought that among the six of them, he was the wisest, the most mature. The way he had reacted to everything was proof of it.

"You could start bringing Robb."
Jon didn't have to wait long for Robb. His brother was out of breath when he got to the tower. He had ran from wherever he had been when Bran went for him. Robb immediately got closer to give him a hug.

"Damn! We thought we had lost you forever, Snow. It's good to see you decided not to take the black in the end."

"I didn't do it for myself," he paused. "I made a promise to Arya and I'm going to fulfill it."

"Count me in. I won't let that fat pervert lay a hand on her. What do you have in mind?"

"I'm going to abduct her before they make it to King's Landing." If they got inside the city, it would become something impossible. "The King won't find us at the Free cities."

"What do you need from me?"

"Good horses, supplies, and enough gold to buy two passages to Essos."

"Consider it done, Snow," Robb said without hesitation. "Rest, you need to be strong," he clapped his shoulder. "Bran will bring you something to eat soon."

"Thank you, Stark."

Robb gave him a bright smile. "What were you expecting? Arya is as much my sister as she is yours. I wish I could do more."

"You're doing a lot."

"I'm not going to risk my life. If the King discovers you..."

"I know. But don't worry, he won't," Jon made a pause. "And even if he does, it won't matter. A
bastard's life isn't something worthy."

"Always the pessimistic," Robb shook his head. "Come on, rest. I'll come for you around the wolf's hour."

Jon ate the meal Bran had stolen from the kitchens. Then he tried to sleep a little before he had to leave Winterfell once more. He was already awake when Robb and Bran went to see him again.

"It's time," Robb told him as he handed him a purse with gold.

"This is too much," Jon said when he examined it. "How are you going to explain it to Lady Catelyn?"

"I'll distribute the missing gold in the wedding expenses. Alys will help me with that."

"I think it will be better if we kept this among the three of us," Jon remembered the black brothers. "I ran away from uncle Ben. He might come to look for me."

"Then we never saw you," Bran said with a smile.

"Don't worry, I won't say a word. Not even to Alys."

"There's a brown bag on one of the horses. Tell Arya it's a name day present." Jon smiled and mused Bran's auburn hair.

Robb hugged him another time. "Farwell, Snow."

"Farwell, Stark. I think this time is forever." Being at the Wall he had the possibility to visit Winterfell. However, if he rescued Arya, they would never be able to set feet in Westeros again.

"That fat King will die someday."
"You're right," Jon said with little enthusiasm. It could still take a couple of decades for that to happen.

The three of them walked to the yard. Once there, Bran separated and directed to the kitchens. Robb accompanied him to the stables.

"I'll go and call the guards. Wait for Bran's signal." Robb left.

Not long after that, he saw the guards leaving their positions. Then he heard the screams at the kitchens. He didn't doubt and directed the horses out of the stables. He mounted when he was far enough from the castle.

More than one time he had to suppress his desire to look Winterfell one last time. He might not see it again, but it didn't matter. There was only one thought occupying his mind. Arya.

Arianne

"Where am I supposed to find my lost cousin, father?" Arianne Martell asked skeptically. She couldn't help thinking it was a plot to send her away from Dorne, and favor Quentyn.

There was something odd about the mission his father was assigning her. For starters, Aegon Targaryen, son of Elia and Rhaegar had died at the Red Keep eighteen years before. It was common knowledge that the Mountain had smashed his head against a wall before raping Elia. Now she was supposed to believe he had somehow survived and made it to Essos?

"We don't know whether he's the son of Elia or not," her father said with his frustrating calmness. "You will go to the Free Cities to determine if he's the real deal."

"How am I supposed to do that?"
"You will speak to him and his protectors, then you will come back and tell me everything. I'll decide if he is my nephew."

"If he's not?"

"Then Dorne never heard about him."

"And if he is real?"

"Dorne will support him and the Usurper will fall." Doran Martell clenched his swollen hands, his eyes half-shut.

It was the first time Arianne had seen him show such determination, but she was not going to fall that easy in his game.

"Eighteen years and you did nothing. Why now?"

Her father gave her an intense look, "Patience is a virtue, Arianne. You will have to remember that when you rule over Dorne."

*If I've been something during all these years that would be patient.* Patience was what her father had always demanded from her. Be it to get a decent consort or to be included in his plans, she had always had to be patient.

"If you want me to cooperate with this strange thing you're planning, you better tell me."

"I've been binding my time ever since Tywin Lannister sacked the city," he gave a weary sigh. "Now is the better chance we will ever have."

"What makes now different from before?"

"The stag killed the lion and destroyed his most powerfull alliance. The falcon that guided him has died. The Usurper is at his weakest point."
"That fat King has asked the help of the wolf. He's going to make Queen the little she-wolf," Arianne reminded him. "Robert Baratheon is marrying the North, the Riverlands, and the Vale with one wedding. As I see it, the Usurper is stronger than ever."

"Eddard Stark is not Tywin Lannister. He can't be happy with that wedding. He must be waiting for his chance as I am," he made an unbearable pause. "Perhaps this time we're looking for the same." There was a strange glow in his eyes.

She was about to ask what he meant, but Arianne decided she was not going to get anything else from her father.

"I hope this is not like that failure with the Dothraki host."

"That was not my fault. How was I supposed to know your idiot intended would insult the Khal and get killed?"

*I was going to be Queen.* Her father had thought it would please her to become Queen. But Arianne had not fancied the idea of marrying Viserys Targaryen. That meant she would have to renounce to her birthright over Dorne, and no one guaranteed her that her husband would consider her opinion to rule over the Realm. Plus, the last dornish princess that had married a Targaryen had found a horrible destiny. *Perhaps that failure was for the best.*

"Are you going to offer me to this Targaryen pretender? That way Quentyn could end in your place as you always wanted." She should have remained silent, but that was something she had never been able to forget.

"We already discussed that, Arianne, and I recognized it had been a mistake," her father looked away, perhaps he was truly ashamed. "If that pretender is my nephew, we won't need that kind of arrangement. Dorne will be yours."

*It might be convenient for me to befriend the future King of Westeros.*

"Fine, what is going to be my excuse for going to Essos, father?"
"You're visiting your mother at Norvos. Nym and Tyene will go with you, to protect you."

"I thought you didn't trust their discretion."

"Oberyn told them you're visiting Mellario. The deviation from your destination depends on you."

"So I can't tell them the real purpose of the visit. Very well, I won't utter a word." Even if she couldn't tell them, it was good enough to go with her cousins. Arianne trusted them more than anyone else.

"You'll leave the day after tomorrow," Doran Martell took her hand. "I'm putting the future of Dorne in your hands."

"I understand father," she kissed her father's forehead before exiting the room.

Arianne went to look for her cousins. Despite the importance of her mission, it was exciting to think they would travel together to the Free Cities. She started to imagine the things they would see and experience. It might be the most exciting thing she had done in her life.

She found them in the training yard. Oberyn Martell was sparring with Obara; Arianne observed them with envy. More than one time since she was little she wished Oberyn would have been her father. She loved her Doran Martell, but she yearned for the freedom the Sand Snakes had. To be able to decide her future.

*Being a bastard is easier than being a princess.* She could have stayed in Essos if she had been Sand. *I am a Martell, and I live for the sake of Dorne.*

Chapter End Notes

I had to reread Arianne's chapters to write her POV. I hope I didn't screw it.
Next Chapter: "The Outcasts"
Hi! I'm sorry it took so long this time.
Thanks for all the encouraging comments you have left on this story.
I'm very happy because Promise Me has reached 200 kudos. :'

I really, really wish I could write way faster, but sometimes it's impossible.

Enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aegon

He smiled when the fish took the bait. It was his tenth capture of the day which meant he had won the bet he had made with Duck.

You won't joke about my royal hands again, Duck.

One single word and the smile had disappeared. He could already hear Connington's reprimand about how he should be training with the sword or studying high valyrian instead of wasting his time fishing.

I'm tired of all this.

His thoughts about being the heir to the Iron Throne had changed on pair with his growth. When he was a little kid, he didn't even know about the matter, so he hadn't cared for Westeros and the great Houses. At ten, after Connington revealed his true origins, he had been confused and scared. He had been living a lie, but it was all he knew and had tried to hold on to it. He had not wanted to be a prince.

By the time he was four and ten, be it for conviction or not having other option, he had embraced the idea. He was Aegon Targaryen sixth of his name. Son of Elia Martell and Rhaegar Targaryen, the rightful heir to the Iron Throne and all that that entailed. He was going to command the Golden
Company, a Dothraki host and recover what the Usurper had stolen away from him.

Almost four years later, with his eighteenth name day near, he was still living the life of Young Griff of Tyrosh. His uncle Viserys had ruined the plans with the Dothraki host. His aunt Daenerys was living happily with her husband and son somewhere in the Dothraki Sea and definitely wasn't interested in recovering an iron chair across the Narrow Sea. He still had the Golden Company and the support of Illyrio, but that had never been enough to aim for the Conquest of the Seven Kingdoms.

With all those failures and delays, he had started to doubt he would ever be able to recover the Iron Throne. The more time it passed, the further the objective moved from him. Despite his studies, he had never been there. How was he supposed to become King of a place he had never seen? Surely he would always feel like an outsider.

Is it even what I want?

Aegon was the son of a prince and a princess, yes, but he couldn't help thinking that the life of a king wasn't suitable for him. Too many duties, too many risks, too many rules. He wasn't even going to be able to choose the woman with whom he would live the rest of his life.

I can't keep living between Griff and Aegon forever. It was madness. Perhaps we should give up already.

There was so much more in the world apart from Westeros. He could keep traveling in the Shy Maid, become a real member of a sellsword company, visit Daenerys or travel to Asshai. Find someone to share his life, forget about the Iron Throne, and stop fearing for his survival. What was wrong about that sort of life?

I have to talk to Connington. The man would fight and growl without a doubt, but he might understand. He might be as wasted as Aegon was.

"Griff! Your father wants to see you!" Lemore called him.

Right in time.

He picked up his catch and ran to meet Connington. He almost collided with Lemore on his way
"You look especially cheerful today, Griff. Did something good happen?"

"It is about to happen," he said before kissing the septa's cheek.

Connington was waiting for him in their shared cabin; he had a parchment in his hand.

"I have something to tell you," he started. Aegon had to talk before his courage vanished for good.

"It can wait. I have excellent news. Your cousin is coming to meet you."

"Eh?! Cousin?"

"Arianne Martell, her father sent her to speak with us."

"What does he want?" He had completely lost the trail of the conversation.

"What does he want?! Don't you understand?!"

"No."

"It means Dorne will support you. It might take time, but she brings our best chance to overthrow the Usurper." Connington was already making plans in his mind; Aegon could see it.

*Here we go again.* Aegon could have laughed. Right after deciding to be Griff, he had been pushed towards Aegon anew. *The gods must hate me.*
"Lady Arya, how long do you plan to stay in bed?!" She heard the voice of Septa Mordane but refused to open her eyes. "Do you think the whole procession will wait until you decide to get ready for the day?"

*They can leave me here for all I care,* she thought as she feigned to keep sleeping.

"Lady Arya, get out of that bed at this moment or I'll call your father."

"Do whatever you want, crone."

"My goodness!" the woman wheezed scandalized. "I'll call Lord Eddard."

Arya threw a pillow at the closed door when the Septa got out of her room. Then she sat at the feet of the bed, prepared to receive her father, to start a discussion. She had decided she was going to make the journey as insufferable as possible for him, for everyone else.

"Lord Eddard, I swear it's an impossible task to make a Lady out of that girl, let alone a Queen." Arya heard the Septa complaining from the other side of the door.

"I know," her father sighed. "I'll speak with Arya."

Her father entered without even knocking. Arya saw he was tired, and his expression looked almost desperate, but she didn't care. She had stopped feeling empathy for her father or anyone else. Sometimes she even wished everyone could be as miserable as her.

"Arya, will I have to drag you out of the inn?" He started calmly.
"You have dragged me up to this point," she spat.

"Your mother told me she had spoken to you and that you understood the situation."

"It's not like I had a choice."

If she had refused to go, if she had rejected the King, it was more than probable that Robert Baratheon would decide to obliterate her family. And although she felt the scorn towards her parents increased every day, she couldn't allow that fat man to do something to her siblings, not even to Sansa.

Her mother had told her that her father had considered starting a Rebellion for her, and she had believed her at that moment. But, as the days passed, she had dismissed that possibility. Her father had never seemed closer to the King. Whenever she complained about the instruction of Septa Mordane, his father backed the crone's opinion. Why would he insist on giving her a Queen's education if he didn't want her to become one? And he chastised her if she dared to do something she would normally do at Winterfell. Yes, she was convinced, that rebellion thing had been a lie.

"You're making this more difficult, Arya."

"Good. That way, the King might realize that I'm no Queen material."

"I wish it could be that way," her father said with a whisper.

Liar.

"Come on, Arya, you can't continue like this forever. Your life will become a torture."

It already is a torture. She had been forbidden from doing everything she liked because none of it was proper for a Queen.

"I need some privacy to dress myself," she conceded in the end.
Her father nodded, left the room, and allowed the Septa to enter. The crone had a triumphant expression on her wrinkled face; she had succeeded once again. Arya could only scowl while she brushed her hair and helped her into the gown.

The Septa chose a stupid dress for that day. It was of yellow silk and golden lace; too delicate to move around. That meant she would have to travel in the litter with Sansa, again.

It took an eternity, but she was allowed to leave the inn after the Septa decided she looked presentable enough. The king smiled when she made it out. For once, he looked sober. Still, she couldn't help feeling repugnance towards the man.

"My Lady, I have a present for you."

"A present?" She asked hesitantly. Whatever that came from that fat King could be good.

*Another stupid dress.* Although it didn't matter what it was. Nothing would be enough to make her accept Robert Baratheon.

"I heard you enjoy riding, my lady. I thought you deserved a mount worthy of a Queen." The King was full of himself.

*I don't want to be your Queen.* Suddenly, nothing mattered anymore. She was furious like she had been back at Winterfell. She felt the urge to tear off the stupid dress, and kick the fat King until he understood she was not Lyanna Stark. But she didn't. That would only gain her another reprimand from her father and the Septa. However, a different idea crossed her mind.

"You're very kind, Your Grace," Arya gathered her whole self-control to pronounce the words. "Can I ride with the rest of the procession? I find the litter boring." She did her best to produce a smile.

"Hah! A northern Lady through and through." The King buffed amused. "I live to fulfill my Lady's wishes."

When the procession started to move again, Arya was riding beside the King. Her father gave her a faint smile as he took his position in the column. She looked away from him.
The fat King talked about the wars he had directed. Since they were near the Trident, he made emphasis on his battle against Rhaegar Targaryen. Arya bared his senseless talk, trying to act the way Sansa would.

Two hours after they left the Crossroad's inn the fat King finally got tired of blabbering and the slow pace Arya had kept. He excused himself and moved ahead of the column, leaving Arya under the protection of Meryn Trant. The white knight didn't pay her especial attention; it was like she didn't exist for him. The knight was more interested in one of the sutlers' wife.

*I won't get a better chance.* Since she had been traveling with the King, none of her father's men was near to her. She wasn't riding near the court, and the common folk traveling with them weren't paying attention to her. *If it doesn't work this time, I'll surrender,* she promised herself.

She breathed, strengthened her grip on the reins and urged the horse away from the column. She didn't turn back, not even when the heard the shouts. She had to get as far as she could and away from the open field, into the forest. Arya didn't know those lands, but she pretended it was the Wolfswood and went ahead.

She didn't know how much time she had been riding or if someone was behind her. She slowed the pace a little and looked back; there was no one behind her. The fat King had been right about something. The horse had been an excellent mount, although that didn't mean she was safe yet.

Arya stopped and thought for a second. The only sound she was able to hear was her own breathing; she was panting. Her legs hurt; the stupid yellow dress wasn't right to ride the way she had. Her hands were bleeding because of the hysterical way she had held the reins. She didn't know whether she would be able to keep riding. She dismounted, and slapped the hindquarters of the horse. Then, walked to the opposite direction always hiding in the bushes.

*Now, what do I do?* She had succeeded in escaping but she had nowhere to go. She was hurt, tired and had no food or gold with her, not even a knife to defend herself if something happened. *Death is still better than marrying that fat pervert.*

She found a small stream, washed her hurt hands and bandaged them with strands of yellow silk. She decided the color of her outfit was too noteworthy, so she covered it with mud the best she could.

Dusk found her still wandering the forest of the Riverlands aimlessly. Even though she didn't want
to admit it, she was completely lost.

At least they had not found me yet. She sat underneath the roots of a tree and hugged her knees. It was starting to get cold. Tomorrow, when the sun rises, I'll travel south until I reach Dorne. She would have preferred going north, perhaps look for Jon at the Wall, but that would be the first place they would search.

Arya tried to sleep, but even the slightest of the sounds startled her. She was worried that the King's men would found her.

The dark blue sky was starting to change to orange when she heard the voices. Arya recognized one of them as Meryn Trant.

"The little cunt escapes and we have to search the whole night for her." The man was furious.

"She is the King's betrothed."

"I don't know why he is so obsessed with her. He could have any woman he desired, but he chooses the little she-wolf."

"They say she looks like Lady Lyanna."

"She looks like a skinny boy. Perhaps the King and Lord Renly are more similar than we thought." Trant started to laugh.

"If the King heard you..."

"He won't hear me. He's too busy roaring orders from Darry's throne," Trant spat. "If he wants the little whore so much, he should look himself."

Arya held her breath and started to walk away from the voices. She was so focused on the guards that she didn't hear someone was behind her till it was too late. She tried to turn around, but a shadow caught her and covered her mouth with a gloved hand.
Damn it! It surely was a crook. A man from the King would have called the white knights already. I'm not going to go from the King's captive to a bandit's hostage. She gathered the last of her strength and prepared to fight.

Arya's elbow hit him right in the ribs; he made a major effort to avoid making a sound. The two royal guards were still too close from them. As she dragged a squirming Arya away from that place, he appreciated wearing the gloves. Otherwise, Arya would have ripped his hand with her teeth.

Robert Baratheon should thank me for what I'm doing. Knowing Arya, she could have stabbed him with a meat knife during the wedding feast.

"It's me, little sister," he whispered when he made sure no one was near.

Arya stopped fighting. He let her go, and she turned to him. The relief in her face quickly transformed into a scowl. She punched him in the stomach with all her might.

"You scared me, stupid," she said as Jon tried to recover his breath.

"I didn't want..."

Tears started to fall from her eyes before he could finish. Arya threw her arms around him; he held her for a brief moment. Jon made her look at him.

"You must be tired, but we have to get away from here."
Arya nodded. "How come you are here?"

"There are dozens of soldiers looking for you. We'll talk later." Jon still felt ashamed for what he had done to Benjen Stark and his sworn brothers. "First change those clothes, you must be freezing." He handed her the bag that Bran had sent her.

Arya tore up the ruined dress and left the fabric hanging from a near shrub. She took his left hand. That made him wince, for it was the hand she had bitten. She was about to say something, but he raised a finger to his lips. The number of explorers would increase now that the darkness of night had relented.

They continued sneaking in the forest. They almost crossed paths with the explorers a couple of times. However, be it luck or their precautions, they made it to the place where Jon had left the horses. He knew he should consider himself fortunate that no one had found them.

"Would you mind if I cut your hair?" He asked Arya after retrieving everything. "They are looking for a girl, not a boy," he explained.

"Do I look like Sansa to you?" The mention of the name of one of their siblings created a fleeting silence. "I would do anything to make sure that fat King won't find me."

"You never change," he smiled for the first time since he left Winterfell.

Jon took his dagger and started to cut Arya's hair tresses. He had never done something like that before, so her head ended looking bumpy. He would have laughed at her, but that was hardly the right time.

"There, now you are my little brother," he mussed what remained of her hair. "You can be Arry until we make it to Essos."

"We are going to the Free Cities?" Her expression had a trace of fear.

"The King won't be able to find us there."
"I hope."

"Is there a port near?"

"The saltpans. It will take us a week at most to get there."

They mounted and followed the road; it was the fastest way to reach their destination. Besides, everyone was searching Arya in the woods.

Their first journey was uncommonly silent. Arya was barely staring at him. For whatever the reason, Jon couldn't bring himself to ask her what was wrong with her.

At the end of the day, they camped on the roadside, but without a campfire. Arya was silently staring at the ground in front of her. Jon sat by her side, this time decided to make her talk.

"What is it, little sister? Have you repented from running away?"

"What?" Arya raised her head immediately. "No. It's just," she stopped and bit her lower lip. "Is the king going to hurt everyone because of what I did?"

"The only thing he knows is that you got lost while riding in the forest." Jon did his best to sound convincing. That was something that had worried him as well.

"If something bad were to happen, it would be my fault."

"Then we are accomplices," he forced a smile. "I'm sure they will be fine."

*And if they're not, we'll have to deal with the guilt for the rest of our lives.*

Arya assented, but her face didn't change. "I'm sorry, Jon."
"Sorry about what?"

"What I said that day. It was not true."

'I hate you.'

"I understand," he said despite knowing he had needed her reassurance.

"I was angry."

"You had the right to be angry. I had made you a promise, and I almost failed you."

"No," she shook her head minutely. "You are here. And you won't be able to return to the North or Winterfell because of me."

"That was never truly my place, Arya. I was always a nuisance there. Maybe Essos is the right place for me."

"For us. I have never wanted to be a Lady."

"You're right, little sister."

Arya turned to him with a scowl. "I thought I would be Arry, your little brother."

"Ah, right. I almost forgot, little brother."

They laughed, and for a moment, they forgot they were fugitives with an uncertain life ahead.
"I doubt someone would recognize you here, but you better wear the scarf."

Arya did as he said, and they went to look for a place to sell the horses. The woman in charge stared at them with mistrust before offering a roughly fair price for the animals. There was no use for them to argue, so he accepted almost immediately.

"I think we can afford a hot meal before looking for the ship, Arry."

"You make my name sound weird," she protested.

"It's weird, little brother."

He had been the one who proposed it, but he still found difficult to call Arya like that.

There was a great scandal when they entered the inn's dining hall. The people of the place were fervently discussing something. They sat as far from the ruckus as possible once they discerned the topic.

"The King is cursed. There's no doubt about it," an old man said.

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, two wolf brides lost and a traitor lioness."

"They said the little girl was eaten by a wolf."

"I heard it was a bear."

"I think she escaped," commented the landlady. "Had I been in her place, I would have done the
"He is the King."

"He is fat, enjoys drinking and fancies whores. The girl was no more than two and ten."

"Still she was a highborn Lady. All Ladies want to become Queen."

"Maybe a Targaryen abducted her. Some say she is the reincarnation of Lyanna Stark."

Jon shook his head to Arya when he saw her scowling.

"Abducted by a Targaryen?" A knight snorted. "Come on, all of them are dead like the girl is. The king has to accept it already."

The discussion went on like that even after they finished their meal. Jon wondered what they would do if they discovered the runaway bride was right in front of them. He decided it was better that he never got an answer to his question.

They went to the port and bought two passages on a ship directed to Braavos. The Titan's Daughter, according to the man, would take them to Braavos faster than any other ship.

"I had forgotten to ask," Arya started. They were waiting on the deck. "How did you find me in the forest?"

"Ah, that. I followed the procession since you crossed the Neck," he paused. "I had been waiting for you to try something like that and give me a chance."

For a moment, he had thought that Arya had resigned to her destiny and wouldn't rebel against the King. The thought had filled him with panic because he couldn't think of another way to save her.

"So you followed me when I got away from the column?"
"I think I was the first, but I lost you when I stopped to hide the horses. I guess we both had luck."

"Where did you get the horses, the gold, and the food? Did you...?"

"Steal? For the gods, no." Although stealing couldn't be worse than abducting the King's bride. "Do you think I am the only one who loves you enough to defy a King?" He whispered the last part. "Robb gave me everything. Except the clothes, those are a present from Bran."

"I used to steal his breeches when we trained at the godswood," she made a weak smile and traced the fabric with her fingers as if it were the first time she felt it. "I wish I could have thanked them."

Jon realized at that moment that Arya knew as well as he did that they might not see Robb, Bran, Rickon, Sansa, their father, the Wolfswood or Winterfell ever again. He would never know who his mother was. They had talked about the things they would be able to do and see at the Free Cities. However, no matter how exciting their adventure was, it would not make up for what they were leaving behind. Everything they had known and treasured.

And it is all Robert Baratheon's blame.

"That fat King will die someday," he repeated Robb's words.

It was a vague and distant promise. Jon and Arya didn't belong to Westeros anymore, and life was unpredictable. Yet it was the only thing they had to hold on.

"We are alone until that day comes."

"We are not alone."

Jon took her hand, and they smiled to each other. The captain shouted some orders and the deck began to move. Before they knew it, the coast had started to get farther and farther away. The sight produced a deep longing in his heart. Maybe Arya felt the same way because she was squeezing his hand with more strength every second.
"I'm glad you are with me," they said at the same time.

Chapter End Notes

For this one, Aegon is only slightly older than Jon. Let's say a little less than a year. (I'm still not sure what's the age difference in canon)

From next week on, I'll be dealing with a new agenda. I'm not sure whether this will affect the updates for both my stories. I'll see how that works.

Next Chapter: "Dangerous Fellows"
Eddard Stark was speechless; the lump in his throat was about to suffocate him. He could only
stare at the dirty traces of the damaged fabric that Jory had presented to them. The yellow gown
was barely recognizable, but he had the certainty that it was the dress Arya had worn that day. A
known sensation, one he had experimented almost two decades before, had invaded him.

"What is that?" Robert was the one who asked.

"It is Lady Arya's dress, Your Grace."

"That is a dirty rag. Are you trying to make fun of your King?!"

"No, Your Grace." Jory glanced at his Lord, looking for support, but Eddard was unable to utter a
word. "I'm sure it belongs to Lady Arya."

"I ORDERED YOU TO LOOK FOR MY BRIDE, NOT HER DRESS!" Robert's imposing voice
made the whole Darry's Castle tremble.

Fortunately for Jory, the racked woken up Eddard. "They are doing what they can, Robert," Eddard
felt like every word required an impossible effort from him.
"It is not enough!" Robert hit the table with his enormous fist. "They are a bunch of useless imbeciles."

"That is Arya's dress," he said in a whisper.

The King fell silent. "Does that mean-?"

Eddard knew what Robert was asking. In fact, he was wondering the same. For the second time in their lives, a girl they both held precious had faded. He cursed the god’s cruelty.

"We don't know what happened," he said trying to gather himself.

"How can you say it so calmly?! Don't you care for what might have happened to her?!"

Eddard couldn't stand it anymore. "SHE IS MY DAUGHTER! DON'T DARE TO INSINUATE I'M NOT WORRIED!" He snapped at the King.

Eddard could not remember a time when he had shouted at Robert, not even before he became king. Robert was as surprised as him; he was incredulously staring at Ned.

"My apologies, Your Grace," he corrected himself before Robert could label his reaction as insurrection. "I am utterly wasted. I believe it would be better if I retired for the day. Do I have your leave?"

Robert nodded in approval; still astonished. Eddard gave a slight bow and turned to leave.

"Ned," Robert called him when he was at the door.

"Yes, Your Grace?" Eddard didn't regard the King for he couldn't stand his sight.

If somebody had told him he would come to hold such hatred towards Robert Baratheon when he was Jon Arryn's pupil at the Vale, he would have laughed. He could not believe life had changed that much.
"We will find her." There was grief in Robert's voice yet Eddard could not pity him.

"Of course, Your Grace." He left.

*Perhaps it would be better if we didn't.* He didn't know what was worse: to lose Arya forever or to drag her back into a life that would make her miserable.

Eddard got to his room at Darry's castle lead by instinct, for he couldn't think of another thing that wasn't the ruined yellow gown that had belonged to Arya.

*This tragedy is my fault.* He sat on the edge of the bed and ran his fingers through his hair.

He wondered how desperate had been Arya to escape in such a way. Of course, she had always been quite rash while acting, but that didn't mean she lacked common sense.

Eddard Stark had started to regret his decision of not informing his children about his real plans. He had underestimated their maturity to hide the situation and was paying a tremendous toll. After all those years of talking about how the lone wolf died, he had been the one responsible for dividing the pack. Robb couldn't stand the sight of him, Arya had disappeared, and Jon had ended at the end of the world.

*'Promise me, Ned.'* Recently, he heard Lyanna's plea more regularly. *What a failure I am.*

He fell asleep, but his regrets, wouldn't let him find peace. The thought of Arya brought with it things he had struggled to forget.

In his dream, a girl with intriguing violet eyes and the sweetest smile he had ever seen was wearing Arya's yellow dress. He dreamt of the Tourney of Harrenhall and the Rebellion; the Tower of Joy and three White Knights; a bed of blood and an unfulfilled promise.

When he opened his eyes, he could smell the scent of winter roses that existed only in his memory.
He was staring absentmindedly at the breakfast he had barely touched when Jory entered with a letter. He knew it was from Benjen because of the plain black seal.

*Dark Wings,* the words appeared immediately in his mind. Eddard didn't want to read the parchment; it gave him a bad feeling. *Maybe Mance Rayder has finally decided to attack.*

"I WANT THEIR HEADS ON PIKES!" Robert burst into the solar, interrupting his pondering.

Eddard felt a struck of panic. His first thought was that they had found out Arya had escaped, and the King asked for his family's heads. In his alarm, he made an instinctive movement towards the hilt of the sword. Fortunately, Robert didn't notice and turned to regard one of his Royal Guards.

"Oakheart, tell the servants to have everything ready in five minutes or else they'll share Trant's and that squire's end."

Arys Oakheart knew he better didn't contradict the King, so he ran out of the room immediately.

"Why are you going to behead Meryn Trant?" Eddard had recovered some of his composure by then.

Robert dropped on a chair in front of him.

"Balon Swann found one shoe and a trail in a place Trant searched the first day," Robert made a pause; he didn't want to tell Eddard the next. "He followed the trail to the place where your guards found the dress, then to the origin of a horse track where they found cut hair tresses."

Eddard felt nausea. "You believe it's Arya's hair."

"No one has to tell me some bandit abducted her for the Seven know what reason." Robert wasn't shouting like the last time. Perhaps, despite everything, he was as exhausted as Ned. "I sentenced Trant for his uselessness, and those criminals-" Robert paused and looked him straight into the eye; Eddard saw the same fury he had seen at the Tourney of Harrenhal. "They will die, of course, but the method will depend on the state in which we find her." Robert had never called Arya by her name.
The King stood up and exited the room. Eddard would have wanted to lock himself into his chamber and be alone. But he knew, at that moment, it was better not to test Robert's patience.

For the first time since the Seven Kingdoms became one Realm, the King dismissed his Justice and passed the sentence himself.

When all concluded, Eddard observed Robert's inexpressive face. He knew that if there had been something left of the Vale's Robert, it had perished along with the White Knight. Despite the resentment, he felt against Robert, Eddard wondered why the gods had been so severe with him.

Eddard spent the rest of the day looking for excuses to avoid writing a letter to Catelyn. If their daughter had been kidnapped, their chances to find her were close to inexistent.

As he pondered what he could write, so that his wife wouldn't suffer, he remembered Benjen's letter.

Eddard had expected to find a long message explaining that the Night's Watch needed Winterfell's help against the wildlings. He was wrong.

*Jon left.* Two simple words that provided him the faintest of hopes.

That night, Eddard Stark supplicated the gods for two things. First, as improbable as it was, that Jon had been the one who had taken Arya. Second, if his first assumption was right, that Robert would never find them.

---

**Bran**

Winterfell had changed. When Arya, Jon, Sansa, and father left, they had taken an essential part of Winterfell with them. As he stared at the landscape from his privileged position at the top of the
broken tower, he realized that wasn't a transitory situation.

It was impossible for things to remain the same forever, and he considered that would be boring. He only wished the change had not been that harsh for all of them.

His mother was always sad, his father was far away, Robb was always angry, Rickon had become wilder, and he might not see Jon, Sansa and Arya again. He didn't know how much he liked Sansa's dreaminess, Jon's gloominess, and Arya's craziness until they left.

*I was supposed to go with them.* Bran was going to live in King's Landing and learn how to be a knight from Barristan the Bold. He was going to be knighted, enter into the Kingsguard and become Lord Commander of the Royal Guard.

His father had insisted that he didn't know what the King wanted from him, but everyone whispered he was going to be Hand ever since Robert Baratheon's visit was announced. Bran thought it might be his opportunity to become a knight. However, when the King announced he wanted to marry Arya, and everything started to go wrong, his mother was so depressed that she begged him to stay. She wouldn't stand to let go of another child.

*One day, after things calm down,* he promised. For now, he knew they would only get worse. Especially if Jon had succeeded. He sighed and carefully made his way down the tower.

He was crossing the main yard when he found Maester Luwin.

"Bran, were you climbing that tower again?" The man asked as they both made the way into the main building.

"I was." There was no use to lie.

Maester Luwin frowned. "Do you have to fall to understand how dangerous that is?"

*So it's war, but no one tries to discourage me from becoming a Knight.*

"I never fall," Bran answered as usual.
"Think about your mother. She has enough worries as it is. You could at least save her to worry about your safety."

"I don't need anyone to take care of me. I am a man." He hated when people treated him like Rickon.

The Maester gave him a pointed look. "You are a boy, Bran."

"I'm almost two and ten," he retorted.

"Your brother is almost eighteen, yet he insists on behaving like a child. Being an adult is not defined by age but by the maturity of our actions. Risking your life climbing trees and dangerous places is far from being adult-like."

Bran scowled. He couldn't stand it when Maester Luwin was that reasonable, but he couldn't deny he was right. Robb had been neglecting his responsibilities at Winterfell because he wanted to stay away from their mother. He should have put his anger aside for the sake of Winterfell.

"I'll try to stay away from the trees," Bran promised.

"You'll try," the man snorted. "I guess that's the best I will ever get from you." Maester Luwin shook his almost bald head. "Do me a favour and go fetch your brother. I'll be at the main hall with your mother."

"Did something happen?"

"Your father sent a letter. Robb might want to read it."

Robb was incredibly reluctant to follow Bran.

"I'm not interested in what he wrote," Robb said as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. He had been in the training yard.
"It might be something important," Bran tried to reason with Robb.

"I'd prefer not to see mother."

"For how long are you planning to carry on with it, Robb?"

The betrothal thing had not been their mother's choice.

"I don't know," Robb looked a bit ashamed to be questioned by his younger brother. "Until I know they are safe."

*Then you will have to wait quite a long time.* It was not like Jon and Arya could send a letter to Winterfell.

"You are behaving childishly."

"Ha, ha, ha, and you're always wise, Bran," Robb sighed. "I wish things could be like they were before."

"It's like asking for the snow to stop falling in the North."

Robb nodded. "Come on, I'll put an end to my childishness."

They heard the sobs even before opening the door of the room. It was their mother.

"What happened?" Robb asked to the Maester.

"Your sister went missing near the Trident. There are reasons to think she-"
"Arya can't be dead!" His mother shouted.

"I never said that, my Lady," the Maester corrected. "They think she was abducted by some criminal while riding in the forest."

Bran and Robb exchanged a knowing stare. Robb went pale.

"Was no one guarding her?" Bran tried to appear concerned. In his heart he believed it had been Jon.

"Apparently, she escaped from the guards. You know your sister's temperament."

"It was the King's guards fault. It's all Robert's blame. She should have never left Winterfell." Their mother pronounced before starting to cry again.

Robb moved forward to embrace their mother. "She is fine," For a moment, Bran feared he might tell her the truth. "They will find her." His brother kept whispering reassuring words to their mother as he conducted her to her chambers.

"How much time has it been since she went missing?" He had to make sure it was what he had been thinking.

"A little more than a fortnight."

*It must have been Jon.*

"I don't think they will find her," Maester Luwin confessed.

*They better don't. Otherwise, they could all end dead.*

"Don't tell that to my mother, Maester."
The Maester assented.

Bran walked to his mother's chamber. He found Robb pacing in front of the entrance; with his concerned face, he looked a lot like their father. As soon as he saw Bran, he dragged him to a private place.

"We should tell her," Robb blurted immediately.

"We can't."

"If we don't tell her, she might go mad." Blame was evident in his face.

"We can't," Bran repeated. "I don't enjoy seeing mother like that, but we can't tell her. In her desperation, she might reveal the secret."

*Or she could take reprisals against Jon.* It was no secret that their mother had never liked their half-brother.

"I didn't want things to go this way."

"Neither did I." They had done it for Arya.

"What are we going to do now?"

Bran wasn't sure either. Maester Luwin had been right; they were still boys.

"Keep our promise."
Arianne

"Do you have some way to proof you are who you say you are?" She asked the older woman.

Arianne heard the man who claimed to be Jon Connington growl in disapproval but paid no attention to it. If they had thought they would convince her right away because she was a young princess, they were wrong.

*Violet eyes might be a rare feature at Westeros, but the Free Cities are another deal. They could have easily hired a whore from Lys to play Ashara Dayne's role. My father or uncle Oberyn might have been able to tell whether she is authentic.*

"I don't know which kind of proof you are looking for, princess. I have told you my story."

*One hard to believe. Ashara Dayne had feigned her death to escape with her baby cousin. They couldn't save Rhaenys because they didn't find a substitute for her. It was unbelievable that Elia had accepted such a proceeding. Was her relationship with my aunt that close? If what she told was true, she had given up her complete life to protect the son of another woman.*

"A personal confession perhaps. Something my father or my uncle can confirm."

The older woman thought for a while.

"Elia's first love was Baelor Breakwind. The Red Viper can confirm it."

Arianne raised a brow. It was the first time she heard that name. But the fact that she had named her uncle by his nickname called her attention.

"Is there something else you want to add?"

"We would want to know your answer, princess." Jon Connington pointed.
"I'm not the one who decides, my Lord. I'm a humble messenger." Arianne smirked when the man growled again.

_There's more than one way to have fun with men._ She found it amusing to tease him.

"We will wait for your answer, princess," he conceded.

"Excellent! I'm sure everything will go well for both parts," said their host. "Will you join us for dinner, princess?"

"It will be my honour, Magister Illyrio," she said courteously. She wouldn't gain anything by refusing.

"Excuse me, I'm not hungry." Her presumed cousin prepared to leave.

"Aegon!" Lord Connington tried to stop him. "Your cousin came here to see you."

_So they have decided he is my cousin._

"I don't mind Lord Connington. As you said, I came to see my cousin. But as I haven't decided yet whether he is my cousin or not, he is free to take his leave," she sipped her wine to hide her grin. Her words had earned her another growl from the Old Griffin.

The young man with blue hair that claimed to be her cousin flinched a little but didn't stop. He left.

During the dinner, the only one who talked was the fat Illyrio. He explained her about his business and his desire to see the dragons back in the Iron Throne. He expressed his gratitude towards Dorne for joining such a noble cause.

Arianne answered him with her well-practiced smile. The one she reserved for unwanted people. She had strong doubts about those who declared to be from Westeros. However, she was utterly sure of her opinion of the fat Magister. He was dangerous, and he had ulterior motives to do what
he was doing.

"I should go before my companions start to worry."

Nym and Tyene were busy with their own business, but she had had enough of the fat man's blabbering.

"One of my guards will accompany you to your lodge, princess."

"That would drag a lot of attention, Magister. I'd prefer to leave on my own."

"As you wish, princess."

Arianne didn't walk directly to the entrance; instead, she went to the gardens. She had to order her ideas and memorize the important stuff. If she wrote it, she risked that one of the Sand Snakes might see it.

She got to the place with a fountain and the statue of a young man on it. Her alleged cousin was staring at the still water. She observed him closely. His blue hair made it difficult to identify him as a Targaryen. Still, she couldn't deny he was unusually handsome like the dragon Lords were supposed to be. The statue's features were strangely similar to his.

"I still have my doubts about you being a Targaryen because of that blue hair, but you certainly have their ego."

He lifted his head and frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"To have a statue erected in your honour is quite eccentric."

So it is him, she thought when he blushed.
"I didn't ask for it. Illyrio can be-"

"A nuisance?"

"Sometimes. But I owe him everything."

A dangerous debt.

"I see," Arianne walked to sit beside him. Close enough to make him feel uncomfortable. "You barely talked during the meeting, cousin."

"You don't believe I'm your cousin."

"Does that make you angry?"

"No."

"Is that so? Then they are lying, and you are an orphan who has been used by the fat Magister."

"That could be true," he whispered.

I wasn't expecting that.

"Why would you say that?"

"Essos is the only thing I can remember. I only know what they have told me about my life," he turned to see her. "If you were in my place, would you be able to think of yourself as a princess?"

Probably not.
"I can't answer to that. I've always been a princess."

She smiled, and he answered with the same gesture. She had never seen such a bright smile.

"Well, I have always been Griff of Tyrosh. I'm kind of tired of this runaway life."

I suppose it is not an easy life.

"Let me see you closer," she said suddenly.

"Why?" He asked nervously.

She was delighted to think she could throw a dragon out of balance.

"I want to see the colour of your eyes."

"Would that be enough to convince you I am Aegon Targaryen?" He asked skeptically.

"No. It would satisfy my curiosity."

"How cynical," he snorted. "I wouldn't mind having you like a cousin," he added before staying still.

Arianne took his face between her hands and stared into his eyes trying to find a hint of him being a dragon. She had visited Elia at the Red Keep, but she could only remember Rhaenys running behind her. She released him after a while.

"So?" He asked.
"They are certainly not blue."

"But you are not convinced."

"It's not my decision." He looked a bit disappointed. "I have to go."

"It was nice to meet you, princess." It sounded too much like farewell words.

"We might see each other again."

"Right." He didn't look delighted by the perspective.

What is it that he wants?

Nym hadn't returned, but Tyene was already in their room. Preparing one of her daggers.

"You took your time, Arianne. Was the sellsword good?" Tyene gave her a knowing smile.

She had told the Sand Snakes she was going to have another kind of reunion with Griff of Tyrosh.

"He was unconventional."

He positively wasn't the spoiled prince she had expected.

"Too bad you won't see him again."

"Don't be that sure, Tyene."
They both started when they heard the blast that announced the arrival of the Titan's Daughter to Braavos. They could hear the crew laughing at their reaction, but they were too amazed, staring at the huge protector of the lagoon to care.

Maester Luwin had told them that the Titan of Braavos was, according to some scribe, one of the nine wonders made by men. At that time, he had not imagined he would be able to see it with his own eyes.

"Do you think it is taller than the Wall?" Arya asked with bright eyes.

"I don't know." He had lost his opportunity to see the Wall.

"Isn't the Titan the most magnificent thing you have ever seen?" The captain appeared beside them.

"It is truly amazing," he admitted.

"It's only the beginning of what Braavos has to offer." Pride was evident in every word he said. "I recommend you to visit the Isle of Gods and Izembaro's mummers. If you are interested, the Titan's Daughter will return to the Saltpans in three moons."

It was a painful offer for them to hear.

"Thanks."

The Titan's Daughter had a friendly crew. They all wished them a good trip. They paid a sailor to take them on the boat to a decent inn.
"If I were you I would hide those," the man pointed to the swords. "Exhibit them here means you are looking for a fight."

"Thanks for the counsel."

"Oh, and only wealthy people wear black."

Jon nodded.

"What kind of stupidity is that?" Arya asked.

"They have different customs," he shrugged.

"Are we going to stay here?" Arya wrinkled her nose. That wasn't a good sign coming from her.

"For the time being, let's enter the inn and eat something."

"I'm tired of seafood," she declared.

"What were you expecting from a harbor city?" Jon laughed. "You are hard to please, little sister."

"Am I not Arry anymore?"

Are we far enough from Robert Baratheon?

"I don't know. Maybe it would be better if I kept calling you Arry." Arya frowned. "You can stop being my little brother, though."

"I guess it is better than nothing."
They finished the meal while hearing the babble of the people among them. Jon understood few words, but Arya seemed interested from time to time. It had turned out that she was a natural not only with the sword but at learning other languages. After nearly a moon of living with the crew, she had become able to hold simple conversations in Braavosi.

"Can we go to the Isle of Gods?" Arya asked once they were done.

"Do you think they have a weirwood there?"

Arya shrugged. "Who knows? I want to see the House of Black and White."

Jon turned to regard her. "I don't think that is a good idea."

"Are you scared?" Arya gave him a daring smile.

"We should keep a low profile."

"Come on, no one knows we are here." Arya took his hand and started to pull him through the stone carved bridges above the canals, the way she had done at Winterfell.

Maybe some things can remain the same. Jon smiled and allowed her to lead the way.

Jon teased Arya when he realized they were lost and earned a kick in the shin. It took them a lot to get to their destination, but they got there.

They saw dozens of different temples, of various shapes and materials. The idols in the temples varied from humans to animals and other elements of nature. The Isle of Gods was one of the most spectacular places he had ever seen. He would have never imagined the diversity of gods that existed in the world.

One thing I can thank Robert Baratheon. They had been one day at Braavos, and he had seen more than he would ever have if he had gone to the Wall.
"So, exactly which God do they worship here?" Jon asked once they were in front of the black and white gate.


_How does she know?_ He assumed it was from one of her various conversations with the crew of the Titan's Daughter.

"Which God is that?" He whispered as well. "And why are we murmuring?"

"Death." A man with a plain face informed them in a perfectly understandable common tongue.

Jon didn't like the answer or the man.

"Can we go inside?" Arya looked completely excited.

"A girl and her brother can't go inside."

"Why?"

"The House of Black and White is a place for those who want to give or receive the gift. For those who look to become no one."

_What is that supposed to mean?_

"Come on, Arry, let's keep going." The man was staring at them in a way that made him feel anxious.

"A girl could be no one. Not now, when she gets tired of being Arya Stark." The man stated before entering the temple.
He didn't know how much time they stood still in front of the temple, but when he reacted, he felt the urge to run.

"We have to get out of here."

Jon took Arya's hand and dragged her in the way he hoped would take them to the docks.

"Wait!" It was the second time he had seen Arya scared. "Our stuff is at the inn."

"There's no time for that." Luckily, he had taken the gold with him. "That man knew who you are. This place isn't safe."

*How did he know?* If the man were at the King's service, he would have taken Arya and killed him. However, he could still tell someone he had seen them.

"Where are we going?"

*Volantis? Lys? The Summer Islands?* He couldn't decide. Most of the Free Cities had trades with the Iron Throne.

"Don't know. We need a ship that sets sail now."

They moved frenetically through the city, startling those who crossed their path. They were two bridges away from the docks when Jon saw the first soldier.

He changed the route, to enter an alley. It was useless. Two soldiers were waiting them at the end of the narrow place. Two more were behind them to prevent them from retreating.

"What do they want?" Arya's voice was almost inaudible.

"They are not men from the King." Of that, he could be sure.
The soldiers carried spears, shields and wore a strange helmet with a spike at the top.

Jon considered what chances he had of fighting them. He knew nothing about those warriors.

"Move, Strong Belwas has to see them." Jon heard.

The soldiers moved, and a huge, bald man with tanned skin appeared in front of them.

Jon took the hilt of his sword.

"Strong Belwas isn't here to fight." His immense belly moved with the words.

"Then allow us to pass."

"The Master sent me to look for the wolves."

What is going on here? No one was supposed to recognize them there.

"Who is your Master?"

"You have to meet him."

"We know Robert Baratheon well enough," he ventured.

"Belwas the Strong doesn't serve the Iron Chair." He answered almost angrily.

"We are not going with you," Arya stated.

"The Master ordered Strong Belwas not to kill the wolves, but he didn't order not to harm them. I'll
take the wolves with me no matter what."

Jon gave a side glance to Arya. She would put up a good fight; they would have to use strength to subdue her. He might stand being beaten up, but he didn't want Arya to go through the same.

"We'll met your Master."

The enormous man smiled.

"Jon!" Arya was staring at him as if he had a second head.

"They just want us to meet their Master, right?"

"Those are Strong Belwas orders," the man said with a nod.

"Lead the way."

In the end, they boarded a ship.

"What are you thinking?" Arya questioned him when they were alone.

"It's clear that our arrival was no secret, little sister. They might be our best opportunity to get away from Robert Baratheon."

"We don't know who they are, or what they will do with us," she said pretty logically.

"We know what Robert Baratheon will do with us if he finds us." He knew it was a risky decision. "Whatever they want, I won't let them hurt you," promised.

"I won't let them hurt you either."
Six days after leaving Braavos, they arrived at wherever they were supposed to go. Strong Belwas ordered to them to board a litter and keep the curtains closed. As they have always lived in the cold, the journey felt like going through the Seven Hells.

It was nightfall when they got out of the litter. They were in a prominently luxurious mansion.

"My Master is waiting for the wolves."

A richly served table and an incredibly fat man were waiting for them.

"Welcome," said the man. "You must be hungry." He prompted them to sit. "Make yourselves at home."

"Who are you?" Arya looked ready to stab the man.

"Oh, where are my manners? I'm Magister Illyrio Mopatis, my little Lady." He said before attacking a chicken leg.

We are at Pentos.

"How did you know about us?"

"Robert Baratheon has been quite loud about it," He commented while serving some pie on his plate. "And you, little wolf pups, weren't discreet enough in your escape."

"What do you want from us?"

"Your friendship," he smiled. "I want to offer you and your charming sister, protection from the
"Usurper." It was the first time Jon heard someone calling Robert Baratheon *Usurper.*

"Why?"

"I like to defend what is just and fair. What that drunken king intended was an infamy." He was well informed.

"How are we supposed to pay such kindness?"

The fat Magister made an offended face. "Gaining your friendship would be enough."

*What does he want?* He couldn't think of which kind of advantage Westerosi fugitives could represent for a Pentoshi Magister.

"You are most kind Magister Illyrio, but we don't want to perturb your home." He stood up. Arya followed him.

"Oh, you wouldn't disturb my life at all. Keeping you here would be unwise."

"Then where are we supposed to go?" Their encounter became stranger every minute.

"You'll travel with some excellent friends of mine. I think you'll get along."

"How can you be sure?" Arya snorted; she was definitely trying to hide her distress.

The Magister smiled widely. "They aren't fond of Robert Baratheon either."

Chapter End Notes
I'm not sure about this chapter. It feels a little like filler and I think I couldn't get Bran right. I hope it didn't turn out that bad.

Next Chapter: "Uninvited Company"
Uninvited Company

Chapter Notes

My godness!! Almost two months since the last update. Are you sill there?

I wasn't supposed to finish the chapter until the Sunday, but I needed a break from real life.
Thanks for all the kudos (already more than 300!), the fabulous reviews and hilarious comments.

Josh, Jackoblades47, emperor and the others, thanks for urging me to update. I know I am a "black hearted bastard" fot taking so much time.

Hope the chapter has worth the waiting. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aegon

Aegon leaned over the balcony's rail to have a better look at the new additions to their group. They were sitting below the statue where he had last talked with Arianne Martell. He wasn't close enough to hear what they were saying. However, giving the gestures the small one was making, they were having an argument.

*The last thing we need is troublemakers traveling with us.* Illyrio had told them he had made contact with someone who could represent an advantage against Robert Baratheon. But he had not revealed the identities of those valuable companions yet. I don't care who they are. *If they are going to be a nuisance, we could do without their presence.*

He saw the taller of them moving to embrace the other. The little one fought against it for an instant before settling and returning the gesture.

"I SAID NO!" Connington's shout made him wince.

Aegon sighed and returned to the room where the others were discussing.
Rolly and Haldon were holding Connington, who was a breath away from hitting their host. Illyrio had not even blinked.

"What is happening?"

"The Lord Hand is being unreasonable, Your Grace," Illyrio answered.

Everyone had started to call him like that since Arianne Martell visited. They were sure she would return, Aegon not so much.

"Unreasonable? I'm not going to consent it."

"Consent what?" Aegon had left for the balcony a single minute, but he had completely lost the track of the conversation.

Connington didn't turn to see him.

"They are the children of one of the Usurper's dogs. I won't have them near the Prince."
Connington stated firmly.

"Who are they?" He had started to understand.

There was a weird silence in the room.

"The son and daughter of Eddard Stark." Lemore was the one who provided him the answer.

Aegon wasn't sure what to think of it. They were as responsible for the Rebellion as Aegon was for his grandfather's atrocities. However, Eddard Stark had been one of the main reasons for the Rebellion to succeed; he didn't know if he liked the idea of traveling with his children.

"Illyrio, you know I am always thankful for what you do for us. But I don't see the advantage in having them with us. In fact, I consider it is very dangerous."
Eddard Stark had raised them, which meant they were loyal to Robert Baratheon.

"His Grace is, as well as Lord Connington, overlooking an important matter." Illyrio shot an almost despising stare at Connington. "Since the Prince asked politely, I'll explain."

"This better be good," Connington muttered, shoving Rolly off him.

"It is true that those two were raised by the Usurper's best friend. However, as you must know, Robert Baratheon wanted to marry the poor girl." Illyrio made a pout before sipping his wine.

"So what?" Aegon had never seen Connington more impatient.

*It must be because of the Battle of the Bells.* He had heard the story from Lemore.

Aegon knew Connington thought the triumph of the Rebellion was his fault. If he had defeated Eddard Stark and killed Robert Baratheon that day, the Targaryens would still sit on the Iron Throne. He would have wanted to tell him it had not been his fault, but it would be useless. Aegon's pardon meant nothing to Connington. *His* was not the pardon Connington wanted.

*I wonder if he will feel better if we win the Iron Throne.*

"Eddard Stark didn't like his friend's decision," Illyrio continued. "The birds across the Narrow Sea sing a song about a wolf that is planning to eat a stag," the Magister shared with a smile.

*Could that be possible?* Aegon couldn't understand why a man would abhor the opportunity of a royal wedding. Eddard Stark himself had married for the sake of politics during the Rebellion.

"Your informants are selling you lies, Illyrio." Connington refused to listen.

"Let's assume Eddard Stark isn't plotting against Robert Baratheon. Robb Stark was infuriated when his father accepted the union. Which side would he choose if he sees his siblings are supporting us?"
"You are funding this madness on a bunch of stupid suppositions. I won't hear another word of it."

Connington turned to leave. Aegon reacted and tried to stop him. More than being convinced by Illyrio's words, a sickly curiosity had invaded him. He wanted to spend time with someone who had lived in Westeros since the Usurper ascended to the Throne.

"Connington, wait."

"Don't tell me you are considering Illyrio's suggestion, brat."

"I am. Well, no," Aegon stopped to order his thoughts. "We don't have to make them our allies, but they could make excellent hostages when the time comes."

"I won't trust your safety to those two. We don't know them."

"We don't have to tell them who we are. Just keep them close."

Connington went silent an instant and stared him in a way he had never done before. "You might not be as heedless as I thought."

Aegon suppressed his smile. He had convinced him.

"Fine, let's get over with this nonsense. If we don't leave at dusk, we won't arrive in time to Volantis."

Volantis was the place where they would receive an answer from Doran Martell. Dorne's support was their last chance to fight for the Iron Throne.

Illyrio gave the order to summon the Starks to the room where they had been talking.

*Weren't they a daughter and a son?* Aegon thought after they crossed the door. The girl's gangly
appearance and short hair didn't match his concept of a Lady.

She was a smaller version of her older brother. Both of them had dark hair, gray eyes, long faces, and sulking expressions. She had not released the hand of his older brother. More likely trying to extract some courage from him. The Stark siblings might be more wary of Aegon and company than Connington was of them.

*They don't look like a menace to me.* However, it was possible that Aegon could not see something the others did.

Connington's expression was pure panic. It was like the Usurper had just entered with a twenty thousand men host. Lemore didn't look any better. She looked like someone who had just seen a ghost. She had stopped moving, and the air completely abandoned her chest. It even seemed as if she were about to cry.

Illyrio walked towards the two strangers and pushed them forward.

"Allow me to introduce you to Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell, and her natural brother, Jon Snow." Illyrio regarded his visitors. "These are the friends I talked you about, young wolves. Griff of Tyrosh, his son, Lemore, Haldon, and Rolly."

There was a prolonged uncomfortable silence. The Starks had perceived Connington's hostility towards them.

"We don't want to cause trouble or interfere with your business," Jon Snow started with his stare fixed on the floor. "I just want to keep my sister away from Robert Baratheon."

Connington reacted after Jon Snow spoke.

"I'll get rid of you at the first sign of trouble. You have been warned," he declared unable to hide his disgust.

Jon Snow nodded. Arya Stark wanted to say something but ultimately didn't; she limited to glower at Connington.
It will be annoying to travel with them. His first impression of Arya Stark was that she was troublesome, and Connington hated that sort of people. Aegon could anticipate their agitated future.

"Let's leave already." Connington turned to their host. "Is everything ready, Illyrio?"

"It is. Yandry and Ysilla are already waiting for you at the usual place," the Magister answered with a satisfied smile.

"Haldon, Duck, you take those brats to the entrance. Be sure to explain them the precautions we take during the journey."

Arya Stark was ready to protest to Connington giving her orders. Fortunately for everyone, her brother noticed and calmed her.

"I'll blame you if they unleash our fail, Illyrio," Connington growled when the Starks had left.

"My Lord," Illyrio feigned being offended. "You are exaggerating."

"The boy only resembles his father, Griff." Lemore tried to reason with Connington. "He is not Eddard Stark."

"Repeat that to yourself, Lemore. I don't want your emotions to complicate our situation more. I saw how you were staring at him."

"Come on, Griff." Lemore rolled her eyes. "He could be my son."

"I thought he was your son."

"You know that is a rumor," she said with narrowed eyes.

Lemore had not taken well Connington's comment. Aegon had to admit it had been cruel.
For Aegon, she had always been Lemore. He tended to forget she had once been Ashara Dayne. That she had loved Eddard Stark. That she had lost him, her brother and a child because of the Rebellion. That she had had a life before Essos, and Aegon.

"You are unnecessarily rude, Connington." He took Lemore's arm and guided her to the door.

"Don't call me Connington, brat!" he shouted exasperated. "Do you want to reveal your identity right away?!

As if they could intuit the whole story just by hearing the name of a death man.

Aegon remained silent to avoid a discussion.

"I thought you wanted to leave already, Griff." It was Lemore's turn to pull him out of the chamber.

"We will contact you later, Illyrio," he shouted before exiting the room. "What is our story?"
Aegon asked Connington as they walked to the entrance.

"What story?" Connington frowned at him.

"Why do we hate Robert Baratheon?"

"We don't owe them any explanation."

"Are we supposed to ignore them if they ask us?"

"Yes, you must avoid having contact with them."

"Wait, what?!" Aegon made a face. He hated when Connington was irrational. "We are going to travel with them for a long time, maybe years. We can't just pretend they don't exist."
Connington stopped short and turned to face Aegon. "They are not our comrades or friends. We will use them when we need them, and that is all. Did you understand, Griff?" Connington made emphasis in the name.

*I will end as mad as my grandfather before we get the Iron Throne.* Having two identities was driving him crazy.

"Yes, father." That was the only possible answer.

They left hidden in a cart of merchandise as they always did. He didn't have to worry about the Stark siblings' questions because they were the ones ignoring him. They only talked among themselves, always whispering.

As days passed, Aegon found himself observing them more and more. Their relationship intrigued him. They seemed to be always sulking, but a word from the other was enough to bring a smile to their faces. They shared something Aegon would never be able to experiment.

They made him think of Rhaenys. If nothing had happened, would they have been as close as Jon Snow and Arya Stark? Would they have been able to forget the existence of the rest of the world just by being together?

*What a useless idea,* he reprimanded himself. Rhaenys was dead; his longing would not change that.

He ignored them successfully until the last day of journey to the Rhoyne when he heard them arguing.

"We can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because we don't know this place, and it is part of the things they told us not to do."
"I want a race." Arya Stark rolled her eyes in exasperation. "We are not going to run away. Besides, are we their prisoners?"

Aegon frowned when she said that. He had warned Connington about it; the Stark siblings would be suspicious about their behavior towards them.

"A... Arry, they are allowing us to travel with them. We can't cause them trouble."

"They don't care about us. They treat us as if we didn't exist. I'm sure they wouldn't notice if we left half an hour or so."

"I don't know, Arry."

"Could you stop calling me Arry?!" She demanded with a disgusted face.

Aegon had to refrain from laughing at her amusing pout.

"We agreed it was safer to call you that way. We don't know who might be listening."

"Then why haven't you changed your name?"

"The King is not looking for me. It doesn't matter if they tell him Jon Snow traveled to the Essos." Jon Snow paused and softened his expression. "If you don't like it, you can choose another name."

_It isn't that easy._ He was able to comprehend Arya Stark to some degree.

She shook her head. "I feel like I'll go crazy if I am never called by my name again. I-" She noticed him watching. Her expression changed drastically. "What are you staring at?!"

"I wasn't." He didn't know what to say next; he had been staring.
"Don't start a fight, little sister, please." Jon Snow acted immediately to stop the disaster. They had already called Connington's attention.

Arya Stark wrinkled her nose at Aegon and rode ahead of the group.

"I apologize for her." Jon Snow had not lost his sister from sight. "She hides grief and fear behind anger." He turned to regard Aegon. "Things won't be the same for us again."

Aegon remained silent for a moment. He had not expected them to talk to him. He had not expected to receive an explanation.

"It is fine." He gave a side look to Connington. "I'm not as unreasonable as my father," he whispered.

Jon Snow answered with a nod before following his sister. Aegon stared at them from afar a little longer before advancing again.

_They are the son and the daughter of Eddard Stark, and we might become foes._ The thought did little to overcome the empathy he had started to feel for them.

---

_Sansa_

It was midday when the Royal procession crossed the Gate of Gods at King's Landing. Common folk and high lords were there to receive their King. She could hear the racket of the crowd; still, she didn't have the intention to move the curtain to have a look outside the litter. The Capital could be everything she had always dreamed about, but right then, she didn't care.

She had been so excited when they left Winterfell with the court. She was going to see King's Landing, know real knights and high-born Ladies. She would learn from them and become a Lady
worthy of Highgarden. Of course, that was until Arya managed to change the plans.

The procession had to stop during a fortnight at Darry's Castle to look for her reckless younger sister. There were no more new things to see, only shouts, endless searches and a horrible beheading. She had seen it by accident from her window.

'She will do better with a pack of wolves instead of family.' That had been her angry opinion the day Arya disappeared in the woods. However, as the days passed without a sign of Arya, her anger had faded and given way to concern.

Sansa and Arya weren't close or able to understand each other, and they fought constantly. Arya was closer to a stable boy than a high-born Lady. That didn't stop the tears she dropped when her father informed her they might not see Arya again.

There was nothing she could do; even praying would be useless. Her father and Septa Mordane had been careful with what they said in front of her. But she heard the people from the procession commenting. Each story was scarier than the previous one.

On some of them, be it due to the cold, starvation or a beast, Arya was death. On others, a criminal had kidnapped her to torture or rape her.

Why did she have to run away? Sansa had thought Arya had gotten lost until she overheard her father talking with Jory. He had said Arya had escaped.

She breathed and tried to set aside the topic. It didn't matter what had happened. One way or another, it was unlikely for Arya to return.

"We have arrived Sansa," the Septa informed her.

Sansa nodded and accepted Jory's hand to get out of the litter. She raised her head to see the Red Keep standing above her. It wasn't as imposing as she had imagined nor that breathtaking. Furthermore, it reeked.

"Jory, accompany Sansa to the Tower of Hand."
"Yes, my Lord."

Her father turned to her. "I have a meeting with the Small Council. I'll see you for supper, Sansa," he said with a look that made her feel terribly sad.

It was rare for him to smile, but Sansa had never seen him more depressed. It was obvious it was because of Arya, even if he had not mentioned her name since they stopped searching. As if he wanted to pretend she had never existed. She imagined the same applied to aunt Lyanna; he never spoke of her.

"Yes, father," she muttered.

She remained in her quarters with Septa Mordane. After some time, someone knocked. She gave a look through her window; it was too early for her father to sent for her.

She found a page from the Tyrell Household at the other side. He handed her a parchment and retired.

"What is that?" The Septa asked.

"Margaery Tyrell invites me to walk with her in the gardens." She folded the message. "I will decline the invitation."

"I think you should go."

"I don't feel well."

"Given what happened, is understandable for you to feel down. However, it is unwise to refuse an invitation from your future good sister."

Sansa avoided making a face; the Septa was right. Although, it was the first time she wished she could stop being a perfect Lady. She wasn't in the mood to see anyone.
"I'll go," she acceded in the end.

The Septa accompanied her to the place of the meeting. Margaery Tyrell was sitting on a bench under an arc of roses. She was the finest Lady Sansa had ever seen in her life. When she noticed Sansa, she smiled and stood up to received her.

"It is my pleasure to meet you, Lady Margery," she said and prepared to curtsey.

Margaery Tyrell interrupted her action by giving her a tight hug. Sansa was out of words; she didn't know how to react.

"I'm sorry for your sister. I have been praying for her since we received the horrible news."

Praying will change nothing. She had prayed enough.

"You are very kind, Lady Margaery."

"Just Margaery, we will become a family soon enough." She smiled again. "Willas asked me to hand you this," she put a parchment sealed with golden wax on her hands. "He wishes he could come to accompany you."

"Thank you, Margaery." The letter didn't produce on her the effect it would have under different circumstances. Margaery had realized.

"I know is a bad comfort."

"No, I... that was ungrateful from me."

"You don't have to be formal with me." Margaery held her hand and looked straight into her eyes. "I can't replace your sister, but I'd like us to become friends."

"I would like that too." She had been feeling terribly lonely.
The next days, she spent most of her time with Margaery. She told her the gossips and secrets of the court. How to deal with certain people, making especial emphasis in the Master of Coin. She introduced her to other Ladies and showed her the best places to have gowns and jewelry made. She told her what awaited her in Highgarden and most importantly, she told her about Willas.

Margaery was all she had always expected from a sister. At King’s Landing, she had gotten everything she had dreamed of since she was a child, but she didn't want it anymore.

What Sansa wanted was Arya to enter covered in dirt and throw things at her. She wanted to see her smile and laugh at her for dreaming of Highgarden. She never thought she could miss her wild sister.

She had spent nearly a moon's turn at the Capital the first time she saw Margaery look afflicted. She had stopped in the middle of her embroidery and was distractedly staring at the flowers of the garden. It made her worried because Margaery always showed to be cheerful.

"Is something wrong?" Sansa decided to ask after some consideration.

Margaery lifted her gaze slowly and gave her a faint smile. "My father gave me some life changing news this morning." She breathed deeply before blurting, "I'm to marry King Robert."

"What will happen to Arya?" She asked.

Margaery blushed. "I am not the right person to answer that question."

"I need to know!" Sansa demanded; she had forgotten all her curtsies. Her father would not tell her anything.

"I heard the Lord Hand will keep searching, but the Small Council insisted the King needs a Queen and an heir." Margaery fell silent. "He made the offer, and my father acceded."

"Congratulations. It must be an important event for House Tyrell." She managed to say what she had to say.
"I could survive without receiving that honor." Margaery confided her.

Margaery had not reacted as abruptly as Arya had done at Winterfell, but it was clear she didn't fancy the idea.

"My sister didn't want it either." The words left her mouth without notice.

Margaery gave a look around, making sure they were alone.

"I doubt there is still a Lady in the Realm who is eager to become his Queen."

Sansa didn't need Margaery to explain her the reason. She had observed the King long enough, and it couldn't be nice to marry him. Plus that was without mentioning what he had done to Cersei Lannister.

"Can't you talk to your Lord father?"

"Duties are unavoidable for noble women. Not all the Great Houses are that indulgent with their daughters."

She wasn't sure what Margaery had meant, yet she had not liked it.

"I can only wish you the best, Margaery." It was sorrowfully true.

"I must return," she informed. "My father and I will have supper with the King." Margaery stared at her strangely before retiring.

Sansa stayed in the garden for a while. It took her some time to recognize the look she had received from Margaery. She had stared at her the same way Arya had when Sansa told her she should be happy to become Queen.
I was not able to understand back then. She had idealized many things. Her short time at King's Landing had changed that, and it filled her with regret. She wished she had understood when Arya was still with her.

---

**Eddard**

Robert didn’t attend the funeral arranged for Arya. He probably was getting drunk, hunting or visiting a brothel. Eddard Stark had not expected it to occur any other way. It had been Mace Tyrell's idea after all.

It was not that the Lord of Highgarden wanted to honor her memory. He wanted to declare her publicly dead so that she wouldn't interfere with his daughter's betrothal to Robert. He didn't care for Arya, no one at that place did.

At first, Eddard had not understood why Mace Tyrell seemed so rare whenever he talked to him after he got to King's Landing. He had questioned whether he was planning to cancel Sansa's engagement to his son. He had asked way too directly if there was a possibility for them to find Arya. He had suggested he should return to the North and take his time to accept Arya's loss. Eddard understood after the royal union was announced.

Mace Tyrell wanted his daughter to become Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and Ned's daughters stood in his way. He had feared that Robert might transfer the betrothal to Sansa. Fortunately for both of them, Robert was obsessed with Lyanna, and Sansa looked none like her. A few remarks from the members of the Small Council convinced the King that Margaery Tyrell looked a little like Ned's sister.

The truth was Eddard had started to doubt his decision to marry Sansa to Willas Tyrell. If the young man had the same ambitions as his father, he couldn't be an appropriate match for his dreaming Sansa. He would have to make a decision soon.

He had also considered returning to the North. Starks didn't belong in the Capital, and he wanted to be near his family. The gods knew he needed their company. He would have gladly relinquished
his position as Hand. Mace Tyrell could have the position for all he cared.

Robert, however, refused to allow him to leave. He insisted they were meant to rule together. Eddard knew Robert wanted him to take care of his responsibilities so that he could keep with his immoral behavior. He felt utterly trapped.

_Hasn't he taken enough from me already?_ But he didn't blame Robert as much as he blamed himself. _'Look where your stupid sense of honor has brought you, Ned.' _It was Lyanna's voice.

It was true. If he had not cared that much about his honor, so many things would be different. He could have defied the King at Winterfell; then Arya wouldn't be lost, and Jon wouldn't have escaped. He would have kept the promise he made to Lyanna. If he were a little less honorable, Ashara Dayne might not have died. If he had not chosen the prosperity of his House above his sister's, the Rebellion would have never happened.

The ceremony ended without him noticing. He had not been paying attention at all. Many Lords got closer to him to offer his condolences. Eddard accepted them all, not even wondering whether they were sincere. It didn't matter. Deep in his heart he knew Arya was alive and even better, away from Robert's reach. As painful as it was not to see her again, he felt relieved.

"This is it," Sansa whispered to him. "Arya is gone for good. Right, father?"

She looked different from the girl that had left home with him. The permanent glow of amusement in her Tully's eyes had disappeared. She had learned the world was not a song. She had become stronger.

"For the King, maybe," he answered. "I haven't lost faith. What about you?"

She pondered her answer a moment. "I think she is fine."

"So do I, sweet one."
A week later, he was once more in the Great Sept of Baelor, attending a ceremony. Just this time it was a wedding instead of a funeral. Eddard didn't overlook how little the city had mourned for Arya.

Margaery Tyrell looked radiant. If she felt repulsion towards being married to Robert, she hid it pretty well. Sansa was more affected than the bride.

His daughter had grown closer to the young Lady; she cared for Margaery Tyrell. She even asked him if he couldn't suggest the King to choose someone else to be his Queen.

It was not in him to do something like that. If Mace Tyrell had decided to marry his daughter to Robert, Eddard couldn't do anything. He did feel sorry for the girl, though. Only the gods knew which kind of fate awaited her by becoming Robert's wife.

They exchanged the pertinent vows and promises, and then shared a kiss. The crowd cheered for the new Queen.

Robert looked overjoyed. As if he had not ordered to behead his previous Queen. As if he had not ruined Eddard's family when he demanded to marry Arya.

As he observed how Robert got drunk during the wedding feast, Eddard Stark decided he wouldn't stay at King's Landing another day. He gave the appropriate orders that night.

Eddard was preparing to inform Robert he would return to Winterfell when he heard a noise inside his chamber. He turned to find the Master of Whispers inside the place. The bald man raised a finger to his lips to ask him for silence and beckoned him to get closer. Eddard followed warily.

"My Lord, I see you have plans to leave the Capital."

The castle is full of informants. He had made efforts to avoid being discovered and had failed.

"I'm renouncing to my position as Hand." There was no use in hiding something to Varys.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you not to do that, Lord Stark." The man rubbed his hands. "We know
dear King Robert is not concerned about the matters of the Realm. The Seven Kingdoms need a capable Hand more than ever."

*Robert does not care about the Realm.*

"I am not the right person to take care of the Seven Kingdoms. I'm sure Lord Tyrell will be glad to accept the honor of becoming Hand."

"In that you are wrong, Lord Eddard. The King listens to you; which makes you the only person standing between the Seven Kingdoms and disaster."

"I have granted the King enough already, Lord Varys." Eddard saw the expression of the spider shift a little, but it was just an instant.

"His Grace isn't the man he used to be. I'll grant you that, my Lord. It is not about protecting the King, but protecting the people." Eddard remained silent, so Varys kept talking with his oversweetened voice. "We are in the middle of a winter that doesn't seem to come to an end. The small folk is starting to starve, and the Lords have lost the love they had for King Robert."

"Mace Tyrell is more than capable of solving that."

"Lord Stark, be reasonable. Lord Tyrell will do whatever the King orders if that means to keep a crown over his daughter's head." When Eddard shook his head, Varys' face became serious. "You and Jon Arryn made him King."

*We started this derangement, Jon. If the Realm was heading to destruction, they were as responsible as Robert for it. The gods help me.*

He breathed deeply. "I'll do what I can for the sake of the people."

The spider smiled. "My Lord, when the time comes, you will see you made the right choice."

*Honorable fool, after all these years, you have not learned.* Lyanna's voice had never been crueler.
"Look, Jon, there is one more over there!"

Arya pointed with her finger. She immediately ran after the giant turtle and disappeared behind the reeds. Jon couldn't help his smile. It had been long since he last saw her that cheerful.

"Your sister seems to be enjoying the trip." Young Griff appeared behind him with a rod in hand.

Jon tried not to show his discomfort when he sat on the river shore beside him.

It was not that Jon disliked Young Griff. He had not interacted with him enough to develop a proper assessment of him. However, judging the faces Old Griff made whenever he or Arya were slightly close to his son, it was better to keep their distance. Still, he kept finding opportunities to get close to them.

"She is amused," Jon answered. He couldn't just ignore his interlocutor. "There is nothing like the Rhoyne at the North or the rest of the Seven Kingdoms." He had not visited the rest of the Seven Kingdoms, but he was quite sure.

"Well, I guess you are fortunate to be able to witness the splendor of the Rhoyne."

Yeah, our lives couldn't be better. The place was incredible, and they had seen lots of new things. That didn't cure their longing for the North and Winterfell.

"Are you going to fish?" Jon wanted to change the topic.
Griff smiled widely. He produced smiles rather frequently; it reminded him of Robb.

"Someone has to feed the crew of the Shy Maid," he said proudly.

Jon arched a brow. "Is there something you can't do?"

In the time they had spent with them, Jon had seen Griff excelling at the study of politics, languages, poetry and faith. He practiced with the sword, hunted, fished, was a good rider, although not as good as Arya. Jon wondered how it was possible that the son of a sellsword received such instruction.

"Ha ha, you think too high of me," he said as he threw the bait to the water.

"I brought you something, Jon." Arya had returned from her search with the legs covered with mud to the knees, a white lily in her hands and a bright smile.

It was a little sad. At Winterfell Arya would always pick wildflowers for their father. Jon had never known how she had developed that habit.

"Thank you, little sister." Jon received the flower, although he wasn't sure what he would do with the gift.

"What is he doing here?" She was frowning at Griff.

Griff observed her carefully, ignoring her question. "Are you truly a high-born Lady?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Arya said raising her chin.

"Well, I don't think high-born Ladies are supposed to play in the dirt." Griff gestured to Arya's legs. "You are too tomboyish to be a Lady."
This conversation won't end well. Jon didn't get the chance to intrude.

"You are prettier than my sister," Arya answered immediately. "Does that make you a Lady?"

Jon saw Griff's face turning red. However, instead of continuing the quarrel, he started to laugh.

"You are more amusing than other Ladies; I'll grant you that."

"Did you only came here to pick up a fight?"

"Arry..."

Arya glowered at Jon and Griff started to laugh again.

"I don't like to disturb your important matters, but it happens you are splashing in the best fishing spot, my Lady."

Arya wrinkled her nose at the title. Jon yielded; he wouldn't be able to stop their confrontation. He could already hear the Old Griff complaining at Arya's behavior.

Arya gave some pondering to his comment. "Can you teach me to use that?" She pointed to the fishing rod.

I wasn't expecting that. Jon thought Arya would snap at him like she had been doing since they met. He didn't expect Griff to accept either.

"If your brother isn't against it, I have no objection."

Arya turned to see him with pleading eyes.

"I don't think that is a good idea." Jon stared back at the Shy Maid.
"Don't worry about my father. He won't return until sunset." Griff had guessed his thoughts. "Lemore and Duck won't tell him." That settled the matter.

_I wanted to see Volantis_. He wasn't interested in the group's businesses, he wanted to see the city. However, Old Griff had ordered everyone to wait At the Shy Maid. The only thing visible from their position was the Great Wall of the city.

_Arya is capable of making friends with anyone_. That was something they didn't have in common. She even smiled at Griff when he was done instructing her. The scene produced an unfamiliar sensation on him, but Jon decided not to ponder over it.

"That will keep her entertained a while," Griff said when he returned to sit with him.

"She better finishes before your father returns." Jon pointed.

Griff grimaced. "He has not been friendly, but that doesn't make him bad."

_How many times has he repeated that?_ Griff was always apologizing for his father. _He could save us his father's sourness if he kept his distance with us._

"I don't judge him." Jon paused. "I guess we remind him of our father's role in the Rebellion."

The Magister had told him the Old Griff had supported the Targaryen side during the Rebellion. That was why he wasn't fond of Robert Baratheon. He couldn't be fond of Eddard Stark either, and people said Jon looked like his father when he was young.

"Why do you think it is about the Rebellion?" Griff's attitude had become apprehensive.

Jon felt offended. _It is not like we will run back to Westeros just to reveal an exiled supporter of the Targaryens._

Jon shrugged. "The Magister told me that is why you are hiding from Robert Baratheon. Was your
father at the Battle of the Trident?"

"He was." He had recovered some color. "After the King stripped off his title and lands, we traveled to Tyrosh with my mother's family. Then he became a member of the Golden Company."

"Is the Golden Company at the service of the Magister?"

"My father isn't a member anymore. He left after Illyrio contacted him."

"He contacted him?"

"Illyrio was searching supporters for Viserys Targaryen to retake the Iron Throne. My father wanted to go home, so he accepted."

"Isn't Viserys Targaryen dead?"

He had heard it one time at Winterfell. The last Targaryen in the world was a princess who had married a Dothraki Kahl.

"He is." Griff paused. "His sister is still alive, though." He stared at Jon as if he was testing him.

"Are they still planning to depose Robert Baratheon?" Jon felt alarmed. An invasion meant they would fight against Winterfell. Not to mention Eddard Stark was the current Hand.

Griff’s face changed again. "I don't know." His tone had returned to be wary, even nervous. "I don't think so. I don't believe they have an opportunity at this rate. Your family doesn't have to worry about it." Griff had guessed his thoughts again.

"I see. Although I wouldn't mind witnessing Robert Baratheon losing the Crown." Jon commented absentmindedly.

*Maybe something else.*
Griff widened his eyes. "I'm pretty sure you aren't the only one."

"Look Jon!" Arya returned with a tiny fish.

"Ha ha." Griff laughed at her. "I wouldn't be proud of it. I've seen mosquitos bigger than that tadpole."

"Are you picking up a fight with me?"

*Here we go again.* Jon didn't even try to stop them this time, but someone else did.

"GRIFF!" The old man had returned earlier than expected.

The three of them started because of the shout. Jon saw Griff rolling his eyes in exasperation. Arya scowled.

"What are you doing here?"

Jon pulled Arya back when Old Griff got to where they were.

"Teaching the Lady how to catch her dinner."

"Stop with this folly, Griff." The man's blue eyes glistened with anger.

"You are the one being foolish, father."

Old Griff clenched his fist. Jon was sure he would strike his son or him.

"Is something wrong, my Lord?" A sweet voice asked, and the older man's expression shifted from
anger to panic.

"I asked you to remain on the ship, my ... Lady." The last part sounded strained.

A young woman gave a step forward. She had olive skin, long black curls, big dark eyes and an attractive figure. She was easily the most beautiful woman Jon had ever met. When she noticed his stare, she smiled at him. He felt his throat go dry.

"Cousin," she regarded Griff. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?"

Old Griff growled disapprovingly. She shot him a stare which made him retreat.

Griff looked lost for a second. "They are Jon Snow and his sister Arya Stark. She is my cousin A-"

"Anne," she completed. She smiled again and got closer. Something in him urged him to retreat. "So, the bastard of Winterfell," she scrutinized Jon. "Interesting."

"Don't call Jon bastard," Arya snapped.

"My apologies, little Lady. I meant no offense."

"My Lady, we have important matters to discuss." Old Griff interrupted once more.

"Of course," she answered calmly before taking Griff's arm.

"You two stay here." Old Griff ordered.

"Excuse us then," said Anne. "We will continue the introductions later. I'm eager to get to know you better," she added without starring away from Jon.

Jon stood still, something in the way she had looked at him, the way she has spoken to him had
"You can stop drooling now," Arya said after a while with a knowing smirk.

"What do you mean?"

"You know." He couldn't hide anything from Arya.

"Well, what were you expecting? I have feelings."

"You are disgusting."

"I think you are jealous." He teased her.

"Don't be stupid." She punched him.

"You are always so sweet, little sister." She punched him again, and he laughed. "Come on," he pushed her. "You have to catch something else for dinner. That thing won't do."

Arya smiled and sat on the shore.

Jon gave a stare at the Shy Maid. He thought of Griff's story, the Septa, the Magister and Daenerys Targaryen; the way they were all connected. It was obvious something odd was going on there. He wasn't as oblivious as they wanted to think.

*It doesn't matter.* As long as they hid them from Robert Baratheon, his schemes were irrelevant. He didn't care who sat on the Iron Throne. *It has nothing to do with me.*
Arianne

Jon Connington was blabbering incessantly. The princess was plainly ignoring him.

Arianne couldn't get the bastard out of her mind. He was handsome enough for her liking, but that wasn't what had called her attention. He looked so naïve that she felt the urge to test how innocent he truly was. Besides, Starks were famous for being incorruptible, and she liked challenges.

"I told you to stay away from them."

"They are not dangerous."

"Eddard Stark is the Hand of the Usurper!"

"They are going to hear you, Griff," Ashara Dayne pointed.

"He has already told them everything!"

"I invented a story." He newly found cousin tried to defend himself.

She had not stayed more than a three days at Dorne. It was the time it had taken her father and uncle to deliberate and decide Griff of Tyrosh was truly Aegon Targaryen. Then Arianne had been sent away to inform her cousin. Just this time, without the Sand Snakes.

She still couldn't decide whether her father trusted her a lot or if he wanted to get rid of her. Her mission was almost as stupid as it was important. It depended on the perspective.

You better get the Iron Throne, cousin. Having the King indebted to her would be beneficial if the things got harsh with Quentyn. First, I have to put some order here.
"My cousin is doing the right thing."

"Explain yourself." Connington was clearly skeptical.

"We will get better results from befriending them than ostracizing them." She stared into Connington's eyes. "We need allies, especially now that Margaery Tyrell has married Robert Baratheon."

"How do you know that?"

"I received a message from my father yesterday."

"Damn!" He cursed. "We needed Highgarden."

"Sorry, the Usurper stole my cousin's queen."

*He wasn't aware,* she thought when she saw Aegon's frown. She was surprised; it was pretty obvious. *I have to teach him some things.*

"Please be more serious about the situation, Princess." Connington looked about to explode. "The Tyrells are now related to the Crown. The Usurper keeps getting stronger."

"Not really." She rejoiced in Connington's stunned face. "My father has the certainty that Eddard Stark is not so happy with his friend."

"When Sansa Stark marries to Willas Tyrell, Winterfell bond to the Crown will strengthen."

"We could link his other daughter to our cause. In the worst case, he won't be able to choose between them."

"They won't marry," Connington said plainly.
"Calm down. I never said the word marriage."

"What do you suggest?"

_Connington must be desperate._ On their way from the city, he had expressed how displeased he was with the Starks' presence.

"Let them trust us. They are far from home. They must be lonely."

Connington didn't seem to be listening anymore. She directed her attention to Aegon.

"They will suspect," said Aegon. "We have not been precisely kind to them."

"I saw you were getting along with them, cousin."

"Arya Stark is friendly, but she won't trust us if her brother is suspicious. Jon Snow makes a point of being wary."

She considered the situation a moment. If her father wanted her at Essos, she would make the best out of it. She would even have fun.

"If that is the case, leave the brother to me." Arianne smiled widely. "I can be very persuasive with men."

Chapter End Notes

I always dread this expected meetings. I'm never sure if I did them right.

Anyway, till the next time. Hopefully, it will be soon.
Leave a comment, please, I love them.

Next chapter: "The Course of Life"
The Course of Life

Chapter Notes

Once again nearly two months since the las update; life keeps getting in the way. Hodor hagar, I said Sunday but it turned out to be Wednesday. Sorry. Honestly, you were fortunate. I delayed the update for my other series two weeks.

Returning to the story.... for the sake of the plot this chapter and the next will have time skips. I wrote the year in which the POVs occur and add the ages the characters have at the end of the chapters in the note at the end.

Thanks for all the comments and the kudos. I can't believe Promise Me already has 419 kudos!!

Anyway, Read, enjoy and comment!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arianne (301 AC)

She was in a foul mood when she awoke that morning. Not only she was not used to the precarious life she had had to live during the last fortnight, she had not made a single advance regarding Jon Snow. He had been avoiding her as if Arianne were a disease. She had thought she already had him in her pocket after witnessing his reaction during their first encounter, but she had been wrong.

Aegon was right about something: Jon Snow was suspicious of everything and everyone. He never stayed alone with her, barely spoke to her and never lost sight of his sister.

There was no way Arianne would acknowledge something like that, but it hurt her pride to be ignored by a northern bastard when practically all of his father's court was at her feet.

She sat up and started to brush her long curls. It was not long before she realized her roommate was observing her.

"Do you need something, Ashara?" Teasing the crew of the Shy Maid had become her only entertainment.
"I have told you not to call me that," the older woman replied with a frown.

_They won't listen, for they are too busy keeping away from us._ Arianne didn't think they would care either; the only thing they wanted was to stay away from Robert Baratheon.

"Do you need something, Lemore?" She corrected.

"No. Why would you ask?"

"You have been staring at me," she shrugged. "I'd like to know why."

Perhaps Connington was a greater paranoid than she had thought and had ordered Ashara Dayne to watch her.

"You remind me of Rhaenys; that is all." Ashara's eyes had turned melancholic.

"Oh," Arianne felt an unusual stung of shame, "did she look like me?" Although she couldn't remember clearly, Arianne knew her cousin did have Dornish features.

"She would have had your striking beauty; I'm sure of it." Ashara made a pause. "Even after twenty years, I have not stopped thinking about her."

"Dorne has not forgotten her either."

"And that is the reason we are _here._"

_For vengeance, for justice, for Fire and Blood_, Ashara's eyes expressed instead, the way her father's had the last time she saw him. Arianne wondered whether Ashara included Eddard Stark in her wish for revenge.

"Yes, we are."
There was not a single soul when she set feet on the deck, not even the small table they used for breakfast.

"Where is everyone?" She asked to Yandry after getting off the ship.

"Old Griff and Haldon said they had business at Volantis. The rest went to look for a place to train."

"Train what?"

"Swords or something like that." The man shrugged and returned his attention to fixing a fishing net. "They can't be far."

"In which direction did they go?"

"To the north, they use to follow the riverbank."

"I'll look for them."

The man turned to see her. "Are you sure? You could get lost."

"I'll be fine."

It wasn't long before she heard the shouts, she recognized Aegon's laughter.

"Well, wasn't that amazing, Duck?"

"I certainly wasn't expecting to witness something like that."
"I believe I have said it before, but you are amazing, Arry."

"Shut up! You are distracting me."

Aegon laughed again. "My apologies."

As she finally got the place where the others were, the scene surprised her. Arya Stark was practicing sword fighting with Jon Snow, and she was winning.

Aegon noticed her. "Cousin, come here. You have to see this battle," he said with a smile.

*Is it my imagination or he has been smiling more recently?* Aegon might be enjoying the Starks presence more than he liked to admit, more than Connington would approve.

Arianne walked to the place where her cousin was and kissed his cheek before taking a place by his side.

Jon Snow and his sister restarted their practice. Arianne couldn't do anything but blink at their movements in disbelief. She lived at Dorne and had known some of the fiercest fighters in the Seven Kingdoms, like Dark Star or the Sand Snakes, but she had never seen someone moving like Arya Stark.

In her case, it wasn't about strength, but speed; she was practically dancing around her brother. Arianne had not seen someone so fast in her life, not even Nym, and her hidden blades. Arya Stark eventually made her brother trip over her feet and forced him to surrender.

"If I had been using Needle, right now, you would be a human colander, Jon."

Jon Snow smiled; it was the first time Arianne saw him smile, and she found it stupidly enchanting. Arya Stark helped him get on his feet before standing in front of Aegon and her.

"I told you I could fight," she said defiantly.
"Yes, you did. I have one objection, though."

The girl frowned. "What?"

"You fought your brother, so it is obvious that he would give you the advantage. I'm sure he would never hurt his little sister," Aegon commented mockingly.

"I'll proof you are wrong," she stated.

"Fine, you can fight Duck."

If her cousin was trying to intimidate Arya Stark with Rolly's size, he had failed magnificently; the girl was already preparing herself.

"I don't think I could fight a girl." Rolly gave a step back.

"Ah, come on, Duck." Aegon made a pout though he was clearly having fun.

"Coward," the girl protested with a wrinkle of her nose.

"Nothing can be done about it."

"You could be my opponent." She cocked her head to one side. "Unless you are scared of being beaten up by a girl."

"Arry..."

"He asked for it, Jon."

"Fine, you have convinced me. I'll grant you the honor of sparring with me." Aegon stood up and made an exaggerated reverence.
So he was waiting for it. Arianne sighed; Connington might not be complete neurotic after all. She
didn't know whether her cousin was doing it on purpose, but it might just work in their favor.

"You will regret it."

"We'll see, my Lady."

"This thing is not going to end well," Jon Snow muttered; he had taken Aegon's seat, by her side.
Apparently he would only avoid her if they stayed alone.

"Excuse me?"

Jon Snow turned to see her as if he had just realized she was there. "I mean I can already hear your
uncle's reprimand."

"Ah, he can be a nuisance."

He scoffed, returning his attention to her sister's fight with Aegon. Arianne considered moving
closer to him to see how he reacted, perhaps, accidentally, touching him. However, recalling her
past failures, she decided she needed another approach.

"Your sister is an authentic warrior."

Jon Snow smiled at her remark, and she knew she had done the right thing. "She has a natural
talent for it; she was born a warrior."

"I wasn't aware in Westeros they allowed women to carry swords."

"Well, there are some places, like Dorne."

"You are from the North. Do they allow it there?"
She watched carefully every one of his expressions.

He pondered his answer. "Those rules are more flexible in the North than in other kingdoms."

"But is not the case with your sister."

"Catelyn Stark is very traditional; she worked hard to raise perfect Ladies."

"I think she didn't succeed with that one." She pointed Arya Stark, who had just kicked Aegon's shin.

This time, he laughed. "That was half my fault; I was the one who taught her to wield a sword."

"Is that so? Why?"

"Because it would make her happy," he answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Besides, I thought it was good that she learned to protect herself."

*I might have found the perfect opportunity.* She smiled to herself.

"Your sister is fortunate to have a brother like you," she shared with a wistful sigh.

He turned to see her again. "Do you have brothers?"

"I have two of them."

"And none of them taught you to use a sword."

*One of them wants to take my birthright.*
"Being at Westeros or Tyrosh, it is all the same: Men fight, and women marry," she answered instead. That was true, especially for princesses.

"That doesn't mean you can not learn."

Her smile widened. "Are you going to teach me?"

"Me?"

His surprised question coincided with Aegon's defeat. "It seems you are an excellent teacher."

"Are you convinced now, Griff?" Arya Stark was completely satisfied with the result of the encounter.

"I slipped!" Aegon replied, his face completely flushed.

"That was not my fault."

Rolly shook his head as he helped Aegon to stand up. "It seems you have not learned anything, Griff."

"Shut up, Duck!"

Aegon left for the Shy Maid rather angrily with Rolly right behind him. Arya Stark was watching him with a triumphant smile on her face. Those two liked to torment one another; Connington was going to love it when he found out.

"Are you going to teach me or not?"

"It would be better if you asked Rolly," he replied cautiously. "Your uncle won't like me close to you."
So that was the reason he has been avoiding me, she considered. Interesting.

"After what we just witnessed, you plan me to trust Rolly's training over yours?"

"You are overestimating my skills."

"I disagree."

"I still don't think it is a good idea."

"Just teach her, stupid," Arya Stark interceded. "That way I might get a decent opponent."

I have started to like this girl.

Jon Snow took his time to reply as if the fate of the world depended on his decision.

"If your uncle accepts, I will teach you, my Lady."

Seems like I succeeded. Not only she had got the chance to get closer to Jon Snow; she would learn how to swing a sword. She would have more than her wits to defend herself in the future. I will surprise the Sand Snakes the next time I see them.

"You don't have to worry about my uncle."
She smiled to Jon Snow. "And please call me Anne."
She would have liked to hear him calling her real name, but it was impossible to have it all.
He had never been in a real city, so King's Landing seemed spectacular to him. As Winterfell's party crossed the King's Gate, he couldn't decide where he wanted to go first. The Dragonpit was in ruins, but that didn't make the idea of riding to Rhaenys's Hill less appealing; he could also go directly to the Red Keep and look for the dragon skulls, the secret passages built by Maegor the Cruel or visit the White Tower and meet Barristan the Bold.

A single look at his mother's face made him feel ashamed of his excitement.

It had been almost a year since the King went to Winterfell, more than half a year since Arya and Jon left to Essos, and around four moon's turns since they had stopped looking for Arya, but even if a hundred years had passed, his mother would never be the same.

The time right after his father's letter had arrived at Winterfell declaring Arya lost forever, were incredibly difficult for everyone. Bran had done his best to maintain his composure, but guilt tormented Robb and grief her mother, and Rickon had become more unmanageable.

She didn't get out of her chambers during almost two moons, neglected Rickon, barely ate and never bathed during that time. Even after she finally decided to reincorporate to her life at Winterfell, it was obvious something had broken inside of her.

Bran had hoped Robb's wedding and the journey to King's Landing would help her mother. He was wrong. When the King's letter arrived, declaring that as heir of the Hand of the King Robb should marry at the capital, his mother refused to go. It took a lot of effort to drag her out of Winterfell.

His mood was not the same after he recalled all that had happened. He hadn't even noticed that the Gold Cloaks had been sent to escort them to the Red Keep. His father and Sansa were already waiting for them at the Keep's yard.

He dismounted and went directly to greet them; they both looked incredibly sad. Robb surprised his father with a warm greeting despite the way they had parted at Winterfell because of Arya. Bran's mother provided a more polite addressing, clearly disappointing his father.

"The King and Queen are waiting for us," his father informed.
"The servants have prepared your chambers at the Tower of the Hand," Sansa commented them. "You will find it comfortable," she added, taking Alys's hand.

"Your Graces," All of them greeted when they got to the King's solar at Maegor's Holdfast.

"It is an honor to meet the rest of the Lord Hand's family," the Queen replied politely.

Margaery Tyrell looked too young beside her husband.

Arya would have been a younger Queen, he thought. Despite what it had provoked, he didn't regret helping Jon and Arya escaping to Essos.

The King received everybody effusively.

"Your bride is pretty, boy, you are fortunate," he told Robb who forced a smile as a response.

"Thank you, Your Grace. It is an honor that you allowed us to wed at the Capital." Alys had no idea of how resentful his family was with the King.

"You are marrying the son of the Hand of the King, after all." The King laughed. "We will have a tourney after the ceremony of course."

"That is too much, Your Grace," Alys replied ashamed.

Bran heard his father sighing behind him; he surely had known of it beforehand.

"It is not. Besides, we are not only celebrating your wedding," the King paused to smile and beckoned to Margaery Tyrell. "We will announce that my sweet Margaery is already carrying a stag, heir to the Iron Throne."

Margaery flushed, and everyone stayed wordless for a second.
"Those are great news, Robert. I hope you get a healthy son," his father answered diplomatically.

"We will name him Steffon," Margaery shared with a smile.

"Congratulations, Margaery." Sansa went to hug the Queen; she was the only one who seemed to know how to act.

Bran had thought the time after his father left, had been tough; that was until he witnessed the moments after their family reunion. Robb, Sansa, Bran and even Rickon were glad to be together with their mother and father. But their parents stared at each other in a way that was a silent reminder that everything had changed for the worse.

Not a single time during supper they mentioned Arya, as though they had forgotten about her existence. He supposed it was less hurtful that way.

Robb's wedding took place a fortnight after their arrival when Alys's family made it to the capitol. It was a greater event than the one they had been planning at Winterfell.

As both Starks and Karstarks worshiped the Old Gods, the ceremony happened at the godswood of the Red Keep; it had been a novelty for the King's court. In fact, due to the change of location, most of the attendants were strangers; only Alys's family and the Manderlys had accompanied them to King's Landing.

The feast was a cheerful event; his mother even danced with him and Robb. It started to go wrong when it was time for the bedding, for King Robert groped Alys more than it was appropriate; Harrion Karstark was furious. Fortunately, when Margaery Tyrell interceded, the King relented.

The next day, the temporary happiness of their family had vanished. Bran wouldn't have expected to happen any other way.

"We won't stay here another day," Robb declared.

"The King expects you to attend the tournament, Robb," his father answered calmly.
"As if I cared for what he wants. He disrespected Alys during the feast. I won't tolerate it!"

"You should lower your tone, Robb," Sansa suggested as if she feared someone might hear them.

"Robb," Alys interceded. "Things like that happen during the bedding ceremony." She blushed. "It was not a big deal."

"I won't let your family think I can't protect you."

"Harrion is exaggerating," Alys insisted. "We can't insult the King by not assisting."

"It would be convenient for you to listen to your wife," his father said absentmindedly. "You will be able to leave after the tournament."

There was silence again, anger clearly perceptible. Bran could intuit what would come next; Robb had never been good at controlling himself.

"I would like to see the jousts," Bran said in a pleading tone, which didn't match the look he shot at Robb. The one implying he was behaving like a child. It worked.

"Fine, but we won't sit near the King," he finally obliged.

Bran was the only one from his family who truly watched the jousts; he wanted to be one of the participants one day after all. The rest were completely distracted; Sansa was more interested in watching the Royal couple than the knights.

"Who do you think will win, Sansa?"

"Why do you ask me?" She asked a bit surprised.

"You have been living here." He shrugged. "You know them better."
"One of the white knights, I suppose."

"I think the Knight of Flowers is better than them." Loras Tyrell made every move he executed seem effortless.

"It would be better if he didn't win." Sansa's face had grown serious.

"Why?"

"Because he would crown Margaery Queen of Love and Beauty."

"Why is that wrong?" Bran was rather confused at that point.

Sansa spared another quick glance at the royal box seat. "She doesn't need another crown."

He knew there was a hidden meaning in Sansa's comment, but he didn't ask further questions. He wasn't sure he would want to know.

"Maybe they will crown you."

"Maybe," Sansa said.

Ser Barristan and Ser Loras broke six lances before the Knight of Flowers finally unhorsed the White Knight. The attendants cheered with a deafening roar while Loras Tyrell retrieved the wreath of white lilacs. Bran heard Sansa holding her breath until the knight passed the place where the Queen was.

"For the most beautiful woman in the Seven Kingdoms, Willas sends his regards," he said gallantly.

"Thank you, Ser." Sansa didn't smile the way Bran had expected.
Although it had perfect trees to climb, Bran didn't like the godswood of the Red Keep; he found it somewhat soulless, not to mention it didn't even had a weirwood. He looked for the great oak that served as heart tree; he knew his father would be there.

"Did your mother send you for me?" He asked when he saw Bran. "It is still early for supper."

Despite Robb's wishes, they had stayed another fortnight so that their mother could spend time with Sansa.

"She didn't. I wanted to talk to you."

"Is that so?" His father beckoned for him to sit by his side. "What is it, son?"

"I want to stay here, with you and Sansa."

"And why is that?" His father said with a guarded expression.

"If I stay, I can learn from a great knight."

"That can not be, Bran."

Bran felt utterly disappointed. "I have always wanted to be a knight."

"I'm not saying you can't be a knight." His father sighed. "I have talked to your mother; we will send you to the Bloody Gate. You will squire for the Black Fish."

Bran repressed a face; he knew Brynden Tully was a great knight, but he was not Barristan the Bold.
"I have higher possibilities to enter the Royal Guard if I learn from Ser Barristan." He tried to make his father understand.

"You won't become a member of the Kingsguard, Bran. I won't let you waste your life to protect a man like Robert." Eddard Stark’s expression was full of gloom.

*How can you be the Hand of a man like him?* He would have asked, but he knew the answer; it was a mean to protect their family. Bran had no arguments to contend with that; he couldn't utter another word.

"I won't lose another child because of him." His father confessed. The rustle of the leaves almost made the words disappear.

*We have not lost Arya.* Bran had to repress the urge to tell him. *I guess, sometimes, you can't go against life.* He remembered he had promised Maester Luwin he would save trouble to his parents.

"I will become a good knight." He hoped his smile didn't look forced. "Maybe I will win the next tournament at King's Landing."

When his father's face changed to relief, he knew he had said the right thing.

*A legendary knight doesn't necessarily have to be a member of the Kingsguard;* he would prove that when the time came.

---

**Jon (302 AC)**

"Watch your step and lift your arm, right there," he instructed Anne. "Start again, little sister."
"May I ask you to do it slower than before, Arry?" Anne asked as she prepared to spar with Arya again.

"Are you planning to ask that to your enemies during the battle?" Arya said as she started to attack.

"What?!" Anne was defending herself the best she could. "When am I going to be in a battle?!" She could barely keep up with Arya's movements.

"That is an excuse," Arya said before hitting Anne's hand with the flat of the training sword to disarm her.

"Ouch! Was that necessary?" Anne was holding her right hand.

"It is the price of learning." Arya shrugged.

"Oh, is that so?" Anne would have tried to attack Arya if she had not known it would end worse.

"And you still can't properly hold the sword," Arya added.

"Is she speaking the truth?" Anne turned to ask him angrily.

"She is. You lose your grip on your weapon as the combat advances."

"That is good to know." Anne tossed her sword and walked out of the ship.

Arya went to stand by his side. "I think she got angry."

"Really?" He asked sarcastically.

"Hey, it was not my fault."
"I keep telling you to slow down, and you keep pushing her."

"Because I want her to improve, and quickly."

"Not everyone has your talent, little sister."

"Fine, I'll be kinder to her. Next time, if there is a next time."

"If she wants to learn, there will be a next time."

"Why don't you follow her and apologize?"

"Me? You wronged her."

"But you will be more affected if she is angry."

"I don't understand."

Arya rolled her eyes. "You like her, don't you?"

He hoped the color had not raised in his face. "What does it have to do with anything?"

"If you keep training her, you can be close to her."

Jon couldn't do anything but smile at Arya and her concern for his feelings; she had seen it from the beginning.

He would not deny he considered Anne beautiful and smart; he praised her for how she was able to confront the Old Griff and make him explode like no one else could. However, not for one second,
he had anticipated for something to develop between the two of them. To be honest, a part of him still wondered why he had acceded to train Anne with the swords.

His only concern, from the day they set foot on Essos, was to keep Arya safe, and, for the time being, traveling with Griff and the others was enough to reach that objective, but he wouldn't doubt to abandon them if that turned out to be the best for Arya. It was what Old Griff told him he would do with them if needed. It was better that way, more practical.

"I'll apologize tomorrow, little sister. I have to help Yandry with something."

Illyrio Mopatis had been incredibly generous with the supplies he provided for their journey, but it had been half a year since they left his mansion; they had to make an inventory to decide what they needed to replenish. It took him almost all day to finish; sunset had already passed when Jon was able to set feet on the deck of the Shy Maid again, which, if not for the moon, would be completely dark.

Griff, his father, Haldon, and Rolly had not returned from whatever they were doing at Selhorys. The deck was empty; the others surely were already inside their cabins, Arya included.

*The old man is going to be furious if no one is watching the surroundings. Old Griff even stayed awake during the night to guard the Shy Maid. And he still wants me to think there is nothing strange about this group.*

Jon climbed the ladder that conducted to the forecastle's roof; he could watch everything from there. The moonlight made the river's surface silver; the wind carried the scent of the wet soil. Jon inhaled deeply; the Rhoyne was not home, but it provided him a sensation he had never felt at Winterfell. There, he was not a bastard; there, he was not limited to become whatever he wanted to be.

He considered what he wanted to do, but got no clear answer. He had always thought he would spend the rest of his days as a member of the Night's Watch. Still, they would have to decide soon.

He and Arya had gotten used to traveling with Griff and the rest, but that was a temporary situation. Jon had not forgotten what Griff had told him before: they had had the objective to overthrow Robert Baratheon, and they might still have it. He would not allow the Magister to use them as captives in his plans. That was why, sooner or later, they would have to establish somewhere else. As much as Arya liked the adventure, that would have to end eventually.
I could find a sellsword company. That occupation was nowhere close as honorable as serving in the Night Watch, but it was something he could do.

As Jon meditated, he saw someone approaching from the northern riverbank; it was Anne. Had she been out the whole day? Perhaps she had been angrier than he had imagined. Despite what he had told to himself, her image produced a new possibility in his mind.

I could also have a family of my own. He smiled at the perspective. It didn't necessarily have to be with Anne; there was too much life ahead of them. The point was, future had never seemed more encouraging for him.

Sansa (302 AC)

She was holding Margaery's hand while the future King of Westeros made his entrance to the world. Only male members of her family accompanied Margaery at King's Landing, so she had asked Sansa to stay with her in the birthing room.

As the Queen screamed in her chambers, King Robert haunted in the Kingswood. Sansa would never dare to make a comment about it, but she found the King's actions reprehensible.

A man should not behave this way under these circumstances. She remembered the time her mother birthed Bran and Rickon; her father had stayed at the entrance of the chamber and entered right after he heard the first cries of her siblings. Ned Stark would have been in the birthing room if her mother had not requested him to stay outside.

"You should see your face," said Margaery panting. "After witnessing this spectacle," she was interrupted by a wave of pain, "Wilas will have trouble to convince you to have a child." Her friend made an unqueenly sound that under different circumstances would have been a chuckle.

"I had never been in a birthing room."
"Neither had I." Margaery managed to say before another scream hitched in her throat.

Sansa forced a smile. It was not the perspective of the birthing room which unnerved her; she was worried about Margaery.

Her friend had kept her as one of her Ladies in waiting after becoming Queen. Therefore, Sansa had become one of the closest to her; she knew King Robert was not a kind husband.

Before the court's eyes, the King treated Margaery like the most valuable of treasures; in private, he was always wary of her. Margaery had told her he feared she would do the same as Cersei Lannister; he never said directly, but his actions spoke for themselves. The King had even prohibited Margaery to be with her brother Loras, without the supervision of one of the White Knights.

Then there was the problem of the drinking and whoring habits of the King. Robert Baratheon spent more nights at the brothels than in his wife's chambers; that created a good amount of gossip for Margaery. The days when he did visit his wife, he was mostly drunk; those nights didn't end well for Margaery, for the King was always too rude with her; Sansa had seen the consequences of the King's visits.

Sansa asked why she had not said anything, and Margaery regarded her with her condescending look.

"An heir and a spare; that is all I need to give him," she had said. 'Then he will forget about me and continue visiting his whores. I can stand these circumstances until then.'

Ever since then, Sansa wished the baby would be a boy who looked exactly like King Robert so that he would not mistreat Margaery any longer. Also, a shameful part of her thanked the gods that it had not been Arya who married Robert Baratheon.

Sansa felt Margaery's grip upon her hand tightening as the midwife prompted her to make one last effort. Seconds later she heard the cries of the baby.

"A princess, Your Grace," the woman declared.

Why wasn't she a boy? Sansa grimaced.
"My Lady." The midwife called and placed the small bundle in her arms while the Maester attended the Queen.

She felt a great relief when she saw the girl's black hair and deep blue eyes. The King would have no reason to complain.

Sansa sat on the bed and approached the little princess to Margaery. "She is beautiful, Your Grace."

"Yes, she is," Margaery answered and received her daughter. Despite everything, she looked happy.

"What is her name?"

"Cassana."

"The King will like that."

Margaery didn't pay further attention to Sansa, for she was entranced, staring at her daughter.

Sansa retired in silence.

She had not made it to the Tower of the Hand when Jory reached her.

"Your father wants to see you, my Lady."

"Thank you, Jory."

She walked to the godswood; for some reason, her father had taken a liking to speak important matters there.
She spoke first after sitting. "The Queen birthed a princess and named her Cassana."

"Robert will like that."

"She has the King's looks," she added.

"Robert will like that even better."

Judging his expression, she understood something worried him.

"What is it, father?" She inquired.

"I'm going to send you to Highgarden the next sennight."

"But you said the wedding wouldn't take place until next year," she cried.

Her father took her hand. "I wrote to Wilas Tyrell; he will wait."

"Then why?" She had to be there for Margaery; she couldn't leave her alone.

"I need you to do as I say."

"I need you to tell me why," she replied.

His father closed his eyes and exhaled. "You are not safe here."

"What are you talking about, father?" There was no risk of a war coming; she didn’t get what her father wanted to say.
"The King disgraced one of the Queen's Ladies."

"Lady Desmera?" She asked although she already knew the answer; Margery and her cousin had been distant lately.

Her father nodded. "It is evident that Robert holds no respect for his Queen or anyone else." Her father's voice was impossibly low. "You do not look like Lyanna, but you grow more beautiful every day, Sansa." He caressed her hair with tenderness. "I refuse to give him the chance to hurt you."

Sansa felt tears gathering in her eyes. She didn't want to abandon Margaery but didn't want the King approaching her either.

"She is going to hate me," Sansa muttered.

Her father held her tightly. "If she truly is your friend, she will understand."

It took her an indeterminable amount of time to calm herself.

"You will come to Highgarden for the Wedding, right?" She felt like she would be left alone in a place she didn't know.

"I wouldn't dare to miss your wedding, dear."

She said goodbye to Margaery before the King returned from his hunt. She knew it was dangerous to say it aloud, but she wished the Queen things would go better with the King.

"Do not feel sad for me, my friend," Margaery told her. "My children will inherit the Iron Throne." She ran a hand through Cassana's soft hair.

"I will write you as much as possible."

"You have a kind heart." Margaery smiled. "I trust you will make my brother happy."
"I will do my best," she promised.

Sansa just hoped Willas would be a slightly better man than the King.

---

Arya (303 AC)

She made one last effort to untangle her hair; it already reached beneath her shoulders. It was useless; the brush got stuck every time she tried to make it pass through her mane. She tossed the item to the floor with a grunt of exasperation.

_It will be better if I cut it._ She wouldn't have to brush it or worry because it got into her eyes when she was training or swimming. She looked around, there was nothing she could use to cut it; Needle was out of the question. _The Septa must have scissors._

She exited the cabin she shared with Jon and directed to the one the Septa shared with Anne; Arya was careful not to produce a sound when she passed Old Griff's door. She slipped into the place; Lemore was sewing something.

"May I help you, Ar...Arry?" The woman hesitated to say her false name.

Arya rolled her eyes; she had told Jon it was stupid, but he insisted on calling her _Arry._

"Could you lend me your scissors?"

"Have you finally taken a liking on sewing?" The woman smiled at her.
"Stupid, Griff. He had overheard a conversation she had with Jon about her inability with the needle, and he had run to tell everyone at the Shy Maid.

"I need to cut my hair."

"And why is that?"

Arya arched a brow. "Don't you see my head? I have to fix this mess."

"Your hair doesn't have to suffer because of it. I could help you with it," she offered.

"You are not patient enough for the task," she dared the Septa.

"Patience is the principal virtue of a Septa."

"Pray to the Seven to give you enough patience." She sat in front of the Septa with resignation.

Arya was sure the woman would give up after the first attempt; not even her mother and her desire to make a proper Lady out of her had reached the objective. It took a lot of time; Arya could not tell how much, but Lemore proved her wrong; the Septa even braided her hair.

"There you are. It wasn't that difficult, was it?"

Arya shrugged. "It will get messy again." She turned. "Nevertheless, thank you."

The Septa answered her with a half-smile and a bitter stare.

"What?"

"You remind me of someone I knew."
For some reason, that made her think of her father, and she felt incredibly sad. She tried to change the subject.

"Don't you get tired of sewing and embroidering?"

This time, the Septa laughed; it was a lively sound. "I admit it is not a thrilling activity at all; I do what I can to keep it fun," she said with a cunning smile on her face while she lifted a pair of trousers for Arya to see.

"Maybe I could help you with that," Arya answered with a smile of her own.

Arya had to wait for the next day to witness the results of her hard work. She was munching a piece of fried shortbread when she heard the first scream from inside the Shy Maid.

"Lemore!" Griff squalled.

The Septa lifted her gaze and smiled. Arya almost choked when she tried to hide her laughter giving a sip to her water.

"What did you do little sister?"

"Griff throws a tantrum, and that is immediately my fault?"

Jon gave her a meaningful look, but it was Anne who spoke. "Let her be, Jon. My dear cousin needs someone to remind him he is not the center of the world."

"I have gotten tired of this fight of theirs. Of that and the old man's shouts." Arya noted the way he spoke to Anne had become more relaxed lately.

Although Jon tried to hide it, he liked to be close to Anne. Arya could even tell their training sessions were what he enjoyed the most during the day.
"Lemore!" Aegon repeated.

"Just ignore him; he will get tired eventually." The Septa told them.

"Lemore!" The last shout was accompanied by rushed footsteps.

When Griff finally got to the deck, everyone cracked into laughter, even Yandry, and his wife.

"I know you like to be the center of attention cousin, but you don't have to dress like that."

Griff ignored her cousin and went directly to the Septa. "Why did you do this to my clothes?" He demanded to know.

"We just wanted to have some fun."

"We?" Griff turned swiftly to Arya. "So this was your idea, little rascal." He agitated the two colored breaches he was wearing and threw another pair at Arya.

She dodged it easily, then gave another bite to her breakfast. "Perhaps that will teach you not to steal my beacon," she said when she was done.

"What?! I didn't steal it; we had a deal."

"You didn't win."

"Yes, I did." He insisted.

"The combat didn't even end; your father interrupted it."

She had been alternating sparring partners between Jon, Griff, and Anne. Jon defeated her most of the times, and she always outsmarted Anne, but she invariably ended tied with Griff. She had
wanted to make the combats more entertaining, so she decided to gamble their bacon share to make things more interesting.

"But I was winning."

"No, you were not." Arya stood up. "What do you expect me to do?"

"Fix it."

"You can do it yourself." She prepared to leave. "I'll wait for you near the huge rock, Jon."

"Uh-huh," was all Jon said. After a year of traveling with Griff and the others, he had stopped trying to keep her out of trouble; she assumed even he had a patience limit.

She heard Griff's steps behind her and moved just in time to avoid him; Griff fell to the river with a big splash.

Arya leaned over one side of the Shy Maid. "Serves you right! How dare you to attack a Lady like that."

"You are no Lady!" Griff answered furiously.

Arya didn't have time to answer; abruptly the place had gone completely silent, and she knew what it meant. She could see it in Griff's shocked face.

"Enough of stupidities!" The old man shouted and pushed her out of his way. "Get out of there, Griff. I want you in Haldon's cabin, now!" The old man directed to the stairs that led to the cabins.

Griff climbed back to the Shy Maid with a somber expression. Arya bit her lower lip; she felt suddenly ashamed.

"I'm sorry," she whispered when Griff passed beside her.
"Don't be." He mussed her hair, the way Jon did.

She felt worse after that; she had not wanted to cause trouble. When she fought with Griff, she forgot that save Jon, she had no family anymore. But Old Griff, the way he stared at her always managed to remind her that she didn't belong there.

Chapter End Notes

I always worry about the way I portrait Bran, hope it didn't turn out wrong. I know there was not enough Jon/Arianne interaction, but my plans never seem to go the way I want them. The next will have more advances regarding that matter.

As I said in the announcement, I'll write two consecutive chapters for my other story, and since I've been taking around to weeks per chapter, the next one for Promise Me might take a while. I'm still considering whether to focus on this one after the two chapters for the Dragon in the wall.

The ages: Arya (14), Jon (19), Aegon (20), Bran (13), Sansa (16), Arianne (25). I think those are all of them.

Thanks for reading. Please comment.
Next chapter: "The proper destination"
Sansa (303 AC)

Sansa lit a candle for the Mother and the Maiden, more for habit than real conviction; she knew already that the gods would not answer her prayers.

Two years have passed since the day Arya ran away, and they had not found a single trace of her. Her father had told her when they were at King's Landing that he believed Arya was alive, and still, he had stopped searching. Moreover, he never mentioned her name in the few letters they exchanged.

Arya was gradually vanishing from their lives.

Sansa finished saying her prayers and exited the Sept; she crossed the labyrinth of rose bushes to the place where she usually had breakfast.

"You are late, Winter Rose." Willas' grandmother was already waiting for her.

"Sorry, Lady Olenna," she apologized and got closer to kiss the old woman's cheek. "I was at the Sept."
Olenna Tyrell sniffed disgustedly. "And what were you praying for, darling?"

"I was praying for my sister."

Sansa took a seat.

"Mmm, it has been two years, hasn't it?" Lady Olenna put cheese on a piece of bread and gave a bite before continuing, "were you praying for her return?"

Deep in her heart, Sansa still prayed for Arya's return, but she knew that was not what the old Lady wanted to hear. The Queen of Thorns had made clear that she thought Sansa was wasting her time and energy. That she should accept her sister had died.

"I was praying for her soul."

"As you should," she approved. "I heard your family won't come to the feast." Olenna Tyrell changed the subject; she didn't enjoy spending time talking about dead people. "That is quite rude."

_Margaery is not coming either._ She was only on the second moon of pregnancy, but the King hadn't allowed her to travel to Highgarden.

"Alys and the baby can't make the journey yet; my mother and Robb don't want to leave her."

"Ah, of course, forgive this forgetful old Lady. What was the name of the child, again?"

"Torrhen."

"The King who kneeled. Poor child." She made a face and sighed. "Nothing can be done about it. We will have to celebrate your name day without your family. Is your gown ready?"

The feast was truly an event to present formally Willas' betrothed to the vassals of Highgarden, but she still appreciated the kindness.
"I had it fitted yesterday."

Lady Olenna ate another mouthful of cheese. "The flock of hens will arrive tomorrow. I hope you are prepared to receive them."

Much to Lady Alerie's dismay, Lady Olenna had decided to leave the preparations in Sansa's hands, to see how well she could manage on her own.

"The servants already know what they must do."

"Good, you are a sweet girl, just like my Margaery."

Sansa smiled to her; she had grown fond of the old Lady despite the initial terror she had induced her.

When she had first arrived at Highgarden, the infamous Queen of Thorns was always judging Sansa's actions and behavior; more often than not she didn't know how to act in front of her. It didn't matter how beautiful the place was or how kindly they treated her, she felt like a savage northern invader. She felt clumsy and ignorant of the costumes of the place; for the first time in her life, she didn't fit in. With time, Sansa came to understand that Lady Olena was plainly honest, disliked the lack of intelligence of young Ladies, and thought Sansa one of them. Sansa had started to fear she would send her back to King's Landing because she was not worthy of her grandson.

However, when Sansa dared to share her opinion about Margaery's marriage to the King, the woman not only agreed with her but changed her attitude. ‘Perhaps you are not a silly hen’ Lady Olenna told Sansa the day she decided to definitely take her under her wing.

With Lady Olenna's help, she understood the place better, and how to behave and interact with others. She was no longer the pitiful sister of another lost Stark girl; everyone recognized her as the next Lady of Highgarden.

Everyone except for Willas.

Margaery had said her brother was sweet, gentle, and intelligent and Sansa could tell it was true,
but he had always treated her as a guest rather than his betrothed. He was polite but never warm with her; sometimes he even seemed uncomfortable in her presence, and although Lady Olenna said it was due to shyness, it worried Sansa to no end. He had even insisted on delaying the wedding another year.

Sansa considered the next two days, as the attendants arrived at Highgarden, the possibility of canceling the feast and asking permission to visit her family at Winterfell; perhaps that would make her feel better, less rejected.

Still, it was inconceivable to cause so much trouble.

_Willas must think the feast is stupid_, she thought while the handmaiden adjusted the sky blue gown of satin Lady Olenna had chosen for her and arranged her hair, leaving the lower half loose around her shoulders.

There was a knock at the door, followed by Garlan's cheerful voice. "Is the Lady of Highgarden ready?" Garlan treated her as if Sansa was his sister.

"What will Lady Alerie say about that comment?" She asked as soon as she opened the door.

Garlan was wearing an elegant tunic, the colors of House Tyrell.

"She would be glad to know grandmother will not torment her anymore," he answered with a bright smile.

Sansa laughed, but Garlan was right; Lady Olenna didn't think too high of her son's wife.

"Lady Olenna doesn't _torment_ me."

"That is because she likes you." Garlan offered his arm. "I am supposed to escort you to the Hall."

"Then we shall go."
Garlan kept making her smile as they walked, but she could not stop thinking of one thing: *Willas should be the one escorting me.*

A dozen of Ladies from the Reach got closer to congratulate her for both, her betrothal and seventeenth name day. Talla Tarly gave her an emotional hug.

"It is so good to see you, Sansa." They had met at Margaery's wedding. "You look unquestionably gorgeous."

*Careful with her,* she reminded herself. Lady Olenna had told her Randyll Tarly had wanted to marry his daughter to Willas. *She can not be fond of me.*

"Thank you, Talla," Sansa smiled despite her thoughts. "How is your mother?"

Talla scoffed. "She keeps suffering because Sam defied father to become a Maester."

"A Maester? Had he not gone to the Night's Watch?" It was a stupid question; they had hosted him at Winterfell a couple of days during his trip to the Wall.

"Sam never pronounced the oath," she made a dismissive gesture, "the Maester at Caste Black said he was more suited to study at Oldtown and sent him there."

Sansa didn't know what to say after. She had asked out of courtesy; she didn't want to meddle in the Tarlys affairs. Fortunately, the servants had started to serve the food, so she excused herself and took her seat at the main table, between Willas and his grandmother.

Willas acknowledged her presence with a nod. "You look beautiful, Lady Sansa."

"Thank you, my Lord."

Sansa heard Lady Olenna clicking her tongue and turned to find her shaking his head. "My grandson might be smarter than Lord Puff Fish, but he does not know how to treat a beauty. No wonder he remained unbetrothed until you, darling."
Sansa laughed at the comment, but she could not deny the formal treatment stung her.

They served her favorite meals, finishing, of course, with her favorite, a huge lemon cake with the shape of a wolf adorned with golden sugar roses. It was almost a pity to eat something that beautiful.

Sansa shifted uncomfortably in her seat when the musicians started to play the melodies for the dance. She fought her urge to look at Willas; his hurt leg barred him from dancing.

"Would you grant me the honor of dancing with me?" Sansa almost jumped in her chair; for a moment, she had thought it had been Willas. "Surely my brother wouldn't mind, right, Willas?" It was Loras.

Willas didn't even look at her and nodded. Sansa took Loras' hand and allowed him to direct to the dance floor. He moved as gracefully as he did on the lists; Sansa could not remember having such a skilled partner before him. Without knowing, she had started to smile like an idiot.

She danced three melodies with him, then with Renly Baratheon who was a regular visitor at Highgarden; she danced one time with each of the Redwyne twins, and twice with Dickon Tarly. Finally, as she danced with Garlan, she caught a glimpse of Willas, and her smile vanished.

*I should not have accepted Loras' invitation.* Willas was wearing a disapproving expression. *He is going to be my husband; I shouldn't have left him at the table.*

Willas must have felt her stare because he stood and left the hall as fast as his legs and cane allowed him.

"Are you fine, Sansa?" Garlan asked when she stopped abruptly in the middle of the dance floor.

"I need some air." She walked away from him, decided to follow Willas.

She found him sitting right at the entrance of the immense labyrinth that was the gardens of the Castle. Willas reckoned her presence but didn’t react for a while.
Finally, he cleared his throat. "You should not be here, my Lady."

*My name is Sansa.*

"Do I displease you?" She blurted.

Willas gaped at her; it was the first spontaneous reaction he had made in front of her. Still, he didn't answer.

"I know I was it was discourteous to leave you at the table. If you had said something, I would not have accepted your brother's invitation." He continued in silence. "And if any other of my actions has offended you, I would want to hear what it is." Her voice was trembling by the end.

There was still no answer.

*I should go back to Winterfell.* She turned around, prepared to retire, defeated. *Father will understand if I explain him.* She was scared to end up married to a man who despised her.

"There is no way you could displease me, Sansa."

More than the fact that he had answered, what stopped her was the sweetness in his voice when he said her name.

"Then, why do you treat me like that?" She faced him, trying to contain her tears.

"Have I ever mistreated you?" Willas looked appalled.

"You avoid me; sometimes you seem annoyed in my presence; you don't want to marry me."

Willas felt silent again and lowered his stare. After what seemed an eternity, Sansa heard a deep sigh.
"Sit with me, Sansa." Willas moved to make room for her on the bench and fixing his eyes on her. "I was trying to give you time."

"Time?" She blabbered; Lady Olenna would have criticized her already.

"I wanted you to grow used to the fact that you would become my wife and live here. To think carefully whether this betrothal was something you wanted; to draw back from it if you didn't feel comfortable."

"Draw back from it?" Sansa was perplexed. "I have been dreaming of it ever since my father told me," she confessed slightly ashamed.

She noticed he had blushed because of her words.

"Well," Willas smiled, "there was no way I could have known that?"

"You could have asked me." His words had made her baselessly angry. "But as you barely acknowledge my presence, communication becomes impossible," she vented her frustration, all manners forsaken.

"I didn't want to pressure you."

"You didn't want to know me," Sansa corrected harshly.

"Sansa," Willas took one of her hands hesitantly, and she shivered because of his delicate touch, "there's nothing I have wanted more since the first time I saw you."

"You make no sense."

He averted his beautiful golden eyes. "I asked Margaery to tell me about you since you arrived at King's Landing. She spoke high of you in her letters, but that didn't prepare me for our first meeting."
Sansa couldn't know what Willas had thought of her, but she remembered the first impression she had had of him; she had thought him sullen.

"The moment I saw you, I knew I was not the right husband for someone as marvelous as you."

Sansa was absolutely out of words. For an instant, she even suspected he might be making fun of her.

"I think I have proven myself right," he continued. "I have made you worry because of my attitude. Not to mention I'm not able to dance with you or crown you Queen of Love and Beauty." He gestured to his hurt leg. "I can't make you happy," Willas added, melancholy plain in his eyes.

Sansa indeed had dreamt of marrying the heir of a great house, a skilled, handsome and gentle young knight or prince, who would wear her favor at tourneys and crown her after every victory. That was when she was younger. After living at King's Landing, she had decided she only wanted someone who would treat her with respect, who would not sell their daughters to gain a fat King's favor.

_I have only been thinking of myself._ She had not considered Willas felt diminished and insecure because of his condition.

"Being unable to do those things lacks importance with a heart as gentle as yours, Willas." Despite how insecure she had been of their relationship, Sansa didn't doubt of Willas kindness.

Willas smiled brightly. "You are amazing, my Lady."

"My name is Sansa," she corrected him that time.

"Sansa," he whispered and smiled once more. "We should return to the hall," he said as he stood up. "My grandmother will scold us for leaving in the middle of the feast."

"I will blame you for everything, my Lord," Sansa giggled, standing up as well.
"Willas," he corrected her.

"Willas," she repeated while taking the arm he had offered to her.

It was only a tiny step forward; she could not say they fiercely loved each other, not yet. Sansa dared to hope time would solve that.

---

**Connington (303 AC)**

The ringing of the bells grew louder every second, echoing in the walls of the city till it became unbearable for him. He covered his ears, closed his eyes, and prayed the noise to stop but it didn't.

The first thing he saw when he managed to open his eyes was a young man with auburn hair and blue eyes who was shouting orders to an army.

He felt panic.

"NO! BURN THE FUCKING PLACE!" He tried to stop the young man.

They infiltrated the city. No one had heard him.

"STOP STUPID!" He shouted, but the sound of the bells engulfed his voice.

He knew what was going to happen but could not move; he could not do anything to stop them. If possible, the ringing of the bells became louder, so much that it felt heavy; it was going to crush him.
He closed his eyes again and gritted his teeth; the sound stopped soon after. He waited, motionless until he decided the bells would not start ringing once more.

Jon Connington opened his eyes; he was back at the Shy Maid. He set the nightmare aside quickly; it was a recurring dream which he had learned to ignore with the passing years.

*Damn,* he cursed as he searched for his boots. The boy sleeping over a book meant Connington had overslept. Despite his delay, he spared a couple of seconds to contemplate the boy's snoring expression and made a disgusted face when he saw the boy had drooled over the book. *Not very kingly.*

Connington left the cabin and didn't bother to shout at Rolly when he discovered he was sleeping soundly instead of guarding the ship. He knew the Jon Snow was keeping watch.

*At least, the bastard turned out to be useful.* If he was honest, Jon Snow was less of a bother than he had imagined and helped diligently with the work at the Shy Maid; unlike his sister, he never caused trouble. If he had not been the son of Eddard Stark, Jon Connington might have been able to get along with him.

Jon Snow had climbed to the top of the forecastle, but unlike the previous occasions, he didn't notice Connington's presence, so he took the opportunity to observe him quietly, trying to visualize Eddard Stark, as if looking for a pretext to hate the bastard. Connington had never been able to stop clinging to the past.

*Stark features, certainly,* he concluded after careful consideration. *What else was I expecting?* Connington observed him a bit longer and stilled; he had detected an expression he had seen only one time before.

*'Your father's lands are beautiful.'*

Jon Snow stared at the Rhoyne, the way Rhaegar had stared at the landscape from Griffin's Roost, the same mixture of awe and melancholy overflowing his eyes. Almost black gray eyes were remarkably similar to almost black indigo eyes under the scarce light of the moon; right then, the bastard’s eyes could have easily passed as Rhaegar's.

*What am I doing?* Jon Connington breathed deeply and shook his head, convinced that what he had
seen was an effect of his recent nightmare. He looked at the bastard one last time, whatever it had been, had disappeared, no, it had never been there.

"Go to rest, boy."

Jon Snow didn't answer, just made his way down the forecastle and into the ship. Jon Connington took his place and kept watch of the ship's advancements until the first ray of light arose in the horizon.

The next day, he took a short nap while everyone had breakfast; he needed to rest, for he would accompany the Princess to board her ship back home in the afternoon.

He found the ship deserted as he walked to the deck, where he saw Ashara leaning over the rail.

"Where is everyone?" He asked still rubbing his eyes, stingy due to lack of sleep.

"Watching closer."

"Watching what closer?"

"The fight. Now, hush, Griff, this is getting interesting."

*Which fight?* I took him a moment to understand.

"Is he sparring again with the girl?"

Connington had warned him against that; he would not let the boy repeat his father's mistakes. It had not come to that between them; he knew that, but the sight of them together panicked him, made that feeling of powerlessness return to him.

"No. He is sparring with Jon Snow."
"They had never done that before." He felt slightly relieved.

"His sister convinced him to kick Griff's ass." Ashara turned and smiled at him. "And he is winning."

"Your perception might be biased, Lemore."

Jon Snow and Arya Stark could have been her children with Eddard Stark. Ashara would deny it, of course, but they knew each other too well; it had been long since they had something to hide from the other.

"Maybe," she accepted, "but it is not. Take a look."

He obliged and had to repress a grunt at the sight: Ned Stark's bastard was outsmarting the son of Rhaegar. The boy still needed training, but what Connington was witnessing was ridiculous.

"He moves like Rhaegar, don't you think?" Ashara whispered in his ear, the way she had done during the feasts all those years ago.

Connington shot her a cold stare as an answer.

"He moves like him, don't you think?"

"The boy is slower than he was." It bothered him to admit that while Aegon had Rhaegar's features, his personality and skills came from Elia's side. "He is more skilled with the lance."

"I was not talking about your son, Griff?"

The comment made him frown deeply. "You are not funny, Lemore."

"I'm not joking, Griff."
He should have left, but something prompted him to stay and watch.

*Graceful and quick,* he contemplated almost horrified. The gods might be making fun of him. He repeated the ritual he used to perform after his nightmares, trying to calm down. *Nothing to do about it,* he gave up. Not that it mattered either; Jon Snow could win that fight, and Aegon would still be the son of a prince while he would remain a bastard.

"Tell her to be ready after lunch." He had seen enough already.

"You know she won't be ready."

Fortunately, Ashara didn't pressure further into the other matter. He answered with a gesture of his hand, then returned to his cabin, still slightly disturbed.

By noon, for once, the dornish princess was ready to leave.

None of them pronounced a word as they made the two hour journey to Volon Therys. There was nothing to say or so he had thought.

"Would you company while the galley sails off, uncle?" Her eyes didn't admit refusal.

"As you wish," was his weary answer. "Haldon, wait here."

The Princess took his arm, and he tried not to flinch; Connington assumed it was not his destiny to get along with dornish princesses.

They walked through the harbor, among the people.

"Do you know why I'm leaving?"

"I know you must see your father."
"No one is listening; no one cares about our business here," she said laughing, diversion plain in her face.

At least, Elia was never this annoying.

"What is it then?"

"I must attend a wedding. Sansa Stark will marry Willas Tyrell in three moons or so."

How does that concern me?

"Do not pretend, my Lord." She stopped abruptly and faced him despite being shorter. "You understand the implications of that wedding very well."

He understood but refused to answer. That marriage strengthened Robert Baratheon influence over the Realm, yet there was nothing he could do to counteract that. In reality, Connington's plans had been shattered the moment the Usurper married Margaery Tyrell, depriving Aegon of a suitable wife.

"My father," she continued, "he supports my cousin, but Dorne can't gain the war alone."

"Do you have a suggestion?" He had gotten tired of her fruitless preaching.

She took her time to answer that time. "Marry my cousin to the girl."

He would have yelled at her if they had not been in a public place.

"No," he said, the rest of what he wanted to say was choking him.

"I know why you refuse, and it is stupid." The Princess raised her chin. "Unlike his father, my cousin has nothing to lose from the union and much to gain."
"It is a terribly dangerous bet."

Connington had considered it as well. In the end, all was reduced to which one of his daughters Eddard Stark would choose to protect.

"It is an opportunity. I, we want him to succeed too."

"I will think about it." His head felt about to explode.

"She is young. We have time to make plans."

Connington fell silent after that. He was too immersed in his thoughts about another prince and another Stark girl. They got to the ship shortly after.

"He is not Rhaegar; she is not Lyanna," Arianne Martell assured him one last time before boarding the ship.

_It was supposed to happen this way_, he realized. Jon Connington now had no doubt that Illyrio had planned it from the beginning. That was why he had sent the Stark siblings to them in the first place.

_'He is not Rhaegar; she is not Lyanna.'_ The Princess' words echoed in his head even after he returned to the Shy Maid.

_I know they are different._ That didn't change, though, the dread he felt. Jon Connington feared he would fail his prince again; he feared history would repeat itself.
He was a knight; he had become one sooner than anyone had expected. The day the Black Fish had
told him he would appoint him a knight, Bran had suspected his grand uncle was making fun of
him. But the old man said he lacked a sense of humor, and becoming a knight was the result of his
efforts, not the time he had spent as a squire.

Bran had been assisting for his grand uncle for a year and a half when the mountain clans attacked
the people of the Vale. As guardian of the Bloody Gate, Brynden Tully was the one to lead the
army to put those people under control. Bran helped him the best he could, trying to remember his
lessons with the sword while controlling his fear; it would have been stupid not to fear the bold
men from the mountain clans.

As he remained kneeling during the anointment ceremony, Bran remembered shaking
uncontrollably before the first battle, the grip of his sword almost failing when the first Burned
Man approached him decided to kill him. He had fought for his life, murdered his enemies, saved
Harrold Hardyng's life and even resisted an attack from the leader of the Black Ears until the Black
Fish arrived to finish the man.

During the battles, there had been blood and death; the life of a knight was more challenging and
darker than he had expected, but he had no doubt that was what he wanted. Brandon Stark had been
born to be a warrior.

The Septon finished his prayers and stepped aside, giving way to the Black Fish, who unsheathed
his sword and touched his right shoulder.

"In the name of the Warrior I charge you to be brave," the old knight said as his sword moved from
Bran's right shoulder to the left. "In the name of the Father I charge you to be just." He returned to
his right shoulder. "In the name of the Mother I charge you to defend the young and innocent."
Brynden Tully mentioned the Seven Gods before reaching the part Bran was eager to hear. "Rise
Ser Brandon Stark of the Bloody Gate."

Bran couldn't hide his smile even as his aunt Lysa shot him a terrible stare; she wasn't too happy of
fostering him, and she didn't like that Bran had become a knight before her son. Nevertheless, she
offered a small feast at the Gates of the Moon after the ceremony.

"When will I become a knight?" Robert asked beside Bran.
"Soon, my Sweetrobin, and you will be the best knight the Vale has ever seen."

"If you want to become a knight, you have to train, Robert," was the polite answer of the Balck Fish.

*Robert won't become a knight.* Everyone at the Vale knew he was too weak, and his mother didn't contribute making him better. Bran had not gotten along with his spoiled, sickly cousin, but the thought made him feel sorry.

"The training is too hard for a boy like my Sweetrobin."

"Bran did very well with the training."

Bran feigned he was not hearing; his aunt had not liked the assessment.

"It is natural that Brandon is ahead of my Sweetrobin. It is the privilege of being older." She directed to Bran. "Your mother can tell you about that, Brandon."

Bran had to force a smile; he had come to understand his aunt held an animosity against his mother. It made him very uncomfortable.

"I'll greet the attendants." It was better not to be close to his aunt right then.

Many Lords congratulated him, and Nestor Royce even told him stories about the time his father and the King lived at the Vale, all while his daughter Myranda, served them wine. Bran enjoyed the stories but had started to get dizzy.

"Ser Brandon!" He felt Harry's hands on his shoulders. "Excuse me Lord Royce, but my friend and I have plans to celebrate his knighthood."

"Excuse me," Bran managed to blurt before Harry dragged him to the yard.

"My friend, you must learn to take care of yourself."
"I am a knight; I can take care of myself." He had no idea of what Harry was saying.

Harry laid his arm over his shoulders. "I'll prefer to face a hundred of Burned Men than falling into the clutches of Myranda Royce."

"They were friendly."

Harry burst into laughter and clapped his back. "Of course, they were friendly. You may be the second son, but you are still a Stark, son of the Hand of the King."

"Ha ha," Bran had understood. "I doubt Myranda Royce wants a husband as ignorant as me." The Lady was ten years his senior and undoubtedly more experienced than him.

Harry shook his head. "You, Ser Brandon, were a cup of wine away from awakening in Randa's bed."

Bran couldn't repress a shiver at the thought. He knew his parents might be looking for a match for him, but he was not ready to marry anyone. I have just become a knight.

"I guess I must thank you for saving me."

"I will give you more reasons to thank me tonight." Harry turned to him with a suggestive smile. "We will celebrate your knighthood with a visit to the town."

He knew what a visit meant for Harry, and although he considered him a friend, Bran was not planning to follow his steps, siring bastards all over the Vale. Harry already had three daughters with three different women.

"I can't do that," Bran replied almost apprehensively.

Harry rolled his eyes, exasperated. "Why not?"
"I didn't come here to have sex with women," he said aggressively.

"There is nothing wrong about it."

_I don't plan on having bastards._ Bran didn't know who he would marry, not even if he would marry at all; if not for the King, he would have worked his way into the Kingsguard. However, if he did marry, he didn't want to insult his wife by recklessly procreating a bastard. He loved Jon as much as any other of his siblings, but he had seen the hurt in his mother's eyes whenever she stared at his half-brother.

"It is dishonorable, and that is my final word."

"What am I going to do about your Stark honor?" Harry sighed. "I'll go alone this time, but take my words Bran: you should relax." Harry turned and directed to the stables.

Bran walked back into the hall, to the company of the Lords of the Vale, his aunt, his cousin, and uncle, although he pictured himself somewhere else. He suddenly felt homesick. It was his siblings and parents with whom he should be celebrating.

_They would be proud, and Arya would have been extremely jealous._ He tried to shake the idea away from his mind, for it would undoubtedly guide him to his blameworthy thoughts but failed.

Bran had to leave the celebration when he couldn't control his thoughts anymore. He had supported Robb whenever his resolution to keep their secret was about to falter, always reminding him of the promise they had made to Jon and Arya, but the truth was he felt as guilty as him for their family's breakdown.

Bran made his way to his chambers, already having forgotten his excitement about being a knight. He walked to the window, opened the shutters and jumped to the sill; that was something he had taken to do from his first day at the Gates of the Moon because it reminded him of the Broken Tower. It had been easy to pretend the landscape was the same at the beginning, but once the winter had started to give way to spring, the snow had vanished and the illusion with it.

_I could visit Winterfell after Sansa's wedding;_ that was his conclusion after much reflection; perhaps, that would help him getting rid of the loneliness he felt.
After almost five years of winter, the Maesters from the Citadel had just officially announced the start of spring, and no other place in the Seven Kingdoms reflected the change of season better than Highgarden. The gardens of flowers, from golden roses to daffodils, were in full bloom, and Bran had never seen a sky that cloudless or felt a breeze so pleasant in his life.

"This place is stunning," he said to his father as they made their way through the marble threshold. "No wonder Sansa was so eager to come to the Reach." It seemed like a place extracted directly from his sister's imagination.

"She looks more radiant than ever; knowing you would come made her even happier."

"She doubted I would come?" Bran arched a brow. "How could I miss my sister's wedding, father?"

His father grimaced, and Bran repented from making such a stupid question. Robb had refused to assist when he knew the King would attend after all.

'I fear I might try to gut that fat King if I ever see him again. I prefer saving trouble to father.' That was what Robb had written to Bran when he tried to reason with him.

"How is Rickon doing at Deepwood Motte?" He tried to fix his stupid mistake.

Fortunately, that made his father smile. "He says he likes it there; you can ask him personally, but you will have to prepare for hours of stories of the place."

"I am glad." Rickon had been who had suffered the most when they parted ways, for he felt abandoned.

"And you?"

"What about me?"
"How is your training going?"

"Fine." Bran bit his tongue to avoid revealing he was a knight already. He wanted to enter the tourney which would be held after the wedding and surprise his family.

"Just fine?" His father stopped his walking and regarded him with a concerned expression.

"What is wrong with it?" Bran had almost reached his father's height while he was at the Vale, but he still felt like Eddard Stark could see right through him as if he remained a child.

"Nothing." His father kept walking in silence for a while. "You know you can return home if you change your mind, right?"

"I know."

"I wanted to make sure."

"I swear it is going well, father." It didn't escape Bran that his father had become more amenable to them after what had happened with Arya.

His father nodded and stopped in front a door. "I must receive the King's party this afternoon, but your mother and siblings are waiting for you. I'll see you for supper, son."

"Bran!" Bran had barely entered the room when Rickon tackled him.

"Hi, Rickon."

"Mother says you fought the clans. How many savages did you kill?"

"That is not a pleasant topic, Rickon." Their mother censured Rickon.
"Sorry, mother."

"I'll tell you about that later," Bran promised.

He had to bend to allow his mother to kiss his forehead. Bran was glad to see her smiling for a change. Sansa hugged him tightly and told him how glad she was that he had made it in time.

"I'm happy to see you smiling, sister."

"I'm fortunate that father chose Willas for me." She blushed a little. "You arrived just in time. I was about to show mother and Rickon about the place."

Sansa took his arm and directed them around the castle, showing them the gardens and talking about the events planned for the tourney. She moved around naturally as if she had lived her whole life there. She introduced them to a bunch of knights and ladies and warned him to be careful with those who were searching for a husband. Bran had been about to laugh until he remembered the incident with Randa Royce.

The next days went by quickly; Sansa seemed to be running all the time. His mother made a tailor fit him for the outfit he would wear; Bran tried to protest, but she didn't allow it. His mother had insisted that it was necessary. Rickon didn't separate from Bran, wanting to hear everything about his time at the Vale. His father enjoyed hearing his stories as well; he had said they reminded him of the time he had spent with Jon Arryn and the King when he was young.

In the blink of an eye, he was standing in the magnificent Sept of Highgarden, watching how his father removed the Stark cloak from Sansa, and Willas Tyrell covered her with the golden rose. A multitude received the couple with a million of flower petals; there was no doubt they adored Sansa.

The tourney, which took place before the feast, was not as great as the one held in King's Landing, but it served Bran's purposes: he managed to surprise his family when he entered the lists. Bran unhorsed Dickon Tarly, Renly Baratheon, and Bayard Norcross on the first round, and earned encouraging shouts from Sansa and Rickon and a proud smile from his parents. He didn't win, of course; his first opponent for the second round was Loras Tyrell, who unhorsed him with astonishing ease.
"I thought you were going to win," Rickon commented once Bran was sitting with them.

"I'm just a beginner." Bran laughed, surprised at the blind faith his little brother had on him. "Ser Loras might be the best knight in the Seven Kingdoms."

At the moment, Bran thought while Ser Loras threw Trystane Martell out of his mount. The next time, I will defeat him.

The Knight of Flowers was ultimately the winner of the tourney and placed the crown of golden roses upon Sansa's head. Sansa smiled brightly, and Bran could not help thinking that his sister was indisputably the most beautiful woman in the Seven Kingdoms.

"Why didn't you tell us you were a knight already, Bran?" Sansa asked as he directed her to the dancing floor.

"I wanted to surprise everyone."

"You certainly surprised us. I hadn't seen father smile like that since the- since the King visited Winterfell."

Bran didn't know what to say to that and limited to make Sansa spin.

"Are we horrible people, all of us?" She asked after a while.

"Horrible?"

"For being happy after we lost Arya."

Bran didn't bother to point out they had lost Jon as well. He thought for a while and cursed for having to lie yet again.

"Our lives can't keep moving around something that won't change."
"None of us speaks about her anymore."

*That doesn't mean we don't think about her.*

"Because it is painful."

"I must be the only one who thinks she will return. I'm such an idiot."

Bran saw tears gathering in Sansa's eyes.

*She is in Essos with Jon.* He wanted to shout then, although, he would never have the certainty.

"You are not an idiot for wishing Arya is safe. I like to believe she made it beyond the Wall and is living with the wildlings as she always wanted."

"Knowing Arya, that is most likely."

"She would be angry at us for being so worried about her."

"She would shout us not to be stupid because she can take care of herself."

"Just that."

The bright smile returned to Sansa's face. Bran could only hope that wherever Jon and Arya were, they were smiling as brightly as Sansa.
"How do we find the Greywater Watch?"

His father laughed. "You don't find the Greywater Watch; it finds you."

Bran had asked permission from the Black Fish to travel to Winterfell with his father after Sansa's wedding. They had planned to visit Robb, Alys, and baby Torrhen and accompany Rickon back to Deepwood Mote. But first, Eddard Stark had to pay a visit to Howland Reed, and Bran was curious to meet his father's old friend.

"That sounds creepy."

"You will like it."

"Who goes there?" An ownerless voice asked.

His father gave him a told you it would find us stare before answering, "Eddard Stark and his son, Ser Brandon."

Bran couldn't repress his smile at his father using his title.

"Howland Reed will be pleased to receive you, Lord Stark."

A short man with a trident in hand appeared out of nowhere and urged them to follow him. His father dismounted; Bran imitated him and carefully guided his horse through the swamp.

It was not long before he saw the floating castle that was the Greywater Watch. At first, it seemed there was nothing; later, Bran noticed the towers, windows, and people. He had never seen anything like that before. It was not an enormous castle, definitely not like Highgarden or Winterfell but it floated, and Bran found it breathtaking.

"It is amazing."

His father nodded. "There's nothing similar in the Seven Kingdoms."
They made the last part of the trip in a boat and were received by Howland Reed in person. It surprised Bran to no end the fact that a man who looked so peaceful, even vulnerable had once saved his father’s life from the greatest knight in the history of the Seven Kingdoms.

"Howland."

"It has been a long time."

Both men greeted each other with a handshake and small smiles.

"I apologize for the sudden visit."

"You are always welcomed here, Ned." Howland Reed reassured his father. "You and your family." The man regarded Bran and offered him a hand. "Brandon, I assume."

"It is my pleasure, Lord Reed." He said, shaking the man's hand.

Howland Reed and his father exchanged an odd stare.

"Surely you don't want to witness our boring talk, Brandon. Jojen doesn't feel well, but Meera can show you around until the table is ready for supper."

A skinny girl appeared out of nowhere and presented herself as the daughter of Howland Reed. Bran followed her along the castle surroundings as their parents entered the main building.

"I don't think there's much to show here, not for someone who has seen Winterfell, the Eyrie, and Highgarden." There was a hint of boredom in her voice.

"Those places do not move around a swamp," Bran smiled.

"Yeah, it must be a great adventure to know the place where the Frogeaters live."
"Frogeaters?"

"That is what they call us."

He recalled hearing the term once at the Twins when uncle Edmure married one of the Frey girls. Bran started to understand the girl’s hostility.

"Not us. My father has always spoken high of the people of the Neck."

The girl stopped and eyed him suspiciously before nodding. Then there was silence, and he felt quite uncomfortable; perhaps Harry was right, and he had no clue of how to deal with a girl.

"Do you fight with that?" He signaled the three-pronged spear she carried; weapons were one of the few things he understood.

"What about it?"

"It's interesting. Knights mostly train with swords and lances. It turns out boring after a while."

That last part had caught her attention.

"I consider swords more attractive, but this is what my father taught me." She made a gesture to her weapon.

"I could teach you to wield a sword if you teach me to fight with your spear," he blurted without a second thought.

He realized almost immediately it was a stupid suggestion; the visit to the Greywater Watch was meant to be a short one. Still, when Meera Reed smiled, and her green eyes sparkled at his suggestion, Bran decided he wanted to stay among the crannogmen as much time as he could.
Arianne (304 AC)

A Blood Orange fell from a proximal tree, splashing in the pink marble of Water Gardens. Her father, as always, stared at the kids playing in the fountains, prolonging her wait for an answer she was anxious to hear.

"Did the couple look happy?" He suddenly came out from his stupor.

That was a unique talent of Doran Martell, testing his daughter's patience to the extreme with dull talk.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Answer my question, Arianne."

She contained her temperament. "Sansa Stark smiled the whole day and the people from the Reach seem to love her dearly."

"That is what I heard." Her father turned to see her. "We are losing this round, it appears."

The Prince of Dorne said he only played the Game when he had chances to win, so he had calculated everything before sending Arianne to Essos, but his plans were hardly going as required. Eddard Stark had not acted as they had expected after Arya Stark's disappearance. Also, they had heard rumors that Willas Tyrell and Sansa Stark were not getting along, and his father had harbored hopes to steal that match from the Tyrells, however, before he could make the suggestion to Eddard Stark, the couple had changed their minds, and their plans had gone down the drain.

At least Quentyn didn't get the advantage of marrying Sansa Stark. It was suspicious that he father didn't doubt sending his heir away for months. Maybe he wanted the people of Dorne to forget
about her. *I have to stop thinking about these things.*

"This is not a cyvasse game, father."

"Still, we are cornered."

"I know."

Doran Martell sighed heavily. "I dislike bold and risk actions, but that might be what we need in our current situation."

"You mean-"

"If having those two on our side can at least confuse the Starks loyalties, it is worth trying."

That left Arianne out of words. Her father was sincerely considering her suggestion. She even turned to see Areo Hotah, looking for confirmation.

"Do you need me to send Oberyn to convince him? For what you have told me, he can be difficult to deal with."

"No. I can manage." She had planted the seed for that plan before leaving Essos.

"I have asked too much of you, Arianne." Doran Martell made one of his long pauses. "Your mother would hate me if she knew the position in which I have put you, but I have no other option."

"I know." She took her father's swollen hand; he suddenly seemed despairing. "We have to make sacrifices for the sake of Dorne."

"That is the duty of us princes and princesses." Her father squeezed her hand back, wincing at the pain the action brought to his joints. "Do you think the girl will cooperate?"
Arianne thought of what she had seen at the Shy Maid. "She will be on our side, but it will take time. Perhaps a couple of years." Arya Stark was too unruly, and Arianne had to get Jon Snow out of the way first.

"A couple of years," he father repeated, closing his eyes. "Perhaps all my patience was a mistake after all."

For the first time in her life, Arianne Martell saw fear reflected in the expression of her father. It was completely disconcerting; her father always knew what he was doing.

"Could you take me to my chambers, Captain?" Her father ordered at last.

Arianne accompanied the captain as he pushed her father's wheelchair to his chambers and placed him on his bed. She covered her father up with the linen blanket and kissed his forehead before whispering her farewell words to him.

"Since when has he been this weak, Captain?" She asked once they were in the terraces again.

"Pretty much since you left the last time, my Princess. He has done the best to hide it."

"I had never seen him scared before."

"I think he fears he will not live enough to see his plans succeed."

*I am afraid we won't succeed.*

"I will hurry the plans as much as possible, Captain." Arianne rose on her toes and kissed Hotah's cheek. "Take care of him, Captain."

"I always serve, my Princess."
"I can't waste time. Not only for her father's sake but her own. If Doran Martell died while she was at Essos, Quentyn, and the Yronwoods could try to manipulate the succession. That was not something Arianne would allow.

"If you keep traveling back and ford, someone is going to suspect."

Arianne scowled; she had barely stepped out of the ship, and Connington was already complaining about something stupid.

"I'm glad to see you, uncle."

The man didn't relent with his disapproving stare.

"Worry not, this will be the last time. The next ship I board to Dorne will be in the company of my sweet cousin."

"Has your father finally decided?"

"He has," she nodded. "And he supports my plan."

She saw Connington stiffening at her words and prepared to start a debate about the benefits and detriments of condoning a relationship between Aegon and Arya Stark, but, for once, Jon Connington decided to surprise her.

"I'm not going to interfere." The words seemed to leave the man's mouth with great difficulty.

*That is an astounding progress.*

"I must confess I am surprised."
Jon Connington eyed her almost disdainfully. "I'll do whatever it takes to put him in his rightful place, even if that means accepting the girl." He sighed. "We need to instruct her, though, as things are, she would be a disastrous Queen."

Arianne raised a hand; the man was acting out of anxiety. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but we must go one step at a time. First, we have to drag Jon Snow to our side."

"How do you plan to do that?"

At first, Arianne had thought about offering Jon Snow a legitimization and the Lordship of Winterfell, but she realized that was not an option. Jon Snow was not that kind of bastard. She knew he was still stupidly attached to his family at Westeros; he wouldn't betray them.

"I'll be persuasive." She knew Jon Connington would disapprove what she had planned; her father would disapprove too, but they would not stop her.

Connington seemed about to say something and stopped to reconsider it almost immediately. "I hope you know what you are doing," he finally commented, distaste plain in his tone.

*You will consider my virtue a small price when Aegon gets his Throne.* Besides, what difference did it make when her virtue had been taken by another bastard long before?

"I do." And if she was wrong, it wasn't as if she would lose something. "Just know I will need your help."

Jon Connington only assented. Like her father, he looked utterly exhausted. They had gotten tired of all the time they had been waiting.

*Anne, Anne, I am Anne, cousin to Griff of Tyrosh.* She repeated as she and Connington made their way to the Shy Maid. It was more important than ever that Jon Snow and Arya Stark didn't discover their true identities before it was time.

Aegon was the first to spot her and smiled, using his free hand to wave at her. Arya Stark took advantage of such distraction and hit him with the plane of her training sword in the back, which
started a fight among them, finishing with Aegon in the river, and Arya Stark laughing at him.

_Those two will be better if I don't intervene._ Unfortunately, others had noticed too. Connington was looking away, and Jon Snow's smile was too forced for her liking. _I have to act quickly._

"I need a favor," she asked Connington.

"What is it?"

"Order Jon Snow to take your watch tonight."

"Why?"

"You don't want to know."

The old man sighed. "Fine."

Aegon received her with enthusiasm; Arya Stark told her she was happy to recover her sparring partner, which made Arianne grimace at the perspective of facing the girl's sword again. Jon Snow was stoic as ever, but even him directed her a welcoming smile; that was an appreciated change from his usual polite nod.

During supper, Aegon told her about their visit to Illyrio and the time when they passed below the Bridge of Dreams and heard the Stone Men howling to the moon.

"Arry was so scared a Stone Men would jump into the ship that she hid behind her brother."

Arya Stark went bright red, confirming Aegon's words. "What is wrong about fearing the Stone Men? Greyscale is lethal, stupid!"

"They are not as lethal as you, I'm sure," Aegon smiled.
"Stupid." Arya Stark muttered and stood up. "Are we going to finish that cyvasse match or not?"

"My Lady, I have been waiting to humiliate you all day."

"Are you coming, Jon?" Arya asked while directing a curious stare to Arianne.

"I don't have a mind for that game, and Griff's father told me to watch tonight."

"You aren't his servant, Jon."

"It is for everyone's safety, little sister." Jon Snow's discontent expression at her sister leaving with Aegon was barely perceptible, but Arianne noticed.

"I shall sleep better knowing you are guarding the ship, Jon Snow."

"As always, you overestimate my capacities, Anne."

For the first time since they met, Jon Snow smiled, not for his sister, but for her, and although she found it sweet, she knew it was also dangerous to pay too much attention to such details.

"I'm sure I'm not." She replied before following Aegon and Arya Stark inside the Shy Maid.

Just as Arya had the upper hand whenever she sparred with Aegon, she was completely overpowered by him in the cyvasse board. The girl attacked straightforward, which made it easy for Aegon to predict her movements. In an hour, she had lost three games.

"Again," Arya Stark demanded as she settled the pieces in the starting position.

"How is it that your father has not come for you, Griff?" Connington's change of attitude could be suspicious.
"He has been working more lately."

_Surely pressing the Golden Company._

"He must be tired of shouting all the time," Arya Stark rejoined while trying to concentrate on the setting of her pieces.

"He had taken long."

Arianne left after witnessing other four rounds of cyvasse. If she stayed until Arya Stark won one game, she would not sleep at all, and she had to wake before daybreak.

When the time was right, she slid from the mattress, trying not to disturb Ashara. She didn't change the night dress she was wearing and silently walked to the door.

"He doesn't deserve it," Ashara whispered from behind.

Arianne stood still a moment, pondering what to say. She agreed on something with Connington: Ashara had a soft spot for the Stark siblings.

"That might be true; unfortunately, my only concern is my dear cousin."

"He is good, and you are going to hurt him or worse, you are going to hurt yourself."

Arianne kept facing the door. "Are you still referring to my situation?"

Ashara remained silent, allowing her to leave.

_I supposed so._
She walked to the deck, making enough noise to ensure Jon Snow would notice her presence but never turning to confirm whether he was paying attention to her. She discarded the night dress in one move and submerged in the cool water of the Rhyone. As the sky grew light, she bathed in the river as casually as if she were in the Water Gardens back home, always careful not to look at the ship's forecastle; she would know whether Jon Snow had watched her soon enough.

She made her way back; only when she had put the nightdress on again, she dared to direct her attention to the place where Jon Snow was supposed to be. Arianne had to repress her triumphant smile. Jon Snow's attention was completely on her, his lips parted, his arousal evident.

*Finally.* She would have felt insulted if he had not reacted after what she had done.

"Were you enjoying the spectacle, Jon?" She did her best to sound angry.

"I-" he babbled as his face went as red as the dornish sun. "I didn't mean to."

"Yes, you did. Otherwise, you would have made your presence known to me."

"Excuse me, Anne, but you knew I was keeping guard."

"Ah," she feigned being offended, "are you insinuating I did *this* so that *you* could spy on me?"

"You knew I was here," he insisted.

She put her hands on her hips. "My uncle won't like your lame excuse."

The color disappeared from his face even faster than it had arrived. Jon Snow leaped from the forecastle, getting closer to her and directing uneasy glances at the access to the cabins.

"Listen, I didn't say anything at the beginning because I had no idea that you would do what you did."

"And then?"
Jon Snow averted his eyes, ashamed. "Then, I just could not stare away from you."

_Honest and sweet._ Arianne nearly felt touched.

"Then I shall take the incident as a compliment." She gave him her best smile.

"Does that mean you are not going to tell your uncle?"

"For real, Jon?"

"For my protection, I have to make sure."

"I won't tell him." Arianne walked past him but turned back to add, "but you owe me one."

Jon Snow hesitated for a moment. "I'm going to repent of this, right?" He asked with his typical kind smile.

"I promise you won't."

_Not immediately, at least._

---

**Jon (304 AC)**

He didn't like the city, not at all, and he liked _her_ game even less than the city. Still, he was there
again, walking the Long Bridge, dodging carts of manure pulled by elephants, ignoring merchants and prostitutes, ruminating over the possibility of turning around and walk back to the house located on the outskirts of Volantis, to where he was supposed to be.

They didn't live in the Shy Maid anymore. The last time after Anne had returned from Tyrosh, she had informed that she would stay with them permanently, and Old Griff had decided they would establish somewhere. No one had dared to protest, but the old man insisted in explaining his reasons: The Shy Maid was overcrowded, he had had enough of delivering Illyrio's messages across Essos, and it was improper that he and Arya kept sleeping in the same room.

_I should return_, he repeated despite the fact that he kept walking in the same direction. _I shouldn't be here._

It was too late; he was already in front of the wooden door, surrounded by the sweet smell of flowers. He pushed it slightly, half wishing it didn't open, but it did, and he slipped inside. As usual, there were no more than two candles illuminating the place.

"I thought you would not come." Her voice came from the bed; she was already waiting.

He released a weary sigh. "I shouldn't have come."

"And still, you are here," she pointed out.

"I could not return without you."

It was always the same excuse: Anne claimed she was bored, that she wanted to visit the stores at the Long Bridge, and they sent Jon to _guard_ her against the city's danger. As soon as they were in the city, Anne ran away to _their_ place. If he wanted her to return with him, he had to follow her, which invariably led to them having sex. He had not been able to resist her a single time; honor lost its value when they were alone.

"We have to stop this," he insisted.

"You say the same every time."
Jon knew she had a smile on her lips even if he could not see her.

"I mean it."

"I don't find a reason. Aren't we enjoying ourselves?"

"They won't like it when they find out."

He heard her buffing. "Your sister surely wants you to be happy, and Griff would want the same for me. As for my uncle, just ignore him."

That didn't reassure him.

"I am a bastard." He reminded her as he did every time he had the chance.

Arya and Jon might be away from Westeros, but that didn't mean a nobleman from Tyrosh would accept his daughter having an affair with someone like him.

"Nonsense." She stood from the bed, the silken sheet sliding down her naked figure. "How many times should I repeat myself?" She walked towards him, "There is nothing wrong in what we are doing."

As she got closer, he closed his eyes, trying to ignore her beauty, fighting to forget his arousal and the imperial need he had to pull her to him; something he had failed to do a dozen times since he saw her bathing in the Rhoyne.

"Or is it that you don't desire me anymore?"

Jon opened his eyes; Anne was a breath away from him. She looked as stunning as ever, and he was harder than he could remember ever being.

"That could never happen," he yielded in the end.
I am so weak, he thought for a fleeting moment, and then he stopped caring.

Having already forgotten all the reasons he had had not to be there, he was the one who reached for her mouth first. She dissolved his resolution with such an ease that it was worrisome; when they were together, if ever for a brief moment, he overlooked the existence of the rest of the world, even Arya.

She separated from him and stared at him with her dark eyes. "Then show me," she whispered in his ear, sending shivers through his body.

Jon complied. In the blink of an eye, he had her over the mattress, kissing his way down her body, preparing to give her a bastard's kiss. Anne received him eagerly, grasping his hair to keep his mouth where she liked it better; it wasn't long before she was whimpering and trembling due to his caresses. Even then, Jon had no idea where he had learned such a thing, not that it mattered when he could make Anne feel good.

"Enough," she cried as she propped herself to sit. "Off with your clothes, Jon Snow," she ordered. For some reason, she liked saying his full name.

Jon undressed hastily as if his clothes burned his skin. Once he was as naked as her, Anne drew him to the bed with her, and he released a faint groan at the delightful sensation of her smooth skin against his. They shared a gasp as she guided him inside of her, using her legs to keep him in place.

"This is how I like you, Jon Snow," she said as she urged him to move.

Jon answered by capturing her mouth before thrusting into her with all her might, trying to go deeper every time because that was how she preferred it.

It wasn't long before she arched her back, her release immediately triggering his; she slid her hands down his back, squeezing his buttocks as he spent himself inside of her.

He collapsed on top of her for a moment as he tried to recover his breath.

"Do you still think we are doing something wrong?" Anne whispered as she playfully bit his neck.
"It isn't wrong." He inhaled the scent of her hair. *It can't be wrong.* "But your uncle is going to kill me when he realizes, and if he doesn't, your father or your brothers will."

"My uncle knows I'm old enough to make decisions," she paused, and he felt her stiffen beneath him, "as for my father and brothers, they are more comfortable with me out of their lives."

Jon frowned. "What do you mean?"

She remained silent, so he sat up to regard her; Anne looked away.

"My father, like most men, prefers male heirs. He finds me useless."

"You are lying."

"I am not." She turned to face him, anger twisting her expression. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have sent me away with his late wife's unfortunate brother." She looked furious rather than sad as he confessed that.

We are truly a group of derelicts.

For a moment, after Old Griff announced his decision to settle near Volantis, Jon thought it would be the right time to separate from them. The idea lasted just a brief moment; it was quite painful to admit it, but those people had become family for them. Haldon and his apparently infinite knowledge; Duck and his ridiculous jokes; Lemore and her maternal concerns for everyone; Griff and his easy smiles; the old man's constant shouts, and of course, especially for him, was Anne. Separating from them, would be like losing a second family.

"Your father knows nothing," he declared a bit ashamed of his childish expression; he had never been good expressing his thoughts with words.

"I know that." She laughed and leaned to kiss him. "We have not finished here," she added.
"We must return." He made a useless attempt to dissuade her.

"We still have time," Anne whispered, guiding his hand between her legs.

Jon felt her warmness and agreed with Anne: they had not finished yet. In fact, he hoped they could stay together, like that, until his last day.

Aegon yawned and stretched as he walked down the outer corridor of the second floor leading to the main stairs. The sky was still rather dark; he might be able to grab a snack without Ashara noticing. He usually got up well past sunrise, but as he slept much better since they had moved from the Shy Maid, he had started to wake earlier.

_We should have done this long ago._ He liked everything about that place: his modest but comfortable room which he didn't have to share with Connington; the yard they used to train; the peaceful garden with the willow, the wildflowers, and the occasional weeds; and he loved how all that made him feel like he was home.

_Damn_, he cursed when he saw Arya leaning over the balcony that faced the inner yard with a sour expression, there was no way she would not see him entering the kitchen. _Maybe if I offer to share with her, she will keep quiet._

He approached her silently; if they made a noise, everyone would wake up. She startled when she noticed his presence and Aegon hurried to ask her to remain silent. She eyed him suspiciously for a moment.

She made a sarcastic grin. "Did you fall from bed?" She had not uttered a single sound, but he could grasp the words from the movement of her lips.
"No," he answered in the same way and smiled, "did you?"

Arya wasn't precisely a morning bird herself.

"No. I am." she paused, a weird expression appeared on her face. "I couldn't sleep."

"Ah," he prepared to make his offer when he heard the yard's door opening.

*Did Connington come back already?* His reunions with the Golden Company usually took more than one day.

He was wrong.

Jon and Arianne were the ones who crossed the entrance, something that left Aegon perplexed. They all knew those two had an affair, what Arianne's visits to the Long Bridge truly meant, but they had never spent the whole night outside. They had taken advantage of Connington's absence; although he would never dare to preach Arianne, Connington didn't exactly approve the relationship.

*They look good together,* he observed. Jon Snow seemed especially happy, and Arianne looked at ease. As they made their way to the main building, Arianne stopped Jon every other step to kiss him, and the kisses grew more passionate every time.

*This situation is getting uncomfortable.* He decided he had seen enough and prepared to leave, but he caught a glimpse of Arya's face, a mixture of distress and anger, and understood. *She has been waiting for them to return; that is why she was here.*

Arianne and Jon continued their way to the first floor, where their rooms were while Aegon watched Arya staring at an unspecific point in the yard with her lips pressed in a thin line. Given how close she was to her brother, it might be pretty hard to see him in such situation.

"You know, I was planning to steal something from the kitchens. Do you want to come along?" He whispered once they heard the doors downstairs closing; Arya could need a distraction from what they had just seen.
She nodded absentmindedly, followed him in silence and sat at the head of the table while Aegon picked a loaf of bread, and a jar of marmalade; he cut two slices for Arya and two for him.

He wasn't able to give a single bite to his snack, for the expression in his companion's face was way too depressing. Aegon didn't know whether he was supposed to say something. After some pondering, he finally dropped the piece of bread.

"I know it might be shocking," he started, "but what they- what they are doing is natural." Arya eyed him with disdain but said nothing. "I understand your feelings, but I don't think them being together is a motive to put such a face."

"Don't dare to insinuate you know my feelings." Her eyes shouted that she thought him retarded.

Aegon decided to be tolerant. "I know it can be uncomfortable to see a sibling in such situation," he explained himself.

"You have no siblings."

Aegon recoiled at the statement.

_I had a sister, a sister who is death because the Usurper and your father_, he wanted to yell at her, but she couldn’t know. And even if he were to tell her, Rhaenys' death had nothing to do with her.

"Anne is my cousin, and I care for her as you care for your brother." He only got silence as a reply. "Is it that you don't like Anne?"

"No."

"What is it then?" Aegon searched her face; she had gone red and looked about to cry. An idea crossed his mind. "Could it be that you have a brother complex?"

She stood abruptly. "I do not have a brother complex!"
"Fine," he raised his hands to prompt her to calm down. "You don't have to tell me, just know you are acting like a child."

"I'm not a child."

"Then don't behave like one." Aegon prepared to leave, annoyed.

"I don't want to be left alone," she whispered as she dropped back into her seat.

Aegon gave her a side look. "I can keep you company if you stop complaining."

"That was not what I meant." She sighed. "It is not that I'm against them being together." Her expression turned into one of pain. "Jon has-" she stopped to suppress a cry. "He is getting away from me." Arya stared at Aegon. "I understand it is the course life is supposed to take, but I thought we would always be together. I was mistaken."

"Oh," he was out of words, surprised she had told him all that. *She can't talk to Jon about Jon.* "If you were to tell him this-"

"I would never," she interrupted him.

*Are you not the closest to each other.* Aegon was confused. "Why not?"

"He would give up on her," she replied without hesitation. "I can't allow that because Jon deserves a life of his own." Arya made a half smile, and her gray eyes turned watery. "He renounced to his life for my sake once. I won't let that happen again."

*So you plan to endure silently.*

"Correct me if I'm mistaken but I think running away from Westeros was beneficial for him as well." He had heard from Illyrio. "He would have had to serve the Night's Watch for the rest of his life if not."
"Father sent him with uncle Benjen because he tried to help me."

"It was not your fault."

*Maybe Eddard Stark just wanted an excuse to dispose of his bastard.*

"It was. Jon was going to become the Master at Arms of Winterfell when Robb succeeded father."

*Was that what he wanted? Perhaps Jon had no other option than to accept the alms his trueborn brother had offered him.*

"I see," he considered he would never be able to understand the dynamics between siblings. "If I were you, I wouldn't worry. Even if you and your brother grow apart, you don't have to feel lonely. That is what friends are for." He smiled at her, unsure of why he was so stubborn about making her feel better.

She made a face after some pondering. "That is not reassuring at all."

"Why not?"

"Because you are my only friend."

Aegon flushed; she was making fun of his kindness. "I'll take your hostility as a sign that you had cheered up already."

*Connington would go mad if he had heard us talking about friendships between Starks and Targaryens.*

"Just a little," she conceded. "Don't think too high of yourself." She took her share of bread and gave it a chew. "We should go back before Lemore catches us here."

Aegon followed her. "That is a scary perspective."
Arya stopped at the kitchen's threshold and turned to him with a faint smile. Her eyes were not watery anymore. "Thank you, for listening."

"It was nothing." He couldn't repress the joy that comment produced on him. Giving his lifestyle the Stark siblings had become his only friends as well. "But you can act my servant for the rest of the day if you want to thank me."

"Mmm, only if you beat me with the sword."

"That will be my pleasure."

He knew it wouldn't happen, but it didn't matter. For the second time that day, he felt he was at home.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I hope this chapter worthed the wait. I had some trouble writing Jon and Arianne's encounter because as much as I enjoy reading smut in fanfiction (when it is well justified), I am not very skilled at writing those scenes, so it took some work to make it flow. R.A I had already thought about what you suggested regarding Arianne bathing in the Rhyone, but you convinced me to included in your commentaries. The ages of the characters at the end of the chapter: Arya (16), Jon (20), Aegon (22), Bran (15), Sansa (18), Arianne (26).

Next chapter: "The road ahead" I can't tell when the next update will be, but I promise I'm going to finish this story, so wait for me.
"Robert Baratheon has found you," the Old Man's words were like a punch in the gut for him.

Jon felt nausea, fear and another half a dozen emotions he was not able to name; he wanted to ask many questions, but the words wouldn't come out.

"How?" He managed at last.

"According to Illyrio, someone recognized you the other night at the Long Bridge."

Damn idiot. They had successfully hidden from Robert Baratheon for three years, and he had ruined everything because of his meetings with Anne. He felt a great anger towards himself, making him forget the rest of what he felt.

"Who?"

"I have no idea." Old Griff buffed. "Does it matter?" His eyes were piercing him. "I did warn you two that your behavior was reckless. You have exposed us. I thought you at least cared for your sister's safety."
The Old Man's words were like venom for Jon; he couldn't deny he had risked everyone for the most selfish of reasons.

"They didn't do it intentionally, father," Griff tried to intervene.

"I don't care for what they wanted!"

Jon breathed. "Arya and I will leave immediately."

That was the best he could do to try to mend his terrible mistake. In fact, he wondered why Old Griff had not ordered them to leave already.

Old Griff looked ready to beat him to death. "As if I had not thought about that." The man hit the table in front of him with incredible strength. "No, you and your sister will take responsibility for this imprudence."

Jon felt a wave of fear; he abruptly understood why he and Arya were still in the house.

"Are you going to hand us over the Robert Baratheon's men?" They could secure their safety that way.

"You can't do that, father!"

Old Griff glowered at his son in a way that stated he didn't care what happened to Jon and Arya. Jon considered for a moment trying to run away; he could take down Duck and the Old Man, and the others would not be able to oppose to them running away.

Where could we go? They didn't have enough gold to get far enough to be safe. Still, he had started to move his hand to the pommel of his sword.

"Stop that, idiot!" Old Griff had noticed Jon's movements. "I won't hand you over that fat idiot's men. It is too risky." Griff's father started to mutter to himself, "No matter what we do, they will make unwanted questions."
The man's words made Jon feel only slightly relieved.

"What shall we do then?"

The Old Man breathed. "We are splitting: Your sister, Griff and Haldon will leave to the East, the rest of us will stay here around a moon's turn, then move to Myr."

"No, I have to stay with Arya." No matter how many years they had traveled together, they didn't know anything about them. There was no way he would leave Arya alone with those people.

"You should have thought about that before committing your indiscretions."

"I can't separate from my sister."

"Is there not another way, father?"

"I wish there was."

"I can't accept it," Jon insisted.

"Jon, if you don't separate from her, they are going to find her."

Jon would have liked to punch Griff for making that statement, but thinking about the matter more calmly it made sense. Griff, Haldon, and Arya had barely left the house; unlike the rest who had visited the city frequently, they would be able to move unnoticed. Jon remained silent for a while he put his thoughts in order.

*They have evaded Robert Baratheon during more time than they have known us. They knew what they were doing.*

"Where would they go?"
"Vaes Dothrak."

Jon blinked at Old Griff; he was positively surprised. It was farther away from Myr than he had expected. "Why there?"

"It is the safest place if you are hiding from Robert Baratheon. Daenerys Targaryen is the living proof of that."

_Are they close to Daenerys Targaryen?_ One thing was that Old Griff had fought on the wrong side during the Rebellion, and other very different was that they shared a close association with the princess. It worried him; not just the Dothraki had a fearful reputation, Daenerys Targaryen might want to take revenge against his father using Arya.

"How do I know you are not handing Arya as a hostage to the Targaryen princess?"

"Explain yourself," Old Griff had narrowed his eyes.

"Griff told me you had been supporting a plot to put Viserys Targaryen back on the Throne. Are you planning to do the same with the Princess, using my sister as a hostage?"

"It seems my son told you many things," the Old Man started in a strained tone. "I assume he told you as well that we are done fighting useless fights."

"We don't even know the Princess in person," Griff seconded his father.

Jon fixed his eyes on Griff's, trying to get a hint of a lie, but he found none.

"For how long will this be?" He had no better idea of what to do.

"At least a year."
Arya is going to kill me. He had promised her they would not separate again.

"I understand."

"They must leave in two days."

It is too soon. Although, having more time to say farewell to Arya wouldn't make her accept the matter more easily.

Jon cleared his throat. "I'll go tell my sister."

Old Griff nodded and allowed him to leave.

Arya looked up from Needle when he heard him and smiled. Jon hated himself for having to tell her they had to separate from each other.

"No," was Arya's surprisingly calm response after he told her about his talk with Old Griff.

"I don't like it either, Arya." Jon made sure to use her name that time to avoid adding up to her anger. "However, my principal concern is your security."

You should have thought about your concern for her safety while you fucked Anne, whispered a voice inside of his head.

"We left together."

The tone of resentment and utter disappointment in Arya's voice hurt him deeply; he deserved it.

"I know," he admitted. "But please understand, if they recognized me, will identify you too."

Arya examined him as solemnly as their father, making him wonder just when she had grown so
much. He had been aware that his little sister was not so little anymore, but the calm way she was reacting towards the news, proved that she had also become more mature since they were at Essos. On another time, Arya would have shouted and cursed at him, like she had done when Jon failed to fulfill his promise when Robert Baratheon visited Winterfell.

Arya sighed finally. "How long will I have to stay at Vaes Dothrak?"

"No more than two years."

"Is that it?" She said as if it as nothing.

For Jon, it seemed an eternity, but he didn't dare to say anything once he realized Arya was repressing a pained expression.

"The Old Man gave me his word," he assured her, ashamed of how brazenly he was taking advantage of the blind faith Arya had in him.

"I see," Arya was lost in thought again. "Will you be safe here?" She asked after raising her stare to him.

*How can she worry about me when everything was my fault?*

"If they don't find us together, they will lose interest on me."

Arya nodded minutely. "I'm sorry for the trouble I caused."

"It is not your fault, Arya." Jon lowered his eyes. "If someone deserves the blame, that would be me."

*I was so focused on my happiness that I even overlooked how Arya felt.* She had not said a word, of course, but Griff had commented about it after one of his visits to the Long Bridge. *How come he knew about it and I didn't?*
"Don't listen to the Old Man, Jon," Arya buffed. "It was bad luck."

Jon forced himself to smile. I tempted my luck more than a single time.

"When am I supposed to leave?"

"The day after tomorrow."

Arya flinched then. "Your name day is just a fortnight away."

Oh, Arya.

"We can't waste time."

Arya stood from her chair, strolled in his direction, put her arms around his body and rested the top of her head against his shoulder.

"I'm going to miss you."

Jon held Arya tighter. "I'm sorry, Arya." He felt the need to ask for her forgiveness another thousand times.

"Shut up, stupid! It will be an adventure. I just wish I could go with you instead of Griff."

"You can tell me everything about it in your letters."

Arya separated from him, placing her hands on his shoulders and staring at him directly in the eyes; she had to raise her face a little, but she was not that far from Jon's height anymore. Once again, he considered that at some point during their three years at Essos his little sister had started to become a woman.
"Can you promise me something?"

"Anything."

"You will stop sulking while I'm away. You will enjoy the time you spend with Anne."

Jon felt himself blushing. "I don't know what you are talking about."

Arya raised her brows. "I'm not stupid, Jon."

"I suppose we weren't as discreet as I had thought."

Arya smiled. "Not at all," she answered before recovering her grave expression. "Promise me," she demanded.

Jon couldn't picture himself being happy while Arya was far from him, only the gods knew where.

"Promise me, Jon," she insisted, strengthening her grip on his shoulders.

"Only if you promise you won't cause trouble to Griff and Haldon."

"That won't be fun, but I guess we have a deal."

"I will miss you," they said together after a moment of silence.

Jon smiled and mussed Arya's hair one last time for what he considered would be a terribly long time.
Arya, Haldon, and Griff had been gone during ten days when Old Griff decided it was time for them to leave Volantis. Jon was glad to part, for the house was a disturbing reminder of his stupidity.

He was sitting under the willow at the center of the garden, which was Arya's favorite spot from the place, waiting for the rest to finish their packing. Jon turned to look at the trunk; there was no face carved there, but he had the sensation that the Old Gods were observing him and judging him from within the tree.

He heard footsteps getting closer and prepared to leave; despite the promise he had made to Arya, he had not been able to face Anne since Connington told him the awful news. Just stealing a glance at her overwhelmed him with guilt. Anne might come to hate him for behaving in such a way, but that mattered little until he received notice that his sister had arrived safely to Vaes Dothrak.

"It is time for us to leave." The soft voice reassured him a little; it was not Anne, but Lemore who had called him.

"Yes," he stood and brushed off the dirt from his breeches. "Thank you," he said trying to avoid the Septa's stare; she always looked at him in a strange way.

"Your sister will be safe."

You don't know that.

"I know," he replied hoping to finish their conversation and walking past the Septa.

"I don't think she would have liked to see you like that."

Why can't she just leave alone? Everyone else had understood he wanted to be alone; even Anne.

"I don't know what she would have liked because she is not here." He was starting to lose his temper.
"You are a petty liar, Jon Snow."

The comment made him turn around decided to tell her to mind her own business, but she didn't allow him to utter a word. Jon stilled, for the Septa had pulled him into an awkward hug; she was stroking his back as if she was soothing a child.

"You can't consume two years of your life like this, waiting for your sister to return." She took Jon's face between her hands the same way she did when she said goodbye to Griff. "You have the right to live for yourself."

To Lemore's credit, her words shifted something inside him and comforted him somehow. She didn't release him until he nodded in understanding, and when she did, she dedicated him an astonishingly loving look. For a moment, she made him wonder whether that was how it felt to have a mother.

"Lemore, did you find him or not?!" Old Griff shouted.

The Septa stepped away from him and offered Jon a playful smirk.

"Stop the shouting Griff! We are on our way!"

"We must leave. Now!"

She rolled her eyes and started to walk towards the main door of the house. Jon allowed himself to give one last look to the trunk of the willow before following the Septa.

He was observing the front of the building which would become their home at Myr. It could be just his guilty conscious, but the place looked strangely similar to the one at Volantis. Jon shook his head, sighed and made his way through the entrance. He couldn't stay there the whole day; he needed to speak to Old Griff.
He had been thinking about Arya frequently, but he had also been seriously considering Lemore's words. He had dedicated the last years of his life to Arya, and with Arya gone, he had to find something to do or else he would go insane. After much thinking he had gotten to one conclusion; there was only one thing he could do at Essos.

"No letter has come from them yet," Old Griff snarled at him as soon as he saw him.

"I didn't come here to ask for the letters."

"What do you want then?" The man always acted as if people were wasting his time.

"You said you would work for the Golden Company," Jon ventured.

"So what?"

"I want to serve there as well."

"Why?" He asked mistrustfully.

"I'm a bastard and an exiled from Westeros. I would say the Golden Company is the perfect place for me."

Old Griff seemed surprised for a second and then pensive, but he didn't refuse Jon. "I will speak to the Commander."

Jon nodded before retiring; all that was left for him was waiting. For better or worse, he had made up his mind.
Aegon (305 AC)

He missed the tranquility of the house at Volantis most of all. He had thought his life on the Shy Maid had been agitated, but that clearly was because he had never traveled with a Dothraki herd. There were too many screams, too many fights, too much dirt and so many indecencies that he wondered just how his aunt had managed to live almost a decade among them.

Aegon couldn't imagine living like that for more than a moon's turn, and he knew Haldon felt the same way. The only one who seemed to be enjoying the journey was Arya. She never got tired even if they rode for hours, and everything she saw, from a flower she had not known to a warrior using a whip, amazed her.

The easiness with which she had managed to adapt to their new life made Aegon feel like a spoiled child, even when he was already a man of two and twenty. It also made him feel unable to fulfill the promise he made to Jon about protecting his little sister; Arya positively didn't need his protection.

'Seriously, you sound like my sister,' Arya had told him when he complained of a sore back after the first night they slept on the floor.

Aegon shifted in his saddle and raised his head, looking for Arya, who was riding well ahead of him and Haldon; she had won the right to take that position in the khas. She was gesturing towards a young rider, saying without words something which, unlike the young rider, Aegon could not understand. Among the three of them, Haldon was the one who spoke Dothraki, but it was Arya who seemed to understand those people the best. Perhaps it was related to her unbeatable ability as a horsewoman.

Aegon saw the young man frowning for a moment before nodding and smiling; a split second later, he and Arya separated from the column. Aegon felt dread for all the things that might happen, from the unlikely event of Arya falling from her horse to the young dothraki forcing Arya to do something improper, before stopping himself from trying to follow them.

He managed to pretend Arya was all right during two hours before running to ask for Haldon's counsel.

"She is not in danger, Griff," Haldon answered while massaging his lower back, "the girl does better than you and me with these savages."
"Haldon," Aegon tried to warn him about his way of speaking.

"They don't understand a word we say, I promise." Haldon kept rubbing his muscles. "Damn, why couldn't Illyrio send us by ship part of the journey."

"He said it was safer this way," Aegon replied still scanning the vicinity for a hint of Arya.

"Safer?" Haldon snorted. "I will die of a festered ulcer in a moon's turn or killed by a bloody warrior tomorrow before we manage to get to Vaes Dothrak or wherever the princess is."

"You are not going to die, Haldon." Aegon shook his head; at least he could say he was not as whiny as Haldon.

"Judging what a poor rider he is, I would say he will." Aegon almost fell from his horse after hearing Arya's voice.

"Where the in the Seven Hells have you been?!"

Arya wrinkled her nose. "You sound like my mother, Griff."

"I don't care whether you want to die soon, but I don't want Jon gutting me because something happened to his little sister." Jon Snow had proven himself capable of such thing the only time they sparred together.

Arya went out of words; mentioning Jon was like a magic spell to cool down her unruliness.

"I made a bet with the boy. I told him I could get to the head of the khas before he did."

_Seriously? _The more he thought about it, the more he convinced himself Arya Stark was not a high-born Lady.
"Did you win?"

"I did." She smiled, pointing the new arakh hanging from her hip.

*Reckless.* That was an easy way to get in trouble.

"I doubt a race took you this long."

Arya shook her head. "I rode ahead of the khas for a while. It is much cleaner there, and I was able to see the landscape before the horses ruined it."

She was right; wherever they went, they couldn't fully appreciate the place once the khas had already stepped over it.

"I hope you had fun," Aegon didn't like how she seemed not to need neither him nor Haldon.

"I saw a couple of interesting things." She searched around her saddle and pulled out a bright yellow flower. "Do you know its name?" For someone who purposefully rejected Lady-like things, she had a strange fondness for flowers.

"No." Aegon turned to Haldon. "Hal?"

"That is a goldenrod."

Arya nodded and muttered the name to herself. "Is it poisonous?"

"No. You can even brew an infusion with it."

Arya twirled the flower in her hand and leaned towards Aegon. "You can have it."

A smile broke on Aegon's face as he took the gift from Arya's hand. "My Lady, are you trying to
"Don't be stupid." She hit him in the arm. "I'm giving it to you because Jon is not here."

His smile vanished. "Don't treat me as your brother's replacement," he spat, throwing the goldenrod to the soil before riding away from her.

Aegon recognized almost immediately he had reacted irrationally; he couldn't understand why Arya's answer had crossed him. He had seen her gifting flowers to Jon from the day they met; perhaps she had plucked it thinking about Jon and had not wanted to waste it after she remembered her brother was not traveling with them.

Aegon felt like a jerk, but he was too proud to return to apologize or even turning back to see whether Arya had followed him. He kept riding surrounded only by the dothraki until the khas stopped for the day, and didn't bother to look for Haldon and accommodated over his bed mat just where he had dismounted. His High Valyrian lesson could wait until the next day.

He couldn't tell when he had fallen asleep, but just before daybreak, he felt someone was staring at him. He opened his eyes and discovered Arya squatting in front of him with a deep frown on her face.

"What?"

Arya fidgeted with the hem of her tunic. "Can we talk?" She whispered.

Aegon sat up, rubbing his face; once he determined Arya was not a dream, he nodded, and she made him follow her away from those who were sleeping. They stopped near a murmuring stream, glittering because of the moon's light; right before dawn, even a dothraki khas was quiet.

Arya didn't speak for a while; she limited to remove the ground with the heel of her boots.

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly.

Aegon blinked at her; he might still be asleep. He thought quickly to discern what was the reason
for the apology.

"The issue with the flower," he started, "I didn't mean to react like that." Aegon placed both hands behind his head. "I guess I was tired; I'm not used to the dothraki way of living."

_Idiot_, he thought right after the words left his mouth. Arya had not been raised to live like that either.

"No. That was not it." Arya fixed her stare on him. "I'm sorry you had to leave the house at Volantis. I know you liked it."

It was not the place but the fact that he had had a normal life there.

"We had to leave for safety," he said shrugging, trying to diminish the importance of the matter.

"And it was unsafe because _I_ was there," she countered matter of factly.

_It was unsafe because we both were there._ Which capture would Robert Baratheon appreciate more? His lost bride or the son of the man he hated?

"We were all hiding," he offered.

"Things got complicated since I got there." She laughed bitterly. "I guess Sansa was always right; I have the exceptional talent to ruin everything."

At first, Aegon thought she was joking, then, he saw the hurt on her expression.

"I didn't know you could be that overdramatic," he said as a fruitless attempt to change her mood.

She ignored him and kept talking. "I should have obeyed my parents." She raised her face towards the sky, giving a deep breath. "I should have just married that fat king and saved Jon and everyone else all these troubles."
Does she truly believe that? Aegon didn't like it; after all the time they had spent together, he didn't want to consider the possibility of Arya enduring such a fate. He wondered for during how long she had been having those thoughts or whether Jon knew about them.

"Don't say that." He paused, looking for the right words to tell her. "Jon made a choice because he believed you deserved better than being Robert Baratheon's Queen." Aegon got a step closer to her. "I believe you deserve better than that."

Arya turned to him, her head still half directed to the sky, with a stare which indicated she didn't want his pity. With the moon illuminating her face or perhaps due to her pain, she looked older somehow.

"I hate when you are indulgent with me."

Aegon gave another step forward and risked himself by holding Arya close to him. She didn't put up a fight, so he forgot the nagging voice inside his head which sounded too much like Connington and stroked her messy hair in what he expected was a soothing fashion.

"I'm indulgent because you are too harsh on yourself."

Aegon felt her fingers knotting in the front of his tunic.

"I miss Jon," she whispered. "I won't see Winterfell of my family again; I don't want the same to happen with Jon."

Aegon felt real bad for her at that moment.

"You will see Jon again." Aegon pulled himself away and made her face him. "And you will return to your home."

"You have no way to know that."
"I do. You will reunite with your family once the Usu- Robert Baratheon pays for his crimes."

Arya snorted and walked away from him. "I'm not naïve enough to believe that." She clapped his shoulder; whatever had prompted her to tell him those things was gone. "I appreciate the lie, though," she said as she walked away from the stream and him.

*It was not a lie.* He wished he could tell her that when he took the Iron Throne, she would be able to go home. *I will take you home.* Jon and Arya were his friends; they had become a highlight in his solitary existence. If Aegon thought it was also for their welfare, the idea of reconquering Westeros made more sense to him.

Arya had maintained her carefree behavior during more than a fortnight; if not for their short conversation at the house in Volantis and the other the previous night beside the stream, Aegon would have bought the act she was putting up. She could change her tunics for painted vests and her boots for sandals, use her hair in the dothraki fashion, speak their language and eat horse's meat, but the hint of longing in her eyes would still return when she lowered her guard.

Aegon found himself watching her more every time, ready to intervene whenever her sorrow threatened to return. He didn't mind making a fool of himself if that meant he managed to make her smile, even if the smiles he managed to get from her were not half as extraordinary as the ones Jon got. Aegon had become very conscious of her actions.

Right then, as washed his face to drive sleep away, he spotted a glimpse of Arya hiding behind the tall grass, stalking something or someone on the opposite side of the stream.

Aegon smiled to himself.

"What are you doing there, Arry?!" He asked louder than it was absolutely necessary, already represing his smirk.

He saw Arya startling, then heard the flapping of wings followed by a muttered curse. Arya overcame the stream with one jump and hit him with the palm of her hand in the nape.
"What was that for?"

"I almost had it, stupid!" She said while snapping a reed into two.

"You almost had what?"

"The bird," she made a disgusted face at him, "I thought, for once, we could eat something that was not horse flesh."

"Oh." He would have also wanted to eat something different. "Sorry, I could help you capturing another."

"Ha, you would only get in my way."

"Mmm, you are right. I guess I just wait for you to do all the work and just eat it." He gave a side look; Arya was preparing to hit him in the arm.

"Griff!" They heard Haldon's voice.

What does he want? It was too early for lessons.

"We are here, near the stream!"

"Come back; we are under attack!"

Under attack from whom?

He and Arya exchanged an uneasy stare; Robert Baratheon's men couldn't have followed them across the Great Sea of Grass.

They followed us across the Narrow Sea. He didn't want to think about it.
"Haldon must be exaggerating." He beckoned for Arya to follow him.

"That would not be something new," Arya agreed with him, but she had placed her hand on the pommel of her thin sword; she felt as wary as he did.

They walked as calmly and silently as they could manage through the grass, even if they shared the fear of finding the Usurper's mean attacking the khas.

They released a reassured sigh when they found Haldon and learned the whole issue was a quarrel with another dothraki group.

"I don't know why you look so relieved," Haldon said almost offended. "If the khas losses, we are going to become slaves for the opposite faction."

"Khal Drogo has not lost a battle in a decade," Arya pointed out.

"Khal Drogo is not here, girl."

"We shouldn't worry." Aegon doubted Illyrio had not expected something like that to happen; he undoubtedly had instructed his guards of what to do in such situation.

Arya was right in the end; the khas utterly overpowered the other group, even without Khal Drogo guiding them. It had been a short but bloody encounter, and it made Aegon consider what a great advantage for their plans would be to have a dothraki horde with them when they got to Westeros.

Maybe I could convince Daenerys to join us while we travel with her Khalasar.

"Did you see that?!" Unlike Haldon, who was found the confrontation disgusting, Arya was pretty excited. "I didn't know it was possible to shoot a bow while riding towards and away from the enemy." Aegon turned to her, for she was grasping his arm with incredible strength. "What?" She asked, noticing he was staring at her.
"I didn't imagine a Lady could become that excited about warfare."

Arya released his arm to give him a punch. "How many times do I have to tell you? My mother and my sister are Ladies, but I am not."

"You are a Lord's daughter, so you at least have the title."

Arya's face fell to the mention of her father. "I don't think Eddard Stark considers me his daughter after what I did." She muttered before turning to leave.

"Wait," he tried to stop her.

"I want to be alone to be alone."

Aegon knew better than to follow her, and in a second, the tall grass from the meadow had engulfed her.

_I could have listened to you._ Aegon exhaled exasperatedly after a while, reminding himself there was no way he could replace Jon Snow. _Why am I even trying?_

Daenerys Targaryen was not what he had expected, which didn't mean Aegon thought of her as a disappointment. She just didn't suit his image of a Targaryen princess. Then again, Aegon, as he was right then, surely didn't fit the image of a Targaryen prince either.

The Khaleesi if the Great Sea of Grass was sitting on the floor of her tent cross-legged, with two dothraki maids standing behind her and a boy by her side. She was wearing the dothraki outfit and a white lion skin over her shoulders. Even with her sitting, Aegon could tell she was shorter than him, without a doubt more delicate than Arya, and still, she was intimidating. She made Aegon feel as a silly child.

"I am," he started, unsure of how to address her. Was it safe to use his real name in front of her?
"I am aware of who you are," Daenerys spoke when Aegon was unable to continue. "Better said, Illyrio made sure I was aware of who you are and why you come to me, nephew." Daenerys directed him a cold stare.

Aegon tried to ignore the way she had pronounced the word nephew. "I have wanted to meet you for a long time, Daenerys."

Daenerys only nodded and prompted him to sit in front of her. Aegon obeyed rapidly, still unsure of how to behave in front of her or her companions. The boy beside her eyed him curiously; he was no more than five and would have been completely dothraki if not for his violet eyes, the only proof that he was Daenerys' son.

"His name is Rhaego," she shared when she noticed Aegon's stare upon the child. "He will turn six soon enough."

"It is good to meet you Rhaego."

The boy didn't answer, just turned to whisper something to his mother in dothraki and exited the tent, with one of Daenerys' maids trailing behind him.

"Don't mind him. He's wary of blue-haired men."

"I see," Aegon answered, not understanding a single thing.

"It is unimportant." Daenerys made a signal, and the second maid handed Aegon a cup of wine. "So, Illyrio's messenger said you needed to travel with us for protection."

"That is right."

"I don't have issues against that; you can stay for as long as you want," Daenerys said after a brief silence. "However, consider you will have to adapt to our customs or you might end up like my brother," she added, nonchalantly.
Aegon gulped at the thought of Viserys Targaryen with a golden crown on his head.

"I have no intention of insulting the Khal."

"That is wise from you." She offered him a brief smile. "I hope you have no intention of asking him for an army to invade Westeros either."

Aegon tried not to flinch; she had crushed his hopes even before he asked. "I thought you would want to go home," he blurted.

Daenerys looked surprised. "My home is here," she declared.

"Don't you want to recover your father's throne?"

"Isn't it your throne?" She asked, raising a brow.

"We are the last Targaryens. We have the responsibility to keep our ancestors' legacy."

"You sound like Viserys." Daenerys chuckled.

"I hope I don't." Aegon couldn’t repress a face.

Daenerys sighed. "Look, for the longest time, all I wanted was to go back to Westeros, to recover my life alongside my brother, but then I realized there was nothing for me to recover." She was staring at him directly in the eye. "I don't have a single memory of that place and traveling the Great Sea of Grass, with Rhaego and Drogo- that is the happiest I can remember being." She seemed doubtful before continuing; her expression had softened considerably. "I was glad to know I'm not the last Targaryen in the world, but I won't risk this life, my life for the unlikely chance of conquering Westeros."

"So you are saying I should give up." It was not that the idea had not crossed his mind before, but he had never heard it from anyone else.
"I'm saying it is not what I want."

Aegon forced himself to smile; despite feeling totally disappointed, he got what she was trying to say. "I understand. Thank you for receiving us; we won't cause trouble." He prepared to leave.

"Speaking of trouble-" Daenerys stopped him. "The Stark girl, should you be giving her that much freedom?"

"She is not a prisoner," Aegon defended Arya rapidly. "She is escaping from Robert Baratheon and has been a good friend to me."

"Friend?" Daenerys snorted. "She doesn't know who you are, does she?" She stared at him disappointingly.

Aegon started to feel uneasy. Daenerys had said she did not want to go to Westeros to find justice for their family, so her being distrustful of Arya, who had not even been born during the Rebellion, was a bit unfair. That couldn't end well.

"Even if she knew, she would not harm me or your family. We share a common enemy."

"People can go to great extents to get a royal pardon." Daenerys' expression had turned into a dark one as if she was remembering something terrible.

"She is not like that."

Daenerys nodded, looking resigned. "Still, I recommend you to keep your distance. Nothing good has come from relations between Starks and Targaryens."

Aegon could have rolled his eyes and told her how ridiculous that notion was, however, he was Daenerys' guest. It was better to avoid unnecessary trouble with her.

_Daenerys and Connington might have gotten along._
"I'll keep my distance." That clearly pleased Daenerys.

He handed his cup to the maid and prepared to leave.

"I'll send someone to assign you a place in the Khalasar." Daenerys stood up and accompanied him to the entrance of the tent. "I'm glad to have you here, nephew, really," she added with a faint smile.

"Thank you."

The first thing Aegon did after Daenerys reentered her tent was to look for Arya.

Arianne (305 AC)

It should not matter to her.

It should not matter that Jon Snow had joined the Golden Company nor that he had ended their relationship; it should not matter that he had stopped speaking to her or even looking her in the eye. Arianne had gotten what she needed from him, and that was all that mattered.

The thing was, Jon Snow's indifference bothered her, a lot. Although she hadn't seen much of him since unlike Connington, he stayed with the rest of the Golden Company.

Arianne released a long sigh and leaned back into the lounge where she was drinking a cup of wine, trying to cast away Jon Snow related thoughts. However, the monotonous life at Myr was of no help; she always ended up thinking of the Bastard of Winterfell.
"Stupid," she thought angrily and spilled the remaining of her wine on the floor.

"Humph," she heard Ashara expressing her displeasure.

"What?" Arianne turned to the older woman, who was sitting across from her, mending a piece of clothing.

"I doubt you are going to clean that," she said, raising a brow.

"I'm bored."

Ashara frowned. "Is that your excuse for behaving like a capricious child?"

Arianne made a face. "I'll clean it." There was that thing about Ashara that made Arianne feel as a reprimanded child, something not even her father had been able to achieve in a while.

"What is wrong with you? You don't look too well," Ashara commented as Arianne did her best to wipe the wine off the wooden floor.

"It unnerves me to think we'll have to spend another two years in this monotony."

That was if Aegon and Arya Stark returned in time. Considering Aegon's letters had not shown a single sign of progress in their relationship Arianne could end up stuck in Myr five years.

"Really? I had thought you and Griff were completely aware of the consequences of your actions." Ashara smiled maliciously. "Boredom included."

Arianne didn't answer; she and Connington had already fought enough against Ashara who reprobed their methods to separate the Stark siblings. She had said it had been cruel, especially toward Jon Snow, as if that could make Arianne feel guilt or regret.

"Perhaps is his absence what is bothering you." Ashara directed her a challenging stare.
Jon Snow must actually be her son. It was incredible how much she rooted for him.

"Why should it bother me?" Arianne tried not to show her contempt in her words.

Ashara shrugged. "You seemed very fond of him at Volantis."

"I was," she admitted, "although, that doesn't mean I'm going to mull over his absence."

Jon Snow is not unique. He was not the first and he will not be the last man in her life.

Ashara's smile softened a little. "Repeat those words to yourself until you believe them." She left Arianne alone.

"We are not the same," Arianne muttered to herself.

Her thoughts regarding Jon Snow would vanish due time; she was sure of it.

Arianne was wandering one of Myr's greatest avenues when she saw Jon Snow for the first time in weeks. He was standing in front of some smith's establishment, wearing the uniform of the Golden Company. Arianne, without a second thought, decided to approach him.

Before she could call him, however, an attractive girl with big eyes stepped outside the place.

"My father says Lord Strickland's order won't be ready until after midday."

Arianne noticed the girl blushed more with every word she pronounced and rolled her eyes at the overflow of innocence.
"He says you can wait inside our house."

*Come on; he can't fall for that.* The girl and her father had, without a doubt, ulterior motives to inviting a young member of the Golden Company to their house.

"Thank you, but I don't want to be a bother."

Arianne could picture Jon Snow directing a kind smile to the girl as he spoke to her, which she found utterly upsetting.

"Oh, but you wouldn't. Lords Stickland is one of our greatest customers."

Jon Snow laughed. "I'm just his squire. I'll return when the order is ready."

He didn't allow the girl to protest further, and Arianne felt such a relief, that she forgot she had been standing practically behind Jon Snow the whole time. The next thing she knew was that she was face to face with him. It was hard to tell which one of them was the most shocked.

"A- Anne. What are you doing here?" Jon Snow was as red as the girl had been when they were talking.

"I felt like going for a walk." Arianne managed to recover from the shock first. "You are playing the obedient servant and seducer at the same time, I see."

He blushed even harder. "Just servant."

"Sure."

"It's true." Jon Snow cleared his throat and looked around. "Didn't your uncle send someone to guard you?" He seemed to have relaxed a bit.
"No."

"Why not?"

She limited to shrug, for her needing a guard at Volantis had just been a pretext.

"You shouldn't be wandering the city alone."

"Are you worried about my safety?" Arianne smiled. "I thought our little venture was over."

Jon Snow made a grimace. "That doesn't mean I would not worry about you."

"It didn't seem that way the last time we saw each other." Her words astonished her; she had not planned to berate him for his conduct, but she continued, "you didn't even tell me you were enrolling in the Golden Company."

Jon Snow averted his eyed and felt silent for a moment. "I'll escort you home." He didn't allow her to object. "We can talk meanwhile."

"Fine." Arianne was curious of what he wanted to say.

"The way I left was wrong," he started as soon as they were walking. "But it was the only way I found to deal with the guilt of endangering my sister for selfish reasons."

Not for the first time, Arianne was surprised that they had been able to trick Jon Snow that easy. He had behaved just the way she had expected.

"So I'm responsible for you and your sister's separation."

"I have never considered it that way."
"Still, you started to ignore me ever since."

"I thought it was the best for everyone."

"Seriously?"

Jon Snow raised a hand, asking for her to listen till the end. "I know I didn't give you a choice." Jon Snow looked ashamed. "The truth is I did what would make me feel less sinful." He made her stop to face him as he said, "I apologize for that, for the silence, for everything."

Jon Snow didn't speak further, so they walked the rest of the way in absolute silence. Arianne was out of words because an apology was the last thing she had expected during their conversation; most men wouldn't recognize their blunder.

*Jon Snow is not like most men*, Ashara's voice whispered.

Their relationship had been almost exclusively physical, but Arianne had been able to identify the difference, and it was not only the fact that he was a bastard. What was especial about Jon Snow was that he was always considerate of her; he always wanted to make sure she was enjoying herself as much as he was.

The first time they slept together, as inexperienced as he had been, he had realized and admitted all his flaws, and even asked for Arianne's guidance to improve. He was always respectful of her, not once treating her as if she were his property, unlike some of her previous lovers.

*I had to act for the greater good*, Arianne tried to excuse herself. For the first time since she conceived the plan with Connington, she considered she had been unfair to Jon Snow. *Perhaps, you didn't deserve it, but it was necessary.*

She felt the need to tell him something.

"It suits you."

"What does?"
"Being at the Golden Company. You look more relaxed and comfortable."

"Well," he laughed, "as I told your uncle, there is no better place for an exiled bastard than the Golden Company." Jon Snow made a pensive expression. "It helps me to avoid thinking about my sister."

"Griff wrote she was doing well among the Dothraki."

"I know." He lifted his stare. "Here we are," he said when they reached the house.

"Thank you, Ser."

"I'm not a knight."

"You will." From her lessons, Arianne was sure he was a better swordsman than the majority of the Golden Company.

"Maybe." He looked at her as if he wanted to say something, but didn't. "I should be going now."

Arianne grabbed his arm. "You should come to visit," Arianne blurted. "I have missed my sword lessons."

Perhaps it had been thoughtless from Arianne, but she had decided she would allow herself the pleasure of Jon Snow's company, at least until it was time for them to invade Westeros.

Jon Snow gaped at her for a moment. "If that is what you want..."

"I wouldn't have suggested it if not, Jon Snow."

"I will see you then, my Lady." He granted her one of his unusual smiles and walked away.
Arianne stood in front of the house's door watching until he was out of sight. *He is a bastard sellsword, Arianne. Where is your common sense?* There was no future for them, they both knew, still, Arianne dared to smile at the prospect of Jon Snow's next visit.

**Bran (305 AC)**

"My Goodness!" Harry shrieked. "The Lady has not replied yet, am I right?" He launched a lazy stroke to Bran's head.

Bran ignored the taunt and limited to raise his shield to protect himself.

"How dare her play with the heart of our beloved Ser Brandon?" Harry insisted as he jumped from the green grass of the Eyrie's garden onto a white marble bench.

"Shut up and concentrate, idiot!" The Blackfish ordered.

Harry swung his sword left and right, mocking Bran. "She must be a heartless vixen!"

This time, Bran could not ignore Harry's words; one thing was that Harry made fun of him, and the other was that he dared to call her that way because he thought it was amusing. Bran threw away his shield and sword and pounced at Harry to knock him down; they collided against one of the statues placed in the garden, making it break into pieces when it touched the ground.

In a second, Bran was ready to punch Harry in the face, but the Blackfish already had grabbed him by the collar of his padded tunic, pulling him back.

"What in the Seven Hells do you think you are doing?!" His uncle vociferated. "You are knights
training, not a pair of drunks fighting in a filthy tavern!"

"He started it," Harry replied as he raised one hand to the back of his head. "I'm bleeding! Damn you, Bran!" He said with a wince.

"Serves you right!"

"What did I do?"

"Take your words back, Harry," demanded Bran, purposely ignoring the Blackfish at his back; the old man's lecture could wait.

"I would apologize if I only knew to whom I'm supposed to be apologizing."

"Enough!" The Blackfish shouted. "Hardyng, go to Maester Colemon; you and Brandon will fix your mess and clean up the armory and the stables after he heals you."

"That is work for the squires," Harry complained, still rubbing the nape of his head.

"Since today you both insist upon ignoring your condition as knights, you will do the squires' work, and that is my last word."

"But-" Harry tried to protest again.

"Say another word Hardyng and you can forget about attending the King's tournament." That made Harry shut up.

As soon as Harry disappeared muttering curses, Bran felt like an idiot. The way he had acted had been shameful for a knight, but he couldn't help it. Perhaps what had bothered the most about Harry's taunts was that he had been right.

It was always the same. Whenever Meera's letters took longer than a moon's turn to reach him, he got anxious, wondering whether she had decided not answering back. He knew her location made it
especially difficult for a raven to get to her, but Bran craved for Meera's handwriting. He could never have enough of her stories about the crannogmen, lizard-lions and the mysteriousness of the swamp at the Neck. During the few days he had spent at the Greywater's Watch, he had learned more about Moat Cailin and the Children of the Forest than he had done during a lifetime at Winterfell. She made him feel there were still a million things unknown to him.

"What is wrong with you, Bran?" His uncle didn't look as angry as he had seemed before. "Hopefully, you don't believe that being a knight you don't have to make an effort anymore."

"I'm sorry, uncle." He knew he had been getting sloppy in his training since he returned from the North. "It won't happen again."

The Blackfish regarded him with a stare full of disbelief. "I hope so, Brandon. You have potential, don't let it go to waste."

Bran nodded, and the Blackfish entered the castle.

The cleaning helped Bran to calm a bit. He realized he had spent a lot of time thinking and worrying and wondering about Meera, so much that it had started to affect his performance as a knight. Was something wrong with him? He couldn't know, perhaps Harry would.

"What did the Maester say?" Bran asked Harry when he joined him at the armory.

He made a face. "Not injured enough to skip the punishment."

Bran had to laugh; that was what he liked better about Harry: He never stayed angry for a long time, trying to make fun of every single thing, even if that made him seem carefree or careless more often than not.

"I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Nah, forget about it. I have had it worse." Harry smirked. "Like when I told Saffron I would not see her anymore," his eyes widened, "she hit me with a pan so hard, that she knocked me out. If Lady Waynwood had not interfered, Saffron might have killed me."
"I can't say you didn't deserve it."

Harry was not the monster aunt Lysa said he was, but he deserved some kind of punishment for the way he went from a paramour to another regardless of the women's feelings.

"Most of the times I do." He put a couple of swords in place. "I guess today was one of those times."

"That was half my fault. I have been acting weird lately. I wonder whether I'm sick or something."

"Yes you are," Harry replied immediately. "You've got the worst of all diseases, I'm afraid."

Bran chuckled, eager to hear which kind of craziness had occurred to Harry. "What would that be?"

"You have fallen in love, and it is bad."

Bran wasn't in the mood of laughing anymore.

"Meera is my friend."

"A simple friend can not distract Ser Brandon from his knightly duties." Harry looked completely amused. "Oh," he said holding his chest, "and I thought your heart was made of stone-hard ice. I feel like crying." Harry wiped none existent tears from his eyes.

"It is not like that," insisted Bran, despite feeling himself growing red. "Now shut up and help me."

"I'm afraid it is," Harry replied with a tone of fatality.

Bran rolled his eyes and decided to ignore his friend's delusions. Inside his friend's mind, everything could relate to women; he didn't understand things worked differently for Bran. Harry was often mistaken while judging him. However, two days later, when Bran received Meera's letter with trembling hands, and every word he read made his heart race, he had to admit that, for once, Harry had been right.
"I swear I have not seen a woman more beautiful than you, my Lady."

"Thank you, Ser."

"Please allow me to wear your favor for the jousting. It shall make me the winner of the Tourney."

"Come on, Harry. Leave my sister alone." Bran tried to make Harry stand up.

Harry refused to stand up. Sansa had been the one to greet them to the Red Keep and, no sooner had Harry seen her, he had dropped to his knees and pledged his love to her.

"I beg you, my Lady, grant me your favor."

Sansa smiled. "I'm sorry, Ser, I'm a married woman."

"My heart breaks!" Harry stood up. "I don't think I can keep on living. Don't come after me Bran. It would be useless." Harry left the yard almost crawling.

Bran could only shake his head.

"You have an unusual friend."

"You should have smacked him in the head. I can't believe he tried to use his tricks on you."

"He was just playing. I think he was funny."
Probably he was making fun of me. Harry had not let an opportunity to mock him pass since they left the Eyrie.

"You don't have to bear his presence every day."

"You are mean, Bran." Sansa took his arm. "Come, let's talk somewhere else. This place will only get more crowded." She directed him toward the Tower of the Hand.

No matter how far they walked, Bran could still hear the fuss of dozens of Lords and Knights gathering in the main yard of the Red Keep. He was sure the place had not been that colorful with the different banners in a while. The Tourney to celebrate the birth of Steffon Baratheon, heir to the Iron Throne, promised to be one of the greatest since the Tourney of Harrenhal.

I have to win this time. He had been training like crazy to defeat Ser Loras.

"It would be great if you won this time," Sansa commented.

"I wish I could."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Well, your good brother is invincible."

Sansa laughed. "Loras has that reputation, but I will cheer you, little brother," Sansa shared with a sweet voice.

"Just now, you sounded a lot like mother."

"That is because now I am a mother, Bran."

"Of course," his voice caught in his throat.
He tended to forget he was no longer the kid who climbed walls; that Robb and Sansa were already parents. Bran was a grown man with two nieces and a nephew. None of his siblings were children anymore, not even Rickon. It was the most natural thing in the world, but it made him feel as if he had lost something along the course of the years.

"Bran?"

He cleared his throat. "Sorry, I was thinking. Where is mother?"

"She is in the nursery with Valerie," Sansa smiled. "She has not separated from her since we made it here. She says she reminds her of me when I was little, even if Valerie looks more like Willas than me."

"Mother goes crazy about her grandchildren. You have to see how she spoils Torrhen."

Sansa's face fell. "Are there any chances that I might meet Torrhen and Lysara?"

"Sansa..."

Everyone knew there was nothing that could compel Robb to set feet on King's Landing ever again, and Bran had not tried to persuade him again.

"Sorry, I thought after all these years Robb would..." Sansa sighed. "I have not seen him in such a long time."

Bran never seemed to know what to say to comfort his sister.

"Can you take me to the nursery? I would love to make an acquaintance with Lady Valerie Tyrell."

Sansa lifted her stare. "You are always so sweet, Bran. She will love to meet her uncle."
The Tourney turned out pretty much as Bran had predicted: Harry fell at the end of the first round; he was an excellent swordsman, but his jousting skills weren't something to show off. The Knight of the Flowers melted every heart in the crowd when he crowned little princess Cassana Queen of Love and Beauty after defeating more than a dozen knights, Bran included.

Bran had drunk more wine than was appropriate during the feast which followed the Tourney, although he couldn't discern whether it was due to his defeat or the fact that he didn't know what to do about his feelings for Meera Reed.

Either way, his head hurt. He was grateful that Sansa had taken Valerie to play with princesses Cassana and Olenna or the squeals of his niece would have made his head explode already. He only wanted to remain leaning over the dining table at his father's solar until his hangover relented.

"There will be other Tourneys, Bran."

Bran turned his head slightly to find his father towering over him.

"Loras Tyrell will win them all," he muttered against the oak table.

"I thought you knew it wouldn't be easy." He took a seat beside Bran.

"It is not difficult to beat him; it's impossible."

"Mmmm." His father went silent for a while. "What is the duty of a knight, Bran?" His father asked.

Bran frowned. "Is it a tricky question?"

"No, I'm asking straightforwardly. What vows did you make the day you became a knight?"

"I swore to be brave and just, to protect the women and children, to defend the weak, to honor my parents and obey the King," Bran recited confusedly. "I don't understand what this has to do with
jousting..." Bran gaped at his father when he understood, straightening in his chair. "You are saying the result of a Tournament doesn't define me as a knight."

His father smiled. "Ser Brynden told me about your performance during the attack of the Mountain Clans. Winning a hundred Tournaments wouldn't make you a better knight than you are already. Of course," his father trailed off, "it would be a great pleasure to see you unhorse Loras Tyrell."

Bran couldn't help his smile. He had never felt that close to his father before.

*I could never get a better chance.*

"Father? Can I ask you something?"

"Whatever you want."

"Have you-" Bran paused to gather courage. "Have you and mother chosen a betrothal for me?"

"We haven't thought you would be interested so- so soon."

"I'm not especially interested in marriage." Bran had never been more ashamed in his life. "I wanted to know if I could have a word on the matter."

Ned Stark nodded after a while. "I will talk to your mother when the time comes." His father's face turned melancholic. "She must be an exceptional Lady if she caught your heart, son."

"Father," Bran's face beamed with Joy, "there is no one better than her."
Arya couldn't say Daenerys Targaryen hated her, but she was not fond of her; Arya supposed it was related to her being a Stark.

*I had not even been born during the Rebellion,* Arya had wanted to tell her every time she caught the Khaleesi resentfully staring at her, but that would be useless, and they would have lost their hiding place if she had acted on something that stupid. Setting that aside, her life among the Dothraki had been quite pleasant; she could understand very well with people who appreciated her riding skills instead of the embroidering or singing ones.

She had missed Jon. She had missed him every day since she left Volantis. The last two years, however, had not been as lonely as she had expected, stupid Griff had made sure of that.

Arya was sitting on a rock and inhaling the scent of the Western Market of Vaes Dothrak during the early morning when the smell of the spices, leather, wine and beaten earth had not been corrupted with the stink of the customers. There was something calming about the mixture of fragrances, mayhaps some of them came from Westeros.

"Arry!"

She opened her eyes right after hearing Griff's voice.

"Arry!"

*Call me Arya,* she wished even though it was impossible.

Arya had had to stick with her fake name after Daenerys Targaryen informed them Robert Baratheon might have spies in the city. She wasn't sure she could remember the sound of her own name anymore.

"Arry!" Griff repeated the false name and Arya surrendered.
"I'm coming!" She stood and walked to the Godsway, feeling the soft grass caressing her feet.

"What were you doing?" Griff caught up with her. "What the-" he stopped short, "when did you cut your hair?"

"Yesterday." Arya brushed her locks away from her eyes and started to walk. "I didn't know I needed your permission."

"You didn't." Griff caught up with her. "It surprised me."

"Then you are quite easy to surprise, stupid." Arya cast a side glance toward Griff; he normally complained whenever she called him stupid.

"What?"

"You are not complaining."

Griff smiled. "I allow you to call me stupid on your name day."

"It is not funny."

Griff smirked. "It's so easy to make you angry."

Stupid! Arya bit her lower lip to keep the word to escape her mouth.

"Whatever, where is my present?"

"Right there." He pointed to his tent.

Arya moved to enter, but Griff stepped in her way. "Wait here."
"Why?"

"The Dothraki say-"

"Every important event in the life of a man takes place under the sky." Arya completed, moving her head with every word. Griff liked that stupidity a lot. "It is just a present."

"I. Said. Wait. Outside." Griff poked her forehead with his index finger while pronouncing each word, then disappeared for an instant and stuck his head out the flaps of his tent. "Today, you will become a real dothraki rider," he announced and stepped outside, holding a curved bow, like the ones the Bloodriders used.

"NO, WAY!" Arya felt like a child again, jumping out of excitement; she looked from the bow to Griff and back again. "HOW?!" She snatched the weapon from Griff's hands and examined it; it was just perfect.

"I charmed a couple of Ladies."

Liar. He had his liar smile on.

"You exchanged your sword belt, didn't you?" Arya realized. The thing was unnecessarily luxurious, but Griff loved it. How could I not notice before? "Maybe you can still recover it."

"I couldn't, not after seeing your reaction."

"Griff..."

"Accept it, please," he pleaded with his eyes.

Fool. There was only one thing she could do to thank him. Arya stepped on his toes and kissed him briefly.
"Gods," Griff sighed when she stepped back. "Why did I wait until your name day?"

"Because you are stupid."

He answered with a smile.

Not for the first time, Arya realized how grateful she was for meeting Griff of Tyrosh.

Chapter End Notes

Here are the ages of the characters at the end of the chapter: Arya (18), Jon (22), Aegon (24), Bran (16), Sansa (20), Arianne (27) Rickon (12). If you are interested in the babies: Princess Cassana Baratheon (4), Princess Olenna Baratheon (2), Prince Steffon Baratheon (4 months), Tohrren Stark (3), Lysara Stark (1) and Valerie Tyrell (1). Aaaaand I'm done with the time skips, time will advance more slowly from next chapter.

Next Chapter: "NOTHING LASTS" (Aegon, Arya, Eddard, Bran, Arianne)
Nothing Lasts

Chapter Notes

This is so embarrassing...
I'm really sorry that it took me half a year to post this chapter, but life just didn't cooperate, and I didn't want to post something I had written halfheartedly. Anyway, thanks for waiting for this.

Read, enjoy and please, please, please, comment.

Russian translation Hazel Grace Lancaster currently on hiatus.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aegon

There was a thought which kept making Aegon uneasy every time they received a letter from Myr and sent shivers down his spine without fail: How was he going to explain to Connington and Jon the fact that he and Arya liked each other?

_I wonder which one of them will attempt to kill me first._

"Give me that already!" Arya demanded, extracting him from his ruminations.

"What?" For a moment, Aegon did not understand what she was asking from him.

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Give me the letter." She leaned over him to snatch it away from his hand. "You are not even reading, Griff, you have been spacing out the whole time."

"Sorry. What does it say?"
"Mmmm, the usual thing: Lemore says to take care, your father expects you are not skipping your lessons," she laughed, "the man knows you very well."

Aegon grimaced. Did Connington think it was easy to concentrate on languages and history while living with the Dothraki?

"Griff, read this!" She pushed the parchment into his face. "Jon became a knight!"

"That sure is great," Aegon replied without enthusiasm.

"Don't tell me you are jealous," she teased with an almost evil smile on her face.

I'm afraid he will challenge me to a fight because of you. He knew Jon Snow could beat the crap out of him, and Aegon had forsaken his sword training since they reached Daenerys. Perhaps it was stupid, but he didn't want her people to ridicule his training method the way they did with most, if not all, his western customs.

"You see, the last thing I want is him improving his skills to gut me once he knows about us."

Arya made a roll with the parchment and gave him a small blow on the head with it. "Although it amuses me that you are scared of Jon, you shouldn't be."

"He is going to kill me, Arry, no kidding." Aegon lowered his head to his palms and rubbed his face. "And if he doesn't do it, my father will."

Arya sighed and pulled his bangs to force him to look up. Despite the force she used, Aegon only noticed her gray eyes fixed on him and not the pain. "Jon will understand. I will explain him." She released his hair. "As for your father... you have to tell him to fuck off."

Aegon chuckled. "Yeah, that would work."

"I know your father doesn't like me but- What would be the worst that could happen?"
"No more than a shouting session and a lecture, I guess," he lied brazenly.

_He might try to hurt you._ Arya didn't know the reason Connington didn't like to see them together. Connington would do way more than shout and repeat over again how Aegon shouldn't commit the same monumental stupidity as his father. _He won't be able to see how different our circumstances are from theirs, how different we are from them._

"See? Don't exaggerate." Arya offered him a brief smile before walking away and directing to the exit of his tent.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm writing a reply for Jon."

"Can't you do that here?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want you reading over my shoulder while I write," she said decisively.

Aegon sighed. "Okay, I understand."

"I'll see you again after I finish my training with the bow."

Aegon couldn't repress his smile. _Arya Stark is there something you cannot do?_ It had been exactly four moons since he presented her the bow, and she was already beating young dothraki riders despite her lack of formal training.

After she had crossed the entrance to his tent, his concerns invaded him again. When he was alone, fear returned, fear that he might be walking directly to repeat his father's mistakes, and it was terrible. At the very least, Connington would not be able to accuse him of not thinking carefully
enough about the matter, of not considering the consequences.

_Connington won't care about my thoughts._ Aegon ran his hands through his hair, desperately. He had not planned it; it had only happened.

It had started as a constant concern for Arya's safety due to the promise he had made to Jon Snow. Then, he had made that concern his because he considered Arya as a dear friend. The transition from that friendship to something else had occurred so naturally, that none of them had realized until it had been too late. Aegon couldn't tell when it was that Arya had started to rest her head on his shoulder as they read letters from Myr. He couldn't determine either when he had taken her hand or tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear for the first time.

What Aegon remembered very well was the first time he had kissed Arya after Rhaego's sixth name day celebration.

He had done it without thought. Partly because he had been half drunk, partly because Arya had looked charming under the moonlight and, most of all, because he had been madly jealous and annoyed. Jealous of the casual manner in which some dothraki spoke with Arya; annoyed when he heard two of them referring to Arya as a wild mare they would like to tame.

Aegon had stormed out of the celebration, and Arya had trailed behind him, ready to mock him for jealousy. After a brief attempt to deny his feelings, Aegon kissed her, and Arya had not rejected him. Rather simple.

Aegon rubbed his face fiercely, still feeling his mind full of useless thoughts. He looked around, searching for some source of distraction and decided upon writing his reply to the letter from Myr. However, that provided him a new source of anxiety.

He started several letters, considered telling Connington about him and Arya, started a dozen drafts but could never approach the subject in a satisfactory way, then eventually surrendered and lied down.

Haldon entered the tent time after that; Aegon noticed the older man observing him from the corner of his eye as he made his way toward the trunk where he kept the stuff for Aegon's lessons. The Halfmaester kneeled, rummaged about the trunk and closed it with a sigh.

"Judging your appearance, I assume you won't have today's lesson either," his friend finally spoke.
"If you keep acting like that every time I hand you a letter, I'll consider hiding the next one."
Haldon sat on the lid of the trunk.

Aegon grimaced; he knew it was true he had been behaving like a slacker. Before he could mutter an apology for Haldon, an idea occurred to him. "Why haven't you told him, already?" Haldon could have easily informed Connington about his relationship with Arya.

Haldon blinked twice before understanding. "I'm responsible for teaching you history, languages and all those things you are supposed to learn. I have no saying in the other aspects of your life; you are a grown man already." He stared at Aegon during a single second and made a dismissive gesture. "Besides it's not as if he could act on it until we go back to Myr, and if I were to inform him before that time comes, well, that would give him enough opportunity to feed his anger." Haldon made a face.

"I don't mean to cause trouble for you, Hal."

Haldon chuckled. "Says my rebel student," there was not contempt in his tone, which relieved Aegon. "I'll leave it be for today. I hope to find you with a better disposition on the morrow."

"Thank you, Hal."

Aegon relaxed a bit after that. Just as Haldon had said, they would worry about Connington's reaction once they returned to Myr.

They were sitting on the grass of a small hill, listening to the chants of the ritual that would assure Khal Donno's wife would give him a son. They couldn't enter the tent where the Khaleesi would eat the stallion's heart, but their position provided a good look at the lake the dothraki called the Womb of the World where the ceremony would finish. While Aegon made an effort to understand the chants, Arya ran her hands idly through the grass at her sides, her stare lost, probably on the surface of the lake; she was thinking.

"What are you thinking?" He asked.
"I," she stopped the movement she was making, "it's nothing."

Aegon searched eyes. "You are concentrating too hard for not being thinking." Arya kept her mouth shut and avoided looking at him. "Was it inappropriate?" Aegon put his best lewd face. "Was it about me? I'd be flattered."

Arya feigned a smirk. "You are not that lucky."

"So disappointing." It must have been about her family. Aegon knew it was better not to press her; if she didn't want to talk, she wouldn't utter a word. He directed the conversation into safer territory. "Do you think the Khaleesi will be able to eat the whole thing?"

Arya shrugged.

He was trying to discern whether it was safe to try to keep talking to her when the chants from the tent started to grow louder; the Khaleesi had succeeded. All the attendants made their way to the lake where the Khaleesi dismounted and washed the blood from the stallion; the chants and cheering didn't stop for a second. The ritual ended officially when Khal Donno took his pregnant wife in front of the whole crowd.

Aegon didn't know how to react to what he had just witnessed and pointedly avoided Arya's stare. He had known the dothraki didn't share their concept of privacy, but the scene was not something he was glad to have observed with Arya by his side.

"Well, looks like she succeeded," she commented far from content. "I can't believe the lengths they'll go to get a son. Do they think all that will assure a boy?" She got angrier with every word.

"Their beliefs are different from ours."

"They are nonsense," she said, turning to face him with disbelief. "My mother had three sons, and I doubt my father ever forced her to eat a raw horse's heart. They-" She stopped abruptly, as she realized she had mentioned her parents.

"I never said they were right," Aegon continued as if he had not noticed. "It's pretty barbaric; that is how then think, but I would never make you do that. What is the point of being so upset about it?"
"You would never make me do that?" Arya arched a brow at him. "You are assuming I'm having your children." She frowned.

Aegon felt himself flush. "What is wrong with it? I mean, I thought we-" he stopped himself, no longer sure of what he was going to say. They had kissed, they had become closer than friends, even Daenerys knew there was something between them; she had advised him against it several times. Still, Arya's thoughts were always a mystery. "Please tell me you don't keep thinking of me as a friend," he asked suddenly feeling panic.

"I'm not an idiot, Griff," she said, offended, "I know we are not precisely friends."

"Your reaction states something else."

"That is because I have never agreed on having your children or marrying you." She looked disgusted when she said the last, and it hurt him.

"What is the matter with it? That's what people who love each other do," he said with way less conviction than he felt.

Arya's face went still as she replied, "love has nothing to do with those things. Besides, I don't want to marry. Anyone. Ever."

Is she making fun of me? Aegon looked for a hint that she was mocking him, but there wasn't; that hurt him even more. "Is it your wish for us to remain unsettled the rest of our lives?"

"Wish? If I had time for wishes, I would ask to go back to Myr with Jon," she declared.

After hearing those words, Aegon's panic turned into anger. "So I'm just a convenient distraction for you until you get to see Jon."

"That is not what I said."
"It is what you said!"

"It is not." She got to her feet. "I'm leaving." She looked away from him. "I can't stand it when you take these nonsenses so seriously."

"Nonsenses?!!" Aegon took hold of her wrist. "Do you have an idea of what I'm risking because of you?!!" He bit his tongue before speaking any further.

"Risks," she mumbled and twisted her wrist away from his grasp. "I didn't know your father scared you that much," was the last thing she told him.

Aegon stood completely frozen, unable to discern whether her tone had carried revulsion or mockery or something else. However, he realized that he didn't want to know; their little argument had called in question whatever he believed there was between him and Arya. Suddenly, Daenerys and Connington's warnings made much more sense; Aegon was risking everything for someone who didn't care.

Just like Rhaegar. The thought hurt, for he had assured himself he was not acting as his selfish father. At least, I haven't done anything worth regretting, he exhaled.

Arya

Arya knew she wouldn't sleep that night. Not that it was something surprising; she hadn't been able to sleep on her father's name-day since she left Westeros. She kept imagining the smile Eddard Stark made whenever she gifted him with a dirty handful of flowers. Arya was still incapable of hating her father, and the confusion she felt because of that was enough to keep her awake the whole night.

As she laid on her side, staring at the wall of her tent, the tears started to gather in the corner of her eyes. However, this time, she couldn't contain them. Tonight, she felt especially lonely.
Stupid Griff. Arya wasn't inclined to accept she regretted fighting with him, though. It was his fault for talking about that foolishness, she decided, wiping her tears, but her conscience wouldn't let her get away with that. She knew her words had hurt him. What was he expecting me to say?

Arya liked Griff well enough, but she couldn't just go and marry a foreign sellsword; she had brought enough shame to House Stark as things were. Besides, she had decided that whether it was to the fat king or that Edric Dayne or Griff, marriage was not something she could endure.

'That's what people who love each other do,' she remembered Griff's words, and the anger started to rise again.

"Love," she pronounced the word with spite. Did he think she was like Sansa? "Stupid," she mumbled louder. Even if she had believed in love, that was not how things worked in Westeros.

Arya stared at the tent's wall and eventually remembered Griff's hurt expression, again. She regretted how harsh she had been to him; she could at least, have explained him her reaction. The tears started to fall again.

You chose the worst possible time to broach the subject, stupid. She honestly had not wanted to hurt him; Griff was her only friend, and he understood her better than most of her family had. In fact, now, it felt more accurate to consider him family than the ones who lived on the opposite side of the world.

Arya pondered over that for hours before deciding she had to apologize. Only then, she was able to get some sleep.

She was not surprised when Griff avoided her the next morning and tried her best not to be afflicted. She followed him with her stare around the city, looking for a chance to talk to him in private. Meanwhile, Griff put her patience to test by spending an awful amount of time in the Khaleesi's tent. Like that, a five passed without an opportunity to get close to him, although, for Arya, it seemed a whole moon.

The sun was setting on the sixth day when Arya finally caught him walking alone and ran after him.

"I have something to tell you," she said decisively.
Griff almost stopped before answering, "I'd like to be alone."

"It is important," she insisted, pressing the urge to force him to face her.

He started to walk faster. "Go to your tent."

_I'm the one supposed to be stubborn_, Arya thought, but just for once, she decided to swallow her pride. She had not expected Griff's rejection to be that painful.

"It was my father's name-day," she blurted, hoping it would be enough explanation for Griff.

He stopped abruptly, slightly shaking as if his body was dueling between turning to face her or keep walking. When none happened, Arya repressed a shiver and risked to get slightly closer to him.

"I spent the whole day wondering why I keep thinking about him or asking myself what would he think of the person I've become." Every word became harder to pronounce. "My father," her voice cracked, "betrayed me in the worst way possible, and I still care for his opinion." Tears started to fall from her cheeks. "Why?" She cried and covered her face with both hands.

She reproached herself for crying, but there was no way she could tell those things without losing control. She could only hope Griff wouldn't think her tears were meant to manipulate him.

Arya felt Griff's hands grabbing her wrists, pulling softly to uncover her face. His expression wasn’t one of anger. "We should continue this talk inside."

Arya nodded, she didn't want the dothraki seeing her crying. Griff guided her into the tent and sat her on the trunk where Haldon kept the things for his lessons, then knelt in front of her.

"I'm sorry I started a senseless quarrel when you were going through a difficult time." He wiped her tears with his sleeve. "And I'm sorry for avoiding you when I should have stayed by your side."
Arya released a shaky breath; Griff had told her just what she needed to hear. She was glad for being frank.

"What I said that night," she rubbed her eyes, decided to continue, "I didn't want to hurt you. I didn't want you to doubt my feelings for you."

"I know," he said with a soft smile on his face.

"I panicked when you mentioned marriage." Arya reached for his hand, fearing he would try to go away before hearing the whole thing. "The matches my parents considered invariably meant I would have to leave my home and family to live with a stranger, and that thought terrifies me."

"I understand." Griff squeezed her hand, and she saw his earnestness through his eyes. "I swear I won't..."

"You are not a stranger; you are my family." She should have realized earlier. "I think marriage wouldn’t be a bad thing," she announced. "If it's to you, I mean."

Arya's cheeks grew hot; for it was the first time she said something that embarrassing. She had been so focused on her embarrassment that it was long before she noticed Griff had not moved at all, and his eyes were wide as plates but shining.

"Griff?" She ventured.

Hearing his name prompted an impossible big smile from him. "I can't believe you proposed to me," he covered his mouth with both hands, and Arya's face went even redder. Without warning, Griff threw his arms around her and kissed her hair.

"What are you doing, stupid?!" She tried to push him away.

"I never thought possible to be this happy."

"You are happy? Your father and Jon are going to flay you."
"Who cares if we get to be together?" Griff tightened his embrace.

"Stupid," she muttered, even though she agreed with him.

"Gods, how I have missed you calling me that."

Griff started to laugh.

Arya spared a thought for Winterfell, her parents and siblings before allowing herself to laugh as well. They would always be a part of her life, but her home was not with them anymore.

---

**Eddard**

The Hand of the King felt a headache approaching him, for the feast was incredibly noisy; his only comfort was that it was a modest one, which he considered a victory against the King and his tendency to waste the limited resources of the Royal Arc.

Eddard gave a weary sigh and, as he searched Robert among the crowd, wondered how was that Jon Arryn had managed to control the King's wastefulness. He finally located the King, singing with men from the Storm Lands, a serving girl sitting on his lap. Eddard frowned and shook his head before looking away.

"Was he different before?" The Queen asked in her sweet tone, although, almost indifferently.

"I beg your pardon, Your Grace?" He asked in turn, faking ignorance.
He was aware that it was not comfortable for the Queen to witness how her husband groped at other women during a feast offered to celebrate her most recent pregnancy. Still, he made a futile attempt to avoid the topic.

"Lord Hand," the Queen chuckled a little. "You can't protect me from, well, that," she said while gesturing in the King's direction. "I am your Queen not one of your daughters."

Eddard repressed a grimace at the Queen's comment. He had been repeating the same to himself ever since Margaery Tyrell married Robert, but some part of him kept reminding him that the Queen was barely older than Sansa, young enough to be his daughter, young enough to be Robert's daughter. What had prompted Mace Tyrell to think Robert was a suitable match for his only daughter?

'There was a time when you considered him suitable for me, Ned."

'I was so young then, Lya, and he was my friend. Eddard tried to excuse himself.

"I apologize if I have offended you, Your Grace," he started.

She smiled. "I will accept your apology if you answer my question, Lord Hand." There was amusement in her voice.

Eddard thought about his answer carefully. Robert had enjoyed drinking and taking women ever since they were at the Eyrie; the difference was perhaps the frequency with which he performed such activities. It was almost as if the present Robert were desperately looking for something in those actions.

*Everything he did seemed more authentic when he was young than it does now.* The only thing that remained from the past Robert was his temperament.

"I wouldn't say he behaved differently," he cleared his throat and forced himself to stare at the Queen as he spoke. "He used to enjoy life," he paused; he wasn't explaining himself right. "I mean-"
"I think I get it, Lord Stark." The Queen held his stare for a moment, then returned his attention to the King. "He has nothing left to live for, right?" The Queen had spoken in a whisper, but Eddard was glad that they were practically alone at the high table.

"The King has the prince and princesses, and you, Your Grace."

The Queen closed her eyes for a brief moment, looking every bit as young as she truly was. She recovered her composure and determination as soon as she reopened them. Meanwhile, Eddard felt more than ashamed for not being direct enough with the Queen. She deserved that at least. Fortunately, the queen was direct enough for both of them.

"As I said before, Lord Hand." The Queen directed him a stare. "I am not one of your daughters." She lifted her chin. "I am the Queen, and I do my duty."

"We all do, Your Grace."

She answered him with a nod, and they both returned to their respective reflections while the hall boasted in laughter at something the King had said.

Living at King's Landing had finally taken its toll on his resistance to the cold of the North. Eddard tried to hide his shiver from the northerners who were escorting him to Winterfell when the gust of the wind caught his cloak. He heard his son chuckling softly and realized, at least he had noticed.

"I feel it too, father," Bran said, smiling as widely as the young boy who enjoyed climbing trees. "I find it comforting, though."

Eddard agreed. It felt like home.

Bran smiled again, and Eddard wondered whether his easy smiles were related to the fact that they were going home or that they had just visited the Greywater Watch. Right then and there, Bran reminded him of how it had been when he was young, living at the Eyrie and in love with a unique Lady. Of course, Bran's smiles came more easily than his smiles had.
"Father," Bran called him.

Eddard shook his head to shake off his thoughts about the past. "What is it?"

"There it is." Bran pointed at the gray castle rising ahead of them.

They both exchanged a stare and shared a smile; they had finally made it home.

The rest of the journey was almost unbearable for Eddard because he couldn't contain his excitement. He had seen Catelyn at the Tourney of King's Landing in honor of Robert's son, but he had not seen the rest of the family in more than two years, and it would be the first time he would meet Robb's daughter.

By the time they had crossed Winterfell's South Gate, Robb had gathered Winterfell's staff in the yard to welcome them. Eddard realized he didn't recognize half of the people there and he supposed some didn't know him either. He tried to ignore the discomfort that idea produced him; after all, Robb was the Lord of Winterfell in everything but name. And it mattered even less when Ned had his son and grandson in front of him.

"Who is Uncle Bran?" Tohrren asked impatiently.

"Don't be rude." Robb chastised him. "Greet your grandfather first, Tohrren," he added gesturing towards Eddard.

"Welcome, grandfather," the child pronounced sullenly.

"I'm glad to be here, Tohrren, thank you."

His grandson barely acknowledged his answer and moved to regard Bran. "Father says you are a knight."

Bran kneeled to face Tohrren. "I am."
Tohrren's blue eyes sparkled immediately. "Can I see your sword?"

"Tohrren!" Robb snapped.

Eddard laughed. "It is fine, Robb. I can't compete against his knighted uncle."

Robb sighed as they saw how Tohrren attacked Bran with a dozen different questions and dragged him inside the castle.

"He is smart for such a young child," Eddard commented proudly.

"Smart, yes." Robb admitted, "and terribly willful."

Eddard smiled again. "My father called it the wolf's blood." He stilled himself to change the direction of his thoughts; two of his siblings and one of his children had also had the wolf's blood. "Where are your mother and the rest of your family?"

"Mother was at Deepwood Motte when we found out you would come. She and Rickon should arrive soon." If Robb had noticed the clumsy change of the subject, he didn't comment on it. "Alys is with Lysara." Robb hesitated. "Do you want to enter now, father? I thought you would visit the crypts first."

"No," Eddard replied immediately; he would never be able to stand before Lyanna's grave ever again. He positively didn't want to see the one Catelyn had built for Arya.

Robb didn't ask for an explanation, and Ned was glad for it, but the silence that came after was terrible. Eddard was about to ask Robb whether he still resented him, but the laughter of a baby interrupted him.

"Seems like Lysara is awake." Robb smiled and hurried Eddard to the nursery.

Robb's wife received him with a big smile. "I think she recognized your footsteps," she commented
and regarded Eddard. "Welcome, my Lord."

"Thank you, Lady Alys."

"My love, you grandfather wants to meet you," Robb spoke to his daughter as he placed her in Eddard's arms.

_A little Lady, like Sansa_, he thought with relief. Eddard hadn't realized how much he had feared the girl might look like Arya until that moment.

He kissed his granddaughter on the forehead and returned her to her mother's arms. "She looks like Sansa," he commented and managed to add, "she is lovely."

"She is," Robb agreed.

When Eddard saw his expression, he understood Robb was as glad as him that there was no trace of the Stark features on Lysara's face.

"Bran will turn eight and ten this year," Catelyn brought up the subject as soon as they were alone in her solar.

Eddard gave a sip from his cup and breathed a deep sigh; he had expected that talk, tried to prepare for it, for he knew it would become a source of dispute for him and Catelyn. Still, he had made a promise to his son.

"He is aware of it."

Catelyn nodded. "Bethany Blackwood would be perfect for him; she is around his age, and her family worships the Old Gods. Her father-"
"Cat," Eddard interceded, "Bran told me he already has someone else in mind," he explained. "I told him I would support him."

"Well, that is a surprise." She seemed as amused as Eddard had been the first time Bran talked to him. "I suppose the girl is from the Vale," Catelyn inquired.

"She is Howland's daughter."

"Meera Reed? Isn't she about Robb's age?"

"Does it matter?"

Catelyn's face turned serious. "It does if Bran plans to have a family."

"Cat, you talk as if the girl was Old Nan's age."

Catelyn shook her head; she had wanted one of their sons to marry a Lady of the south. "She is not an appropriate match for Bran."

"Bran is in love with her, Cat." Eddard took his wife's hand. "Don't you want him to be as happy as his siblings?"

Catelyn retrieved her hand and stared at him in a way she had not since she saw Jon Snow for the first time, and he knew he had said something terrible "Do you think Arya is happy?"

How could the mood change so drastically? Eddard stiffened as he spoke, trying to ignore how much the comment had hurt him. "This is unrelated to Arya." Saying her name felt like being stabbed.

"Everything here is related to Arya!" Catelyn shouted. "Do you think that just by avoiding mentioning her she fades away?" His wife started to cry. "You don't have to live here where even the silliest object reminds me of her."
"Catelyn," Eddard tried to get closer to her.

"Don't." She pushed him away, starting to sob. "Just leave me alone, please."

Eddard didn't say another word but stood and closed the door behind him as quietly as he managed. He leaned on the hardwood and tried to control himself. His father, his siblings, Arya, Catelyn, his life at Winterfell, he had not managed to protect any of them.

Arianne

"Who gifted you that trinket, Arianne?" Mellario of Norvos had chosen a peculiar way to start their conversation.

The question took Arianne off guard; after years of not seeing each other and a full hour of awkward silence, the first thing her mother asked, was the origin of a piece of jewelry.

"It was a present from a friend."

Her mother took a grape from the plate in front of them and smiled at her. "He must be an especial friend."

_I shouldn't have come here._ Bearing boredom at Myr was better than her and her mother's futile attempt at restoring their relationship.

Arianne feigned innocence and turned to watch the garden of the Mansion. "What gives you that idea, mother?" It was hard to believe her parents had once walked there, together and in love.
"The Princess of Dorne surely has access to finer jewelry, and still, you are fond of that cheap bracelet." Before Arianne could dismiss that statement, her mother added, "you keep reaching for it, as if wanting to make sure it remains attached to your wrist."

"Perhaps I'm nervous to see you after fifteen years, mother."

Mellario of Norvos smiled again. "Perhaps, I know you better than you think, sweetling." The older woman reached for Arianne and brushed her hair away from her face.

"I find that difficult to believe." Arianne moved away, for the familiarity of her mother's gesture had been terribly uncomfortable.

"It would be if I dared to make such a statement about Quentyn or Trystane, but not you."

She was right; Quent and Trys had not had to suffer as much as Arianne because they had barely known her mother.

"At least you are honest." Arianne was aware this time that she had touched the bracelet.

Mellario took Arianne's hand. "I regret leaving every day, Arianne." Her mother made a pause to allow her to protest, but she remained silent. "Maybe it was better this way."

"I never blamed you," Arianne remembered her parents’ fights and knew better than anyone how confusing and frustrating could be to deal with Prince Doran Martell.

She looked away when tears started to gather in her mother's eyes; they were not close enough to cry together over the past.

"Are you going to tell me?" Her mother insisted after they both had calmed down.

"We met by chance and have spent some time together."

"And he isn't a noble, is he?"
"He is a sellsword," she admitted just to see her mother's reaction.

Mellario's expression barely changed. "Be careful Arianne."

Arianne couldn't repress her laughter. "I'm not the eleven-year-old girl who stayed at Dorne."

"Being in love is overwhelming. It can lead you to great mistakes." Her mother looked at her earnestly. "And you being the heir of Dorne will only make things more complicated."

Arianne observed her wrist. The bracelet was of red gold without ornaments, plainer than anything she had owned, yet the sight of it made her smile because she could picture Jon's serious face on the gift.

She realized she couldn't contradict her mother. Even her level-headed father had succumbed to the power of love.

'Princes don't beg, Arianne,' the Prince of Dorne had taught her once. However, Arianne had witnessed how her father pleaded her mother to stay at Sunspear.

"I don't plan to repeat your mistakes," she declared.

Her mother nodded. "I hope you don't."

"Does your father know you came to Norvos?" Her mother asked her when she returned from her visit to the Sinner's Steps.

What's with that question? She had been there a fortnight, but it was the first time her mother asked.
"He does. Why?"

"A letter arrived from Sunspear while you were out." Mellario eyed her questioningly as she handed her the letter. "The messenger said it was urgent. He was... concerned because he didn't found you at Myr."

"So it is time," she mumbled. Her father had told her he would summon her when Dorne was ready to receive Aegon. She had chosen an awful time to visit her mother.

"Time for what?" Her mother was not pleased.

"Time for me to return to Dorne." Arianne hesitated. "Once I was at Myr, Norvos didn't seem that far away," she said smiling, hoping her mother wouldn't question her further.

Mellario shook her head and sighed. "You should send a reply right away."

"I will."

She directed to her chamber while considering which was the fastest way to contact Lord Connington so that he could call back Aegon and Arya Stark. Nevertheless, when she opened the letter, she didn't find her father's handwriting.

_Dear niece_,

She smiled at the notion of receiving a letter from her uncle until she kept reading.

_I must inform you, with great sorrow, that your father, my dear brother, died during the night of the tenth day of the fourth moon of the year. He died as peacefully as his disease allowed him to._

_It is imperative that you return home, for there are issues that require your immediate attention._

Arianne and Doran Martell had been in constant disagreement during most of her life. She had doubted him and frequently wondered whether her father considered her worthy of succeeding him, but she loved him dearly. Therefore, after she gathered the courage to reread her uncle's words, the
grief took her over.

Until then, Arianne had forgotten how much pain could be caused by a simple letter.

Chapter End Notes

So, that was it. Hope you liked it, especially Arya and Aegon because I swear I cried blood while writing them in this chapter.
The coming chapters are supposed to be easier, but I won't promise an update soon.
(At least I'm being sincere)

Please comment!

Next chapter: "Resolutions"
Another delayed update. At least it didn't take as long as the last one. I'm truly thankful to everyone who has kept reading and offered their support despite how terrible I am with the updates.

I hope you can enjoy the chapter. 
Don't forget to leave a comment. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bran

Their visit to Winterfell had turned out to be shorter than planned. Bran and his father said his farewells in different ways; while he made the most of the time he had left with his family, Eddard Stark prayed in the godswood.

Alys explained to him his mother wouldn't see them off because she was feeling unwell, and Bran decided not to tell his good-sister it was unnecessary for her to lie. He had realized that, at some point, keeping painful things unsaid had become a habit for the whole family.

Bran kissed Alys' hand, ruffled Lysara's hair and promised Tohrren he would teach him to wield a sword the next time they met, then went to pat Rickon's head. "Take care, little brother."

Rickon slapped his hand away. "I'm a grown man," he protested, raising his head.

Bran repressed a chuckle, remembering he had repeated that same phrase when he was Rickon's age. "You will always be my little brother."

Rickon rolled his eyes and turned away as he said, "Get going before you start crying out of nostalgia."
"I will miss you too!" Bran shouted to his brother, who answered with a series of impolite gesticulations before disappearing behind a wall.

"Seeing Rickon, I wonder how I will manage Tohrren when he turns that age," Robb commented beside Bran.

"They'll grow out of it." Bran caught a glimpse of Tohrren who was running in the snow, cheeks flushed; making faces at his sister to make her laugh. Bran looked away. Rickon had hit the mark; he did long for the children he and his siblings had been. "We all did."

He should be nervous or impossibly happy, but as their group made its way down the King's Road, the only emotion he could feel was guilt. He couldn't spare a single thought for Meera because he kept thinking of the way his parents had parted. His poor horse kept losing his foot on the slippery mud of the swamp because Bran was unable to guide the creature properly.

"Careful, Bran!" His father called his attention right in time for him to pull his mount away from the edge of the road. "If you get too close to the water, a lizard-lion is going to catch you."

"I know." He felt a chill as he considered the idea. "Thank you, father."

Eddard Stark stared at him strangely, then looked up to the sky. "We should stop for the day. I think it is going to rain."

Bran nodded, thankful for the excuse. Perhaps his father feared his distraction would kill him before they made it out of the swamp.

They set the camp and ate dinner silently, so much that the place felt depressing. Not even the guards escorting them seemed in the mood to tell their usual women and war stories. It was pretty evident their Lord's affliction had gotten into them as well.

Bran thought and thought through dinner, before deciding to talk to his father. He waited until they were the only ones remaining in front of the campfire, and then waited again before gathering enough courage.
"I'm sorry you and mother fought because of me," he murmured, half hoping the rustling of the leaves to engulf his words.

When his father didn't answer, he continued, "Perhaps it would be better if we didn't visit Lord Reed yet."

This time, Eddard Stark raised his head to regard him. "Does this mean you are having second thoughts?"

"No, of course not," Bran replied way too quickly.

"Then what is the matter?"

"I just." His father's eyes were piercing him. "It doesn't seem fair after all the trouble I caused."

"Bran-" His father sighed and looked around. "Let's have a walk," he proposed.

Once they were far enough from the men, his father faced him again.

"While it was your betrothal which sparked my fight with your mother, you should not blame yourself for it." His father paused, and his eyes reflected his fear. "I'll tell you something that I have not told the rest of your siblings, Brandon."

Bran didn't know what shook him more: the implications of his father calling his full name or the sincerity in his eyes.

"Arya's loss affected our relationship badly." His father tried to control his expression in vain. "Your mother blames me for the course of action I took, and she is right. There's so much I could have done differently." Ned Stark sighed again. "I'm nearly thirty years older and still unable to make the right choices," he whispered.

Bran was not meant to talk, but there was so much pain in his father's eyes, that he couldn't stand it.
"Father..." Bran clenched his fists. "I understand why you didn't refuse the King that night." Like many other times, Bran struggled not to tell there was the possibility of Arya being alive, but he stopped himself for the same reason he always did: uncertainty was worse than no hope at all. So he said instead, "what happened to Arya was not your fault."

"As usual, you are way too kind, son." There was immense relief in his father's eyes. "I doubt your mother and I will ever be right again." Eddard Stark silenced Bran's protests with a stare. "If your feelings for Meera Reed are sincere, don't hesitate because of us. Your mother will accept it in time."

"Thank you, father."

"No, thank you, Brandon."

Meera was not at the Greywater Watch when they got there, which was good because Bran had to talk to her father first. He straightened at the sight of Lord Reed and tried no to seem the green summer boy he was.

"Ned, Ser Brandon, we didn't expect to have you back this soon! I guess the Hand of the King never rests."

"Sorry for bothering you again, Howland."

"Come on, Ned, you know you are always welcome here. And just in time, we were about to set the table for supper."

"Lord Reed," Bran interceded, "before that, could we have a word in private, please."

Lord Reed's eyes darted between Bran and his father. "Of course, Ser Brandon, follow me. Ned, you already know your way around."
His father barely answered with a nod. After all, Bran had insisted on doing everything on his own.

Lord Reed guided him to a room in which Bran had never been before, and all the time Bran's heart kept beating uncontrollably. He was at least a foot taller than Howland Reed, but once they were sitting, their eyes were at the same level.

Howland Reed set both hands in front of him. "So, what is this important matter you wish to talk about, Ser?"

Bran had prepared a long, elaborated speech for the occasion, but he couldn't seem to remember any of it. He cleared his throat, "I would like to marry Meera- your daughter," he corrected himself, "my Lord."

Howland Reed held his gaze during an eternity before a smile appeared on his face. "I can't say I wasn't expecting this, given the unusual amount of letters from the Vale she had received."

*Of course, he knows.* Bran flushed. "If my actions caused any offense, my Lord-"

"Not at all," Lord Reed reassured him. "Your father is my friend, and I can tell you are a good man," he made a significant pause, "but I cannot speak for Meera."

"But- but you wouldn't oppose if she accepted me?"

"As long as it is her decision."

"Do I have your permission to ask her?"

"You do, Ser Brandon."

"Thank you, Lord Reed." Bran forgot about his manners and ran towards to the exit of the floating palace after shaking hands with a shocked Lord Reed.

It took him an awful amount of time to find her. And he stood half frozen when she greeted him.
"You came back earlier."

Bran set the thought of his rushed return aside. "I had important matters to attend at the Neck."

She smiled and handed him a net, before taking the lead of their expedition. "Like chasing lizard-lions?"

"More important than that."

Meera turned her head back to him. "And what could be more important?"

"I'm looking for the answer to a question."

"And you can only find that here?" She paused and gave a long jump. "I have no idea of what that could be."

.Doesn't she know? Lord Reed had known.

Bran stopped; he would have liked to do it in a more formal fashion, but he had decided not to doubt anymore. So, even with Meera facing away, he said, "I'd like to marry you, Meera."

For the first time since they met, Bran saw Meera losing her feet in the mud of the swamp. She fell and got back up in a second, with her breeches and arms covered in mud, and when her stare met Bran's, she flushed.

"Why would you want to marry me?"

It was amusing to see a surprised Meera, but things were hardly going the way he wanted. "Should I tell you everything I like about you?" He asked, slightly confused.

"You are making fun of me," she stated, the flush already disappeared from her face.
"What?! No. I would never."

Her flush returned but was quickly replaced by concern. "Does Lord Stark know about this?"

"He does."

"Does he approve?"

"He does, as well as your father." Bran kept losing aplomb after every question he answered. "That is why I'm asking you."

Meera just stared between him and the water of the swamp, wordless, during a long, long time. Then as if he had asked for an explicit denial, she added, "I think we should stop writing to each other."

He should have left then, but his heart demanded an explanation, for she would not have answered his letters if she had not felt something for him. "Why?"

"I like you, Bran." She got a step closer to him, but not enough for him to reach her. "But the son of the Hand of the King can't marry a frog-eater."

"You are not a frog-eater!" She couldn't be serious.

Her sad smile hurt more than anything she had said. "That is not how they will see it."

He could not lie to her; surely, that was one of the reasons his mother had not liked the idea. "I don't care about what other's think."

"I do," she recognized. "Besides, my place is here, helping my father and Jojen after him. I won't leave, and I doubt you'll be willing to stay in this forsaken place during longer than a fortnight."
Bran didn't answer as swiftly as he should have; the thought of abandoning his training as a knight got in the way of his feelings. That was the end of it. Meera picked up her trident and started to walk in the Greywater's direction.

"Go back to the Eyrie and marry a proper Lady, Ser Brandon."

It hurt, a lot. But his hesitation had given her the right to say such things.

"I will not marry anyone else," Bran whispered once he was alone. He would not hurt Meera a second time by marrying someone else.

---

**Jon**

They were sitting on a bench at one of the public gardens of Myr. It was a place for couples, but as it was still early in the afternoon, they seemed to be alone. Jon thought that loneliness was a good companion for the news he had just received.

"Is there something... anything I can do?" It was the stupidest question he had ever asked, but he couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"I just told you I'm leaving, presumably forever." Anne smiled at him. "You should be mad, not trying to comfort me."

He would have, indeed, liked to comfort her, but she had not shed a tear for her father, at least not in front of him.

"I'm trying to be serious."
"Do you always have to act the perfect man, Jon Snow?" She ran her fingers through his hair and sighed. "I wish I could take you as a token. There are no men like you back from where I come." She insisted on changing the subject.

*If that is what you wish for our last encounter, so be it.*

"A token? Should I be offended?"

"It was a compliment."

"In that case, I'm flattered."

There was silence after that. It was not the right moment for teasings. Gods, they were not even looking at each other.

*Perhaps is time to put a definitive end to this situation.* What good could it make to prolong the departure?

"I wasted precious time being resentful," she said. "Now I wish I had been less stubborn."

She had commented about her relationship with her father once before, and it had not seemed a pleasant memory. However, what she had just said implied the story was more complicated than what he had initially understood.

"I don't think you are the first one to make such a mistake, Anne." He had also been harsh towards his father when he refused to let him escape with Arya. "We tend to mistake impossible decisions with personal affronts."

It had taken Jon years to fully understand that Eddard Stark had been trying to keep the North safe even if that meant he had to betray Arya's trust. He had had to balance his duty as a father with his duty as Guardian of the North.

"Why did you have to remain silent all that time?" Anne asked. "I could have helped you," she whispered and closed her eyes.
Jon didn't need to ask to whom she was talking. When Anne rested her forehead on his shoulder and started to cry, he remained still, allowing her to release her pain. There wasn’t much more he could do than being there for her.

As he helplessly heard Anne sob, Jon found himself praying to the Old Gods for the chance to make things clear with his father.

Jon was glad for the paperwork Captain Stickland had cast upon him, for it kept him away from the docks, at least physically. In his mind, there was only room for an unknown ship departing for Tyrosh with an irreplaceable part of his life in it.

Jon laughed; he had brought that feeling on himself. Every time he had met Anne, the most rational part of him kept whispering that relationship would only bring him misery, but he had not stepped away from it. Even after he got separated from Arya, he had refused to learn the lesson, and he was finally paying with his suffering.

'You will meet many women, and all of them will fall for you.' That had been Anne's way to command him to move forward.

Jon would move forward, they both would. There would come a day when, just as his family, Anne would turn into a pleasant memory. Still, the promise of that day was not enough to make him feel any better.

Jon cursed under his breath. "You could have at least allowed me to take you to the damn ship."

But deep inside, he understood why Anne had not allowed him to accompany her: their farewell had been less dramatic that way.

Perhaps I could still go after you, he thought while reaching for the small bag which contained a lock of Anne's dark hair. Anne had said his request was disgustingly conventional, but she had accepted all the same.
Jon shook his head at his stubbornness. He had chosen a path for himself, and he had to do his best with or without Anne.

*How I will miss you,* he thought not for the last time that day.

"Well, aren't you diligent, Ser Snow," Harry Strickland commented while leafing through the paperwork Jon had handed him.

*Is there no way to please this man?* Jon liked the Golden Company well enough, but the Commander was always a pain in the ass for him.

"Is something wrong, Commander?"

"No," Strickland never seemed to pay attention to anyone. "You can leave."

Jon obliged thankfully after a brief respectful nod. If he stayed too long, Strickland would find another task for him.

"Ser Snow?" His newly assigned squire called him.

Jon sighed. All he wanted was to go to bed.

"What is it, Oswald?" He had decided he would not be an ass to his squire, unlike Strickland.

"A messenger brought this." The boy handed him a parchment.

"Thanks. You should go to rest."

Once the lad had disappeared, Jon read the parchment and smiled. Against the odds, his day had given a turn for the best.
There weren't children playing in the Water Gardens. The water was calm on the fountains; a week of fallen leaves and rotten Blood oranges covered the pink marble of the place. There was no refreshing breeze coming from the sea.

It felt as though the Water Gardens knew their Prince would not visit them again.

Arianne closed her eyes to avoid the sight, for she refused to cry. She had decided she had left all of her tears at Myr. In Dorne, she could not allow herself to be weak.

Quentyn and the Yronwoods will not see me crying.

To learn of her father's death had been devastating, but the fact that Quentyn had been there during his last moments, was unbearable. Arianne was the heir to Dorne, she was the one supposed to hold Doran Martell's hand until the end.

I wasn't even able to make it to his funeral.

"Arianne, they are waiting for you." Trystan's voice was cautious. He was the only one who seemed to understand she barely had time to mourn her father, while all the others were already demanding things from her.

Arianne turned to see her youngest brother's worried expression; it broke her heart. He was already a man of one and twenty, and still the kindest person she knew. Just like her, Trystane was clearly suffering, but he worried for Arianne first.

"I'm going right away, Trys."
She gave one last look to her father's favorite place and prepared for the confrontation.

She could feel everyone's stare on her as she made her way to her place at the head of the table. Manfrey Martell, Alyse Ladybright, and Maester Myles, as members of her father's Council, received with due respect, while Anders Yronwood and Quentyn barely acknowledged her presence with a nod.

*Anders Yronwood shouldn't even be here.* Being her brother, Arianne could not dismiss Quentyn from Dorne's ruling Council, but the Lord of Yronwood had no legitimate right to be there; only his influence over Quentyn.

'I princes maintain their composure despite the situation, Arianne,' she heard inside her head and decided to wait till another moment to show Lord Yronwood where he belonged.

"I apologize, for the delay." Arianne tried to hide the tremble in her voice; it was a first for her, to preside a Council without her father. "Are there any urgent matters?"

She hated to have to make that question. Which kind of ruler was unaware of the state of their territory? The only excuse she found for herself was that the Prince of Dorne was not supposed to die so soon.

"Prince Doran was a dutiful man," Manfrey Martell started after clearing his throat. "He envisioned a smooth transition for you, Princess Arianne."

*This transition will be everything but smooth.* She had to set a rebellion against Robert Baratheon while preventing one against herself.

"The most pressing matter right now would be your investiture as the ruler of Dorne," seconded Lady Alyse. "Prince Oberyn and Captain Hotah stayed at Sunspear to make the pertinent arrangements."

*My uncle stayed at Sunspear to avoid an encounter with Lord Yronwood.*

"We can resume our usual meetings after the ceremony," Manfrey Martell rejoined the
conversation gracefully after the Lady had finished speaking. The dialogue almost seemed rehearsed, something which Arianne didn't like. "Do you have any doubts, Princess?"

*I've got many doubts regarding many matters,* she thought but said nothing, for she knew her position was not ideal. She would take a more assertive approach once she had the support of her uncle, Hotah, and the Sand Snakes.

"As you said, uncle Manfrey, I think it is pertinent to wait until we return to Sunspear." She prepared to leave. "I'd like to leave on the morrow."

"Before you leave, Princess, I'd like to ask something," Lord Yronwood's smug face shouted he had been waiting for that moment. "As members of Dorne's Council, shouldn't we know why had the heiress to Dorne been away during the last couple of years?"

*Like hell, you'll be in my Council,* Arianne would have snapped at the man but, once more, her father's calm voice warned her against that course of action.

Arianne straightened in her seat. "My absence was due to a crucial matter for the future of Dorne." She made a pause to watch the others' expressions. "However, as Prince Doran didn't see fit to inform you about it, I'll also postpone the subject until we return to Sunspear." Arianne managed to maintain the authority in her tone, even after she detected how unsatisfied they were with her answer.

*They won't like it either when they get to know,* Arianne decided.

As she made her way to her chambers, Arianne tried to find out how she would broach the subject with the dornish Lords and, more importantly, how she would persuade them to fight for Elia Martell's son. So many years had passed since the Targaryens had fallen, that Arianne wasn't sure whether they still had the right to start another war in the name of justice. Did Aegon even want the Iron Throne? If someone asked her, her cousin had shown no interest in reclaiming his rightful place.

*I shouldn't be the one doing this madness,* she repeated to herself for the hundredth time. Nevertheless, she didn't dare to cancel everything, for she couldn't stand her father's effort and planning going to waste.

"I can't do this alone." She told to the empty hall.
"I know."

Arianne barely managed to stop herself from jumping at the sound of Quentyn's voice.

_Not now_, Arianne pleaded as she turned to face her brother. She didn't want to confront Quentyn just yet. Did she have an option?

"Is this the part where you offer to relieve me from the weight of ruling, brother?"

Quentyn didn’t look away. "Can we talk in private, Arianne?" He answered calmly.

"Do I have an option?" Arianne supposed it was better to solve their dispute as soon as possible.

Quentyn's only answer was to follow her quietly to her solar.

She and Quentyn sat at her solar's table, but none of them decided to speak. There was a sense of formality, even distress in the air. If anything, it was a confirmation than Arianne would never share with Quentyn what she did with Trystane or the Sand Snakes.

Finally, Quentyn was the one who broke the silence. "How is she?"

"Excuse me?"

"You visited our mother, didn't you?"

_Where are you going with this, Quentyn?_

"I did."
"Did you tell her about father?"

"I did."

Quentyn nodded and went silent again.

Arianne sighed. "Quentyn, what do you want?"

Quentyn fixed her stare on hers. "I don't want to steal your birthright if that is what you think."

Arianne directed him a fearsome stare, but Quentyn remained completely relaxed, which only made her feel uncomfortable. Such reaction had reminded her of Prince Doran Martell. She breathed and tried to keep her cool demeanor.

"I don't know what-"

"Father told me you read that letter," he interrupted her. "You have to understand plans were different then."

"Were they?" Even if her father had never meant to betray her, the fact remained that he had trusted his plans to Quentyn and hid them from her.

"Dorne is yours," Quentyn continued. "I swore to father I would, by no means, interfere with your ascension."

Arianne didn't know what to think. "It seems Yronwood has a different idea."

Her brother frowned. "I won't deny that Lord Yronwood doesn't think you are fit to rule over Dorne."

Arianne wasn't expecting a different answer, but it still worried her. "I assume he is not the only one."
"Perhaps," Quentyn admitted. "I've been paying attention to detect potential threats."

That statement, on the other hand, had surprised her. "Why would you do that?"

"Because you are my sister." Quentyn reached across the table to take her hand. "Please, Arianne, I beg you: Accept my help. You don't have to go through this alone."

Perhaps she needed someone with whom she could share the burden her father had bestowed upon her. Perhaps it was the fact that Quentyn produced in her a feeling of calmness similar to the one her father had. The truth was Arianne couldn't ignore the need to believe in her brother.

'Quentyn is your brother, he would never wish you ill, Arianne,' she heard yet again her father’s words.

"Can I trust you, Quentyn?" She asked, too exhausted to keep her guard up against her brother.

"On our father's memory," he squeezed her hand, "I swear I would never act against you."

Arianne nodded. It would take time for all her doubts to disappear, but she wanted to trust Quentyn with all her heart. She only hoped, her brother wouldn't prove her decision to be mistaken.

Aegon

'Your uncle has died. Return immediately.' Those were the only words contained in Connington's last letter, and they had become a constant source of distress for Aegon.
Realizing he had lost his opportunity to meet Doran Martell had been a shock. Aegon had looked forward to getting to know his uncle and ask him a million questions about his mother. The sort of questions neither Ashara nor Connington could answer.

Aegon had suffered greatly because of that, but at least he had Arya's support for that matter. Unfortunately, Aegon could not turn to her to discuss the second cause of his distress.

Soon after they had separated from Daenerys' Khalasar, they had started to hear rumors regarding a civil war at Dorne. Aegon's cousin, Quentyn, had used Arianne's absence during their father's death to proclaim himself Ruling Prince of Dorne.

Aegon knew that fight between Arianne and Quentyn had negative repercussions for their plans to invade Westeros. However, what concerned him the most was Arianne's well-being. What if she had become a prisoner or worse? There was no way he could ask for Arya's opinion without revealing too much.

*I have to tell her soon, anyway*, he considered.

"Griff!" Arya snapped him out of his stupor. When he turned to regard her, she was holding his arm and wearing a troubled expression. "You were about to fall from the horse. Are you still thinking about you uncle?"

"I'm more concerned about, my cousin." That was as much as he could tell her.

"Jon is stupid. He should have accompanied her home."

*Well, that was out of the question.*

"I'm sure he would have if Anne had allowed him to."

"I don't get why they hold back."

"They must have their reasons." Aegon wished, again, he could stop lying to Arya, but he had to make things clear with Connington first. "Anyway, if Jon had gone after Anne, he wouldn't be at
Myr to meet us."

"Yes, you are right." She didn't sound as excited at the notion as he thought she would be.

She must be as nervous to face Jon as I am to face Connington. Aegon shook off the thought and offered Arya a reassuring smile. They had made up their minds to be together, and that was all that mattered.

Aegon felt himself trembling like a leaf the moment they crossed the gates of the house at Myr, where the rest of the group was waiting for them. He had spent a significant part of the journey reminding himself that everything would go well, yet his nervousness refused to disappear.

"I can't believe I'll sleep on a decent bed," cried Haldon.

"Crybaby," Arya scoffed behind them. "How did you even managed to survive?"

Haldon glowered at Arya but, whatever he had planned to say, she was no longer paying attention to him.

"Jon!" She shouted and ran ahead of them, launching herself into her brother's arms as she had done ever since Aegon met them.

Jon received her with open arms. "For the Old Gods," Jon took a step away from Arya; he was only a handspan taller than she was. "I can no longer call you little sister, can I?"

"I thought I would always be your little sister."

Jon laughed. "How much I missed you, little sister." He hugged her again.

It surprised Aegon the easiness with which they had resumed their relationship as if the two years
they had been away had not been more than a couple of days. In an instant, Jon's presence had completely made him invisible. As Aegon tried not to feel disheartened, he observed Jon Snow; he had not changed that much. If anything the way he carried himself was more confident than before.

"Griff!" Arya called him after a while. "Come here!"

Jon Snow's stare upon him told him all he needed to know.

*What is wrong with you, Arya?!* Aegon thought frightened. For the Seven, she had not given him time to prepare himself. *Don't run, don't run, don't run,* he repeated as he made an inhuman effort to move forward.

"How good to see you, Jon," he blurted.

"I hope you will do right by my sister, Griff."

"I would never, I mean- my intentions are earnest."

Jon's expression didn't change a single bit. Arya, on the other hand, rolled her eyes and punched Jon in the arm.

"Stop that already. What is the point of you behaving like that, stupid?"

"I wanted to see how he reacted," Jon replied, rubbing his arm. "You also grew stronger," he commented.

Aegon blinked at them. He felt utterly lost.

"What's wrong?" Jon and Arya asked in unison when they noticed his reaction.

"I expected a different reaction from you, Jon." He had not realized just how tense he had truly been until that moment.
"Did you?" Jon's expression had gone friendlier.

"I told you, he would understand, stupid."

"I guess you did." Aegon rubbed his hands; he still didn't feel completely safe. "To be honest, I thought you would ask me to prove my worth or something like that."

Jon chuckled. "If Arya thinks you worthy, there is no reason for me to oppose." Jon turned and directed a sincere stare to Arya. "It is her life; the only one who can decide is her." He returned his attention to Griff. "If you were to hurt her, however..."

"I would never." Aegon raised his hands.

Arya scoffed. "I would beat him up before he could even consider the possibility."

"That is another reason I don't fear for my little sister."

Aegon had to laugh at that; he was glad that Jon was on their side. "You could have at least been more surprised."

"I had my suspicions already." Jon gave a side glance to Arya. "When she stopped mentioning you in her letters, I knew she was hiding something important."

Arya blushed immediately.

"Oh." It never failed to amaze him how easily Jon and Arya understood each other.

Aegon looked toward the building. "I should do my part I tell my father." He knew there was no way Connington would react half as well as Jon had.

"That would be the best," Jon agreed.
"Do you want me to go with you?" Arya offered.

Aegon shook his head. "I shall do this alone." He dared to reach for Arya's hand and squeeze it before directing to Connington's studio.

He knocked the door half wishing Connington would be asleep or too busy to see him, but the gods were never merciful. Connington asked him to enter.

"Ah, I didn't hear you had arrived," his surrogate father widened his eyes when he saw Aegon.

"We arrived just a moment ago."

"Close the door. There is much we must discuss."

Two seconds and he has already taken the lead of the conversation. Will this situation ever change? Aegon thought as he sat on the chair across Connington.

"I-

"We are sailing for Dorne in a fortnight," Connington commented nonchalantly.

What in the Seven Hells?!

"The Golden Company is ready. We were only waiting for you."

"Wait, wait, wait," Aegon almost pleaded. "Haven't you heard? There is a civil war at Dorne. How can we possibly think of going there during such a situation?"

Connington didn't answer, but walked to the door and verified it was locked. Then, with an unnerving quietness returned to his place. "The civil war is not real. It is our excuse for setting feet on Westeros without raising suspicion. It is the stage the Princess prepared for us."
Now, of all times? He was not ready to become King, to fight for the Throne, to tell Arya who he was.

"I'm not ready," he muttered.

"It is our last chance."

He looked into Connington's eyes; they were imploring him, and, for some reason, Aegon couldn't refuse.

"What will happen to Jon and Arya?" He asked, defeated.

"They will be coming with us."

"As hostages?!" Aegon wasn't going to allow that.

Connington breathed deeply. "Jon is a member of the Golden Company, and I assume he won't leave his sister alone in Essos. If they hate Robert Baratheon, they will take our side. If not-"

Aegon rose to his feet. "I'm marrying Arya."

Connington blinked at him. "What?"

"I'm telling Arya the truth and marrying her," he declared and prepared for Connington's retaliation.

There was none. Instead of fury, all he could see in Connington's expression was the man was considering the possibilities, which scared Aegon even more.

"I guess she could gain us the support of the North and the Riverlands. Perhaps even the Vale." Connington kept talking. "Once you marry in front of enough witnesses, and the marriage is
consummated, we'll send notice to Eddard Stark and Winterfell."

_They planned it_, he realized suddenly. Everything made sense. That was the reason Illyrio had sent them. Arya, Jon, even Aegon had been dancing to Illyrio's tune. _Did we ever have a choice?_

He felt back in his chair, holding his head in his hands. He refused to believe everything had been a setup.

"I do love her."

"Does she return your feelings?"

"She does. She already told her brother."

"Then what is the matter?" Aegon couldn't see him, but Connington sounded exasperated.

"I have to tell her the truth."

"When the time is right, you will," Connington said matter-of-factly.

Aegon could not think of a right time to tell Arya that he had been lying to her.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I hope the chapter worthed the wait and that I can update slightly earlier. Once again, thanks for the support, the kudos and all the comments. I expect to return soon.

Next chapter: "DISCLOSURES"
Chapter Summary

The hugely anticipated revelation.

Chapter Notes

This thing is super delayed, but I promised I wouldn't think about that anymore. I want to thank all of the kind comments I received and those who are still waiting and supporting this story.

I hope you all can enjoy this chapter because, as it was written in the span of more than half a year, it was monstrously complicated to try making it cohesive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arianne

'You better know what you are doing.' If she heard that phrase one more time, she was going to run away to Essos. How stupid did everyone consider Arianne to be?

She had accepted Quentyn's help, but she didn't, not for a single second, trust Lord Yronwood, contrary to what her uncle and cousins believed. And no, she wasn't stupid enough to think that Dorne and the Golden Company were sufficient to sit Aegon on the Iron Throne. She was also aware of the fact that their success depended on Eddard Stark's response to his daughter's return. For all she knew, the Starks could spurn Arya, and then, Dorne would have to face six kingdoms alone.

Calm down, Arianne, you have to inspire confidence to your people, she told herself.

She took a deep breath and walked away from the ship's rail, decided to get some rest in her cabin, but found Tyene standing in her way.
"You don't look well, Arianne."

"I've got a lot in my mind, that's all," she said, stepping aside, trying to finish the conversation.

Tyene smiled and took her arm. "You need to relax, cousin. Isn't everything going according to plan? Or is it that you're having second thoughts about Quent and his Ironwood friend?"

I'm sorry Tyene. Arianne promised she would apologize as soon as Aegon got the Iron Throne. She didn’t wish to start driving people away from her, unlike her father had done.

The ship made it to Starfall just as the dornish sun started to disappear in the horizon. As they made their way to the harbour, Arianne remembered Elia once told her there was no better time to appreciate the Dayne's castle than sunset. She wished she had been able to visit the place under different circumstances.

Arianne and her retinue were received by Lord Dayne personally. The young Lord kissed the back of her hand and welcomed her with a smile, although she perceived certain tension in his stare.
"We prepared a feast in your honour, Princess," he announced while offering his arm to her, which she accepted immediately.

"I'm flattered, Lord Dayne, but there is something of great importance we must discuss."

At that, Edric Dayne was unable to hide his discomfort, and Arianne grew worried.

"Of course, please follow me, Princess," Lord Dayne delivered in a less pleasant tone.

Could it be that he knows already? It couldn't be, for she had given strict orders to maintain their real purpose a secret until Aegon made it to Starfall. Well, Hotah warned me about it, she sighed. One more reason to act fast.

Edric Dayne guided her to something that seemed to be his studio and had the precaution of barring the door behind him. Arianne didn't even bother to take a seat before questioning him.

"Who told you, Lord Dayne?" Arianne demanded.

Edric Dayne stared at her, almost terrified. "Princess-"

"I need to know who is divulging something I ordered to keep a secret."

Dayne stared at his desk and struggled for a second before facing Arianne again. "My aunt Allyria visited Spottswood just after you."

"She considered I should know."

Sylva told her, she had no doubt. Sylva Santagar was her childhood friend, but she had never been very discreet, and Arianne could not feel less than irritated at the fact that she had revealed something of that magnitude as if it were court gossip. The worst part was Allyria Dayne was married to the Lord of Blackhaven who was a vassal of Storm's End. I'm going to kill her when I see her.

"Well," she started, trying to conceal her anger, "Lord Dayne, you already know the truth. Are you
going to refuse the call of your Princess?" She sat on a lounge and rested her chin on the back of her hand to feign nonchalance.

"No!" The young Lord replied, his expression between shame and anger. "Starfall is loyal to Sunspear. Our families have been friends for centuries," he said. "We also want justice for Princess Elia and her children," he added with a fierce look in his eyes.

*It doesn't seem like he's lying, but there's still something he's not telling me.*

"I need you to tell me what it is, Lord Dayne." Arianne made a pause, challenging the young Lord. "What is it that bothers you?"

"Princess, it is not my place to question you."

Arianne narrowed her eyes; she had become curious. "You have my permission to speak freely."

For all his insecurity, Edric Dayne dared to look at her directly into the eye as he declared, "bringing the Golden Company is a mistake, Princess."

Arianne was so surprised by such a statement that she couldn't repress a smirk. Of all the Lords and Ladies she had visited, the Lord of Starfall had been the only one to voice a concern Arianne was sure all her bannermen shared: Allowing the Golden Company to set feet on Westeros meant trouble.

*He seems to be genuinely loyal,* she thought and decided to reassure him a somehow. "I know it is a lot to ask you to receive the Golden Company in your home."

"I understand we need the numbers to succeed," he added after a brief silence.

Just then, Arianne understood that Edric Dayne had never planned to refuse her request.

*This man is honourable to a fault.* Arianne grimaced as soon as the thought made its way into her mind. She didn't want to think about honourable men.
Seen from the Palestone Tower, the same from which allegedly Ashara Dayne had thrown herself into the sea, the arrival of the Golden Company was a sight to behold. Given its reputation and imposing appearance, Arianne couldn't help to think that with its assistance it was, in fact, possible for them to win the upcoming war. She tried to hold onto that feeling and ignore the fact that among those thousands of men was Jon Snow.

*It's not the time to think about him.* The woman she had pretended to be while at Essos had remained there; Princess Arianne Martell had never met the Bastard of Winterfell. It didn't mean she was able to conceal completely how she felt.

There was a knock at her door and she knew it was time to meet with the officials of the Company. They would not reveal Aegon until they had gathered with Quentyn and the rest of the dornish forces near the Prince's Pass, and of course, her cousin would marry Arya Stark before that happened, but they needed to settle some things before the journey.

The Princess sighed and walked to the door where Edric Dayne was waiting for her.

"It is time, Princess."

"Thank you, Lord Dayne."

When they entered the Council Hall together, a couple of the assistants raised a brow at her but said nothing. Arianne hoped they their response was due to the reaction she usually elicited from men instead of recognition. It was not impossible that one of them had caught a glimpse of her and Jon Snow at Myr.

Arianne sat at the head of the table, introduced herself and allowed Edric Dayne to explain the details of the army's journey. After the first encounter, she had decided to trust him more responsibilities, and seeing how the young Lord was managing through the meeting she could tell she had been right.

*He will be my eyes on the battlefield.* She could not ride ahead of the men but she could at least be well informed.
Just before the end of the meeting, a messenger entered looking for Harry Strickland, something which almost made Arianne's heart leap out from her chest. Of all the ten thousand members of the Golden Company, they had sent Jon Snow.

_Stupid Connington._ She had told her to keep Aegon and the Starks as far away from her as possible.

There was not much she could do to avoid what was about to happen. She leaned towards Edric Dayne feigning they were discussing something in private, but Harry Stickland was too close to her seat for her to be able to hide.

"What is it, idiot?!" Stickland squawked right beside her. "You are interrupting."

Arianne held her breath while begging to all the Gods Jon Snow would have enough common sense to avoid making a scene in front of the higher ranks of the Golden Company.

"Speak," Strickland's voice cut the silence.

"My apologies," she heard Jon Snow muttering. "We are missing two ships, my Lord."


A man at the other end of the table directed towards the door; Jon Snow did the same. Nothing else happened, and Arianne hoped he had not noticed. However, when both men had reached the door, she dared to look their way and caught a glimpse of Jon's eyes before he exited the place. Arianne barely refrained herself from flinching.

There was no doubt. Jon Snow knew who she was.
To say Jon felt apprehensive about their journey was an understatement. He still couldn't believe that they were on a ship on their way to Westeros. It was not like they were disembarking on the Capital, however, the more he thought about it, the more it seemed like a terrible decision. And they were already halfway, but his mind insisted on considering just how plausible it was for him to jump into the sea with Arya and return to Essos swimming.

*I would be jumping alone, anyway.*

Arya was not going to consider such a stupid notion, not even as a joke, not after all the effort it had supposed to make up her mind. They knew the risks of setting feet in Westeros while Robert Baratheon remained alive, and still, the reasons she had to go had weighed more for them. Jon wouldn't have minded renouncing the Golden Company, but Arya had been reluctant to separate from Griff during more than a moon's turn. She had been sure the Old Man was up to something and had said that more than losing Griff, she refused to let his father outsmart her.

Yes, Arya's feelings had been crucial to making the decision.

Ever since Arya had been old enough to understand what marriage would mean for her, he had listened to her fears and complaints. For both of them, Arya accepting and living a happy married life was an event as unlikely as the Wall falling. Therefore, when Jon learned that what she felt for Griff was strong enough to consider marrying him, he decided he would do his best to support them. Granted, he looked away whenever they kissed, announced his presence when he walked on them and tried to ignore how his little sister stared at Griff. That didn't mean he didn't support them.

Nevertheless, Jon felt like he was going to lose his sanity by overthinking.

There was a knock at his cabin's door, and he rolled off the bed to open. Arya, who was waiting on the other side, entered without asking permission.

"I have not seen you in two days," she said, looking at him expectantly.
"We have seen each other at dinner."

"Where you barely speak to me," she pointed out as her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Is this about Griff?"

"No." He wasn't lying. "It's nothing." That, however, was a lie.

"Jon," she took his hands and searched his stare; it was so weird how their eyes were almost at the same level now. "I'm anxious too."

Arya's sagacity always seemed to hit the mark when it came to Jon's thoughts. He decided Arya deserved to know what was in his head.

"Little sister, I'm not anxious, I'm terrified."

Arya's expression changed immediately to concern. "Do you think we could be that... unlucky?"

"I think we should have been more... careful."

"Dorne is almost a separate Kingdom," Arya tried to reason with him, "and given its story with King's Landing, I doubt someone important will visit."

"There is a civil war. What if the King decides to send troops or something?"

There was a prolonged silence during which Arya seemed to be in serious thought, then, "I will stay out of sight, and no member of the Golden Company knows who I am."

"But they know who I am," he stated. "We look alike. How much time will it take before someone connects the dots?"

It was not like when they were children; after all, even if Arya tried to deny it, she had grown into a beautiful young woman. Nevertheless, their Stark traits they shared were pretty evident.
"Aren't you overthinking?" Arya's voice remained firm, but Jon could see doubt in her expression.

**In our current position, there's not much we can do.** Jon decided there was no point in making Arya worry at the moment. He would talk to the Old Man and do something once they were on solid ground.

Jon breathed and nodded. "Maybe I am."

Jon had felt like he could not breathe properly from the moment he set feet at Starfall. He had talked to Old Griff regarding his worries, and he had assured him Arya and his son had no reason to have contact with the members of the Golden Company or the dornish nobility. Jon knew Old Griff would never put his son at risk, and even if the older man rarely ever hid his disgust towards Arya, he would not attempt anything against her if that put his son in danger or made him unhappy. It was proof enough that just for the sake of Griff, the Old Man had accepted his relationship with Arya.

Still, Jon's wariness had not disappeared. There was something he could not identify that kept telling him it was a bad idea to set feet at Dorne.

"Will you stay for dinner, Jon?" Arya asked once she had finished unpacking.

Jon moved his head both to shake off his thoughts and as an answer. "I must go back with the rest of the Company."

"Will you come to visit later?"

"We talked about this," Jon said ruefully. "It is dangerous enough that I am here now."

Arya sighed. "Will you at least come for the... um... ceremony?"
Jon didn't answer. He left his place by the door immediately and sat on the bed, patting the spot beside him. When Arya sat, he took her hand.

"Are you sure you want to marry Griff?"

Arya blinked at him. "What makes you think I don't want to be with him?"

Jon couldn't repress a chuckle.

"What?"

"It's just that you never say wedding. I know you don't like what it means."

"Not much," she admitted.

"Then don't do it."

"It is important for Griff and his father." Arya bit her lower lip. "I thought it was what you wanted."

It was, but just because he would like to make sure Arya would be safe if something happened to him.

"I won't deny it would give me some peace of mind," he admitted.

Arya raised an eyebrow at him. "But..." she prompted him.

"It must be your decision."

Arya buffed and threw herself back to lie on the bed. "It seems like a disgusting nuisance," she complained, then smiled despite everything, "but I'll do it if only to prove the Old Man wrong."
Jon laughed at that; adult or not, Arya was still Arya. "I would never dare to miss that, little sister," he said, expecting it would be enough of an answer to Arya's previous question.

Arya's smile grew bigger at that. "You better don't."

Jon pulled her into a hug. "Please take care of yourself."

Arya held onto him with crushing strength. "That's supposed to be my line, stupid."

Jon would want to tell her she should not worry about his safety, but that would mean giving false reassurance to Arya, and that was something he would never dare to do.

"I'll do my best."

"Now go help that Princess to get the crap out of his brother," Arya said, pulling away from him.

Jon snorted and ruffled Arya's hair. Of course she would take the Princess’ side.

As they walked together towards the main door, they heard murmurs coming from Griff's room. When she heard, Arya only rolled her eyes and kept walking. Jon followed her, assuming the distress he felt was just him being paranoid.

It wasn't long before the Old Man got out saying they had to leave. Jon gave one last squeeze to Arya's hand and directed a nod towards Griff, then followed Old Griff outside.

The place the Old Man had chosen as the residence for the rest of their group was at a considerable distance from the town that surrounded the castle of Starfall, so it took them around an hour to get to the Company's campsite. Jon used the journey to ask something that had just recently come to his mind.

"Did you use to live here?"
Old Griff directed him a suspicious stare as an answer.

"Griff once told me you were a landed knight," he explained. "You seem to know these lands, so I was wondering whether you used to live around here."

The older man frowned and looked ahead again. "I lived at the Stormlands, came here to run errands for my liege Lord."

Jon nodded; the information appeased a concern he had not known he had. It made sense Robert Baratheon had not forgiven Old Griff, unlike he had done with many others. And it made more sense that the Golden Company had insisted on having him back on their ranks; he probably knew the frontier between Dorne and the Stormlands better than anyone else.

Jon didn't speak again. Old Griff was staring at the distance, his hands clutching at the reins, probably remembering his home. Jon had only been away five years; he could only guess how it felt to be away during such a long time.

They took their separate ways as soon as they entered the castle, and Jon was immediately sent to tell Harry Strickland they had two missing ships. He walked as fast as he could towards the Council Chamber, mentally preparing himself for the Commander's reaction.

Jon entered the Council Chamber, walking as inconspicuously as he could toward Strickland, who caught sight of him almost immediately.

"What is it, idiot?!" Strickland spat disdainfully. "You are interrupting."

Jon was wondering whether the man treated everyone like that or he only despised him, when he noticed the woman sitting next to the man. Jon blinked, she was giving her back to him, but he would recognize those black curls anywhere. It could not-

"Speak," Strickland ordered.

"My apologies," Jon managed to utter. "We are missing two ships, my Lord." He hoped his voice had not sounded strange.

Jon turned around instinctively, all the while convincing himself he was seeing things. However, the moment right before he closed the door he spared a last glance towards the woman, noticing she was looking at him too. He could have mistaken the hair but not those eyes.

"What are you doing, Snow?"

Jon looked up; he was still gripping the handle of the closed door. There were so many questions he needed to answer.

"Wh-" he bit back the rest, realizing it was stupid to ask anything. "I was thinking about the ships." Jon had never been a competent liar.

"Stop losing time if it worries you enough to space out."

The next hours were like a dream for Jon. He hardly registered the visit to the docks and what they discussed. While Captain Lothson gave orders and prepared a searching party, Jon tried to remain calm and go through what had happened. He couldn't concentrate, though, and his thoughts kept aimlessly swirling, stopping him from reaching a conclusion.

He retired past midnight, not to sleep but to continue thinking.

Anne was in the Council Chamber, he recapitulated. There was no doubt; it had been an instant, but she had definitely looked back at him. Her real name is Arianne Martell, he continued. He was sure of that as well, for the Princess was the only woman who had reasons to be there.

"What were you doing at Essos?" He whispered to the darkness.

For a fleeting moment, he felt thrilled at the idea of knowing the Princess of Dorne. Then, the apprehension that had not left him during the whole journey became a real thing and Jon's heartbeat became impossibly fast.
If Anne was Arianne Martell who was the Old Man? And Griff? And all the others? They had had to be lying about their kinship.

Jon stood from the bed abruptly as he had remembered something even more worrying: The Magister and his relationship with Daenerys Targaryen. The prolonged visit half of the group had made to Vaes Dothrak. Was there a connection between those things and the dornish civil war? Anne’s departure roughly matched the death of the Prince of Dorne.

Jon felt nauseous, angry beyond reason, and he didn't know the whole story, but that didn't matter. They all had lied, and he and Arya were standing right in the middle of something they couldn't understand.

"Idiot, idiot, idiot!" Jon repeated as he reached for his sword.

He opened the door and was about to look for Old Griff when another thought hit him.

_They wanted us here._ They had insisted. Jon didn't know which the purpose was, but he didn't plan on staying to find out. It couldn’t be good.

_Calm down, calm down._ Jon repeated to himself. He didn't have a plan, he didn’t know for sure what was happening; the worst he could do was drag attention.

First things first, he had to go find Arya.

---

**Aegon**

Aegon should be used to the lies. His life, after all, was the most exceptional lie anyone had ever told. It turned out, however, that it was easier to lie when you didn't care about the people who listened to you.
He knew he had to tell the truth to Arya. And there was no possible way for him to stop what would happen once Arya got to know, but he figured he could at least have the decency to tell her before she married a complete stranger.

Aegon had not been able to do it. Not before they had boarded the ship, less so when they were in the middle of the sea. Now they were at Starfall, several steps closer to the revelation of his real identity and Aegon was even further away from telling the truth.

*I'll tell her after Connington and Jon leave,* he promised as they made their way from the docks to the place where they would be staying. Perhaps it was a cowardly thing to do, but he had convinced himself that such a revelation required privacy. It would have been impossible with Connington by his side anyway.

Just then, as if reading his thoughts, Connington turned to cast him a glare. Aegon had seen that glare dozens of times over the journey, mostly when he had been spacing out. Connington knew him well enough to comprehend the meaning behind Aegon's silence and saw fit to keep reminding him of his duty. The man had even coerced a vow of silence from him, but that was yet another lie Aegon had told.

Almost two hours after they had set feet on Starfall, they made it to a wooden cabin on the outskirts of the town. It was the perfect place for them, not spacious but comfortable, and no one would spare a second glance at it. It was also the place where Griff of Tyrosh would cease to exist, but Aegon tried not to think much about that.

"Follow me, Griff," Connington growled as soon as they had dismounted.

He sighed and caught a glance of Arya rolling her eyes before following the older man into one of the chambers. Aegon smiled despite everything.

"I know what you are going to say," Aegon muttered as soon as he closed the door behind him.

"Do you?"

Aegon didn't reply. They had had the same talk a hundred times, and he just wanted to be done with it. He had already decided what he was going to do.
"I know you don't like what we are doing, but we can't back off at this point."

"I know," Aegon replied while wondering if there was ever a point at which they could have backed off.

"In a sense," Connington continued, "this is for her sake as well."

"I guess so," he had to keep his answers simple, not sure of what would happen if he dared to utter more than three words.

Connington, for once, seemed pleased with Aegon's answer. "I'll send Rolly for you when the time is right," he said, then hesitated before placing a hand on Aegon's shoulder and adding, "be careful, boy."

"Take care," Aegon muttered as the older man crossed the door.

Aegon gave a deep breath and stepped into the hall just in time to catch a glimpse of Jon squeezing Arya's hand. The other man only offered him a nod as a farewell, which produced an unpleasant sensation in Aegon's chest. He was also going to lose the friendship he had managed to form with Jon.

He tried to remain calm through dinner, for he couldn't let Haldon nor Lemore suspect what he was about to do. Lemore might not like the way Connington and Arianne had manipulated Jon and Arya, but she was as invested as his surrogate father on the scheme to put him on the Iron Throne; she would not permit of his actions either.

Eventually, he realized the table was unusually silent. Haldon was yawning as he used to do after a long journey, and Lemore hadn't talked a lot since they had made it to her hometown, but both things were understandable. What was worrisome was Arya's general state of stillness.

He took Arya's hand. "Is something wrong?"

_Everything is wrong, stupid pissant!_ He hated himself for prolonging the situation.
Arya lifted her stare from her plate. "Did you say something?"

Aegon wanted to punch himself for being such an oaf. "I was wondering whether you were feeling ill or something."

"Why?"

"For starters, you are not mocking Haldon's weakness."

Arya gave a side look at Haldon, who seemed ready to leave the table. "I was just thinking." She shrugged.

"About Jon's safety?"

"No. It is just..." Arya paused and directed a quick glance towards Haldon then Lemore; she seemed pretty uncomfortable.

_Is this about her father again?_

Arya had been more open with her thoughts concerning her family since they were in Vaes Dothrak, but it was still a delicate subject for her. It was definitely not something she was going to tell him in front of Haldon and Lemore.

Lemore saved him the trouble of changing locations when she ushered Haldon away from the dining table. Aegon thanked her with a stare before returning his attention to Arya.

"It's just what?" Aegon prompted Arya to continue.

Arya looked away. "It is strange that we are getting married here."

Aegon tried not to flinch. "Why?"
Arya turned to look him in the eye, and Aegon felt like he could breathe again when he found no anger or distrust in her expression, but embarrassment.

"I'll tell you if you promise you won't assume weird things." Aegon could have sworn she was blushing.

"Now I'm curious," Aegon said playfully, earning a warning stare from Arya. "I won't say anything stupid," he added quickly.

Arya seemed sceptic but spoke anyway, "Before the fat pervert went to Winterfell, my father had been looking for a betrothal for me. I-" She bit her lower lip. "I had kind of accepted to meet Edric Dayne," she blurted. "That's why it's weird that we are marrying at Starfall."

Aegon fell silent. The idea of Arya being with someone else, even in a hypothetic scenario, was unbearable. Then again, that was an idea with which Aegon would have to deal after he told the truth. He might not even see Arya ever again.

"Hey, stupid!" Arya called him, and Aegon had to stop his pathetic thoughts to look at her. "I was thinking it is funny, that's all."

Arya's earnest expression made him feel like the most despicable scum in the entire world. Aegon averted his stare. He had to tell her; every second he let pass would only make it worse.

"Didn't you promise you wouldn't get the wrong idea?" She took his face between her hands and gave him a soft kiss. "I'm glad I didn't come here back then. I wouldn't have met you otherwise."

Aegon buried his face in Arya's messy hair, containing his tears. "You are the best thing that happened in my life." It was true and all the more reason to end his farce.

"Of course I am," Arya chuckled.

Aegon didn’t answer.
Arya rolled on the bed for the tenth time that night. Perhaps it had not been such a great idea to tell Griff what she had been thinking. She had expected they would laugh together at the stupid irony of life, but Griff had seemed more affected than she had thought possible.

Or maybe that was not it. If Arya recalled it correctly, Griff had been getting distracted ever since it was decided they would travel to Dorne, and she couldn't quite understand that.

Arya had reasons to worry about being in Westeros, but Griff? She doubted Robert Baratheon remembered every single man he had exiled after the Rebellion. Griff could also be concerned about his father's safety, just like she was about Jon's. Or he could be thinking about his cousin returning to Tyrosh.

"Fuck it!" Arya cursed. She would just force Griff to spit out what was bothering him.

Arya started when she heard a door closing followed by light footsteps directing towards the main entrance. She waited until she heard the front door closing before going after Griff because she had no doubt it was Griff, and that was the ultimate proof that there was something wrong with him.

She turned around, taking some time to find Griff's figure in the dim light of the crescent moon. He was pretty far already, but Arya decided against calling his name and kept walking. If she woke up Haldon and Lemore she would lose her chance to talk to him alone.

At some point, abruptly, Griff sat down in the middle of the field. She got close, and Griff didn't seem to notice she was approaching, even if she wasn't trying to hide her presence. When she reached Griff, he was holding his head in his hands and was murmuring something to himself.
"Hey," Arya called as she sat beside him. "Couldn't sleep either?"

Arya felt more than saw him shaking his head slightly but didn't catch sight of his face. That wasn't a good sign.

"Griff, are yo-"

"My name is not Griff," he interrupted.

"What?"

"I am Aegon Targaryen," Griff said, looking straight ahead.

Arya blinked at him; she had no clue of what he was talking about. "Griff, is this one of your stupid quirks or are you simply drunk?"

"I'm not Griff," he insisted.

*Quirks it is,* Arya decided. She was pretty sure Griff had not had a drop of wine during dinner and he had gone to sleep right before her. She felt annoyed and relieved at the same time.

"Very well, I'm Queen Nymeria and will beat you for being stupid." She flicked his temple with her finger.

"Arya," Griff said, taking her wrist, tone serious and finally turning to face her. Arya couldn't decide what had shaken her more: The way Griff had called her name, her real name, or the sad resignation etched on his face. "Listen to me, this is no game. I'm telling you, I'm Aegon Targaryen."

Arya stayed still. "This is not funny," she said, feeling an inexplicable tension coil around her.

Griff pulled her closer and Arya couldn't avert her eyes from him. "I am Aegon Targaryen, son of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen and Princess Elia Martell of Dorne. Griff of Tyrosh doesn't exist."
Arya's mouth went dry. "Stop already, you are scaring me."

Griff didn't release her wrist as he continued. "I came with the Golden Company to claim the Iron Throne."

Griff's tone was strained, his voice seemed on the brink of braking, and Arya was not sure she was understanding what she was hearing. Her head had gone completely blank.

"The Golden Company is here because of the civil war," she tried as if Griff had not known that already.

"That is a lie, Arya." She vaguely identified Griff was growing impatient. "Princess Arianne Martell is my cousin. The civil war is a cover for the real purpose of the Golden Company."

Griff kept talking after that, but Arya had stopped listening. During a long moment, she lost track of where she was and how much time had passed. Suddenly, it all seemed like a dream, she had to be dreaming. She closed her eyes shut, expecting to wake up in her bed.

"Arya!" Griff's voice forced her to open her eyes right in front of his.

_Purple_, she thought hazily. At some point, after they had gotten together, Arya had realized that Griff's eyes turned purple under certain lighting. She had never been one to care much about looks so she had not thought anything of it back then. Now the realization made her snap out of her daze and react.

Arya stood up, finally able to pull her hand free from Griff's grasp, Aegon Targaryen's grasp. She looked down observing his face, anger gathering inside her.

"You were not going to tell me," Arya hissed.

"I was," he replied, immediately standing. "Connington said I had to wait but-"
"Wait! Wait for what, the arrival of the Others?!" Arya pushed back Griff, Aegon or whatever his name was. "We were going to marry in less than a moon turn!"

"I couldn't tell you or anyone else. I had to hide from Robert Baratheon."

"I was hiding too!"

"Arya, you have to understand it was too dangerous." He reached to grab her arm, and she slapped it away, which made him grimace, but she didn't care a bit. "We couldn't trust anyone."

"You knew who we were from the beginning."

"That-"

"You knew who I was." She stared at him in disbelief. "You all knew who I was," she repeated again, clenching her fists.

Her temper had flared as soon as she had learned the truth, but the anger had mainly come from the fact that Griff had lied to her about who he was. Remembering he had always known her identity brought into light something much more worrying, disgusting even.

"Am I your hostage?"

"What? No." He gave a step forward warily, and Arya made a point of avoiding looking at his face. "I may have lied about my name but not my feelings for you."

There was no way Arya was going to believe that. Her laugh was hollow when a bitter memory came to her.

"You are a wild animal, not a Lady," Sansa said, not quite shouting because a proper Lady wouldn't, but Arya felt it anyway. "No one would want someone like you. If someone ever accepts to marry you it will be because you are a Stark of Winterfell."
Arya couldn't remember why Sansa had said that, but the truth of her sister's words hit her hard, opening her eyes. She suddenly understood why Griff and his father had been so adamant about a marriage.

"You want Winterfell." It was not a question.

Griff's expression, no, Aegon's —she kept correcting herself— twisted, but he didn't deny her statement. He reached for her more decisively, and Arya couldn't contain herself anymore. She punched him right in his stupid lying face with enough strength to make him stumble backwards. Viciously, she hoped she had at least broken his perfect nose.

"Don't come close to me ever again," she spat as she turned around and walked, breath laboured.

"Wait," he spoke, and she made an effort to ignore the apparent pain in his voice. "Where are you going?"

That made her stop. Of course, she was going straight to look for Jon, but she couldn't just walk there, and that was assuming Griff was not going to try to stop her. She looked over her shoulder; he was not moving, just covering his nose, and waiting.

Arya considered her options. If she started walking towards Starfall, he could go back, get a horse and catch her in no time. If she went for the horse and her stuff, she would have to fight her way out and not just against Griff.

Needle, she thought. If she got to her room and grabbed her sword, she would have the advantage. Haldon and Lemore represented no threat, and she had defeated Griff more than one time during their sparring sessions. She was also the best rider of the four by far, and if she took her bow, she would be able to defend herself even while riding.

Arya looked back at the man who had betrayed her trust. Despite what had just happened, the idea of truly hurting him made her stomach turn in a disgusting way.

He is Aegon Targaryen, she reminded herself and recovered her determination.

Arya would have never hurt Griff of Tyrosh. The Dragon Prince, however, was a different matter.
Chapter End Notes

I'm still trying to put my life in order and working on translations and stories from another fandom, so I will make no promises about the update other than I will definitely finish this.

Please, please, please, leave a comment. I love them and have missed discussing the story with all of you.

Finally, next chapter: LONE WOLVES
Chapter Notes

So much time has passed since the last update... I can only be thankful to those that like this story enough to keep waiting for my awfully slow writing, and I apologise for the comments left without reply. At least we are getting closer to the end. It is a rather short chapter, but I hope you find it good enough to make up for the brevity.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Connington

He knew something was wrong the moment someone knocked on his door. No one should have been looking for him, not now that he still was another nameless soldier from the Golden Company. Not right before sunrise, and definitely, not that desperately.

The words the Princess of Dorne requires your presence were an unnecessary confirmation of something he already knew: Everything had gone straight to the Seven Hells.

"What happened?" He demanded from the Princess the moment they were alone.

"Not much," she shrugged in that sardonic way that Connington had come to hate so much. "Some idiot sent Jon Snow to the Council Room in the middle of our meeting."

Connington had to breathe very slowly to stop himself from doing something tremendously stupid. "That was hours ago," he growled. "Did he recognize you?"

Arianne Martell huffed. "Of course he did. He isn't stupid."
Connington felt one of his terrible headaches approaching. "What did you do with him?"

The Princess raised an eyebrow at him. "What was I supposed to do with him?"

"You let him go?!" He couldn't believe it.

"He didn't call me out," she shrugged again. "If I had ordered to arrest him for no reason, there would have been questions. Questions we can't answer yet."

Connington closed his eyes trying to calm himself down. After a brief moment, the Princess walked towards him and offered him a cup of wine, one he drank down in one go.

"This is not as bad as it could be." Connington glared at her, but the Princess was unaffected. "He only knows my identity. I will tell him I went to Essos to negotiate with the sellsword companies and that you were my contact."

Connington tried to control himself in favour of forming a coherent thought. He would very much prefer to restrain Jon Snow, to prevent him from further endangering the plan, but being too ruthless would only cause conflict with the Stark girl later. Still, his instincts told him it was stupid not to act.

"What makes you think he will believe you?" Connington doubted Jon Snow would take the deception lightly, no matter how much infatuated he had been with the Princess, especially because how infatuated he had been with her.

Arianne Martell walked back to where she had been sitting, looking away from him. "I think I can manage Jon Snow."

Connington narrowed his eyes. "Don't dare to involve your feelings in this."

"There is no such thing as feelings involved in this, my Lord."

Connington contained a snort, for it was not the time nor did he have the energy to argue with Arianne Martell about something as inane as her fascination with Jon Snow.
"I'll talk to him," Connington replied after deciding he would consider part of what the Princess had said. "But I'll throw him into a cell if necessary." He turned and reached for the door without waiting for a reply.

Connington directed towards Jon Snow's cell once he had sent a squire after two officers of the Golden Company. If things got ugly, he wanted to be prepared.

He took a deep breath before knocking on the door. "Snow! Strickland wants to see you!" Connington waited a couple of seconds before knocking again but still received no answer.

"Ser Snow is not in his cell, my Lord," a voice behind him informed. It took Connington some time to recognize the owner of the voice as Jon Snow's squire.

"Do you know where he is?" He was not going to succumb to panic, yet. It wasn't strange for Jon Snow to wake right before sunrise to run errands for Strickland.

"He left late at night and has not returned, like many others, my Lord." The boy blushed fiercely. "They were saying something about dornish girls being very eager to please foreign visitors."

Connington closed his eyes; he was not going to fool himself believing Jon Snow had stayed the night in a whorehouse. He didn't knock again but reached to open the cell's door with shaking hands. The place was dark and cold, the bed had not been touched, and Connington doubted Jon Snow had even entered in the first place.

"Find the Commander," he ordered without looking at the lad. "Tell him it’s necessary to send a searching party to arrest Jon Snow."

"My Lord?"

"I think he has become a deserter, lad," he explained briefly.

"But-" The squire started to reply, horrified.
"Do as I said!" Connington roared, finally snapping.

"Yes, My Lord." The squire ran towards the entrance of the main keep.

Connington didn't waste another second before walking to the stalls and saddling his horse. He had told the squire to send soldiers after Jon Snow just to cover all the possibilities, but he was fairly certain the bastard had gone directly look for his sister. He only hoped that in all the time he had been missing without them knowing, he had not managed to extract the whole truth from Aegon.

However little hope to contain the situation Connington still harboured, disappeared when he crossed paths with Haldon on the road. The Halfmaester looked exhausted, and his expression twisted into horror when he caught sight of Connington.

"What happened?" He asked, completely aware of his trembling voice as he unhorsed to talk to Haldon who had been travelling by foot.

Haldon shook his head during a full minute before muttering, "We don't know what he did; he won't tell us." The man swallowed. "The girl left," he finished.

Connington didn't need more information to understand that Aegon had told the truth to the Stark girl and what was even worse, he had let her go.

"How long has she been missing?"

"We don't know exactly. At some point in between dinner and dawn," Haldon replied nervously.

"How can you not know?!!" Connington shouted. "Where in the Seven Hells were you when she left?!!"

"We- we were asleep. It was late," stammered the other man. "We didn't know until Lemore found the Prince the kitchen, and with a bleeding nose."

Connington clenched his fist and refrained from punching Haldon. It was not the Halfmaester's fault. If one was going be held responsible for what had happened, it was Connington himself for
trusting Aegon's common sense. He should have known everything was going to fall apart the moment he left the Prince alone.

"Where is he?" Connington managed to utter, suddenly thinking of Rhaegar.

"In the cabin, with Lemore."

Small mercies. At least Aegon had not run after the fucking Stark girl.

Connington looked to the sky. The sun had risen about an hour ago, which meant Arya Stark and her brother had a considerable advantage over them. At this point, there was only one effective way to find them.

"Take the horse, go to the castle," Connington handed the reins to the Halfmaester.

"What for?"

"Find a raven or whatever, contact Varys. His little birds will find them faster than a group of soldiers."

He waited long enough for Haldon to get on the horse before walking towards the cabin. The bells in his head were ringing louder than they had in years.

--

Eddard

"And you, Spider, what do you have for us today?" Robert asked with a grin on his face, ready to laugh. "Which Lord found his Lady wife with the stable boy this time?"
Eddard just averted his stare. He hated the days when Robert attended the Small Council meetings. It was difficult enough to manage the Seven Kingdoms with Mace Tyrell's resentment aimed at him every time or Baelish's cryptic speeches. Having Robert there made it ten times worse; not only did he held no interest in what they discussed but kept interrupting to make some lewd comment or nasty joke, barely related to the subject.

"The Golden Company was sighted near the dornish coast. It is said they have a contract with the Princess of Dorne, Your Grace."

Eddard turned abruptly towards the Master of Whispers. "When did this happen?"

Varys read from the piece of parchment in his hand. "A week ago, Lord Hand."

Eddard shook his head minutely. He had told Robert and the rest of the Small Council they had to intervene in the dispute for the Throne of Dorne and support the rightful heir before the issue became unmanageable. Robert, of course, had said it was none of his business what the dornish wanted to do after the death of Doran Martell and that he was not going to support the enactment of a law that only applied Dorne. Mace Tyrell had said something about dornish scum not being worthy of their time, and even Stannis had said it was the Princess' fault for being away during a crucial moment for her Kingdom.

The Hand of the King looked around the table, expecting some reaction. The mention of the Golden Company produced some concern in the faces of the Council or at least interest in Baelishe's case. They all knew the presence of the sellsword company in Westeros was not to be taken lightly.

"Only the dornish could be stupid enough to make deals with the Golden Company," complained Mace Tyrell.

"We should contact Princess Arianne to confirm this," Eddard said, ignoring the comment, "and offer her the support of the Crown on the condition that she finishes her contract with the Golden Company," he suggested.

"I'm not going to gather an army to grant the rule of a Kingdom to a woman, Ned," Robert buffed and scratched his beard dismissively.
"Still, it is not something we should ignore, Your Grace," Barristan Selmy interceded. "The last time the Realm confronted the Golden Company, there were uncountable loses, your Lord grandfather included."

"If the sellswords stay in Dorne, then that is a problem of the dornish, not of the Crown."

The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard looked at Eddard, silently asking for help. If someone knew what it meant to deal with the infamous sellsword company, it was the white knight.

"We could at least strengthen the frontiers between Dorne and the rest of the Realm, Robert," Eddard tried. He honestly hoped that would be unnecessary, but it was highly possible that the Golden Company had taken advantage of the Princess' situation and inexperience.

"The Others take you, Ned," Robert cursed, "you are such a worrywart. Take care of the frontiers, if that makes you happy, but don't bother me unless the fucking sellswords start marching towards Storm's End." Robert stood up, pushing the table in front of him. "I think that's enough for today." That was Robert's way of dismissing the Council.

"I'll prepare the Royal Fleet," Stannis said as he followed his brother with his stare as the older man exited the room. "Make sure we have enough resources, Baelish," he returned his attention to the rest of the Small Council.

Stannis' words lifted some weight from Eddard's shoulders. Even if they were not friends, he knew he could trust Stannis' sense of duty, most of the time.

"Maester Pycelle, send messages to the Great Houses, explain the situation, ask them to take precautions," Eddard ordered. "I'll write the ones directed to Winterfell and Sunspear personally. Ser Barristan, you have."

"Lord Hand," Varys interrupted him, "perhaps we should wait before alerting the whole Realm. This would only cause panic," the man said rubbing his hands in that way that unnerved Eddard so much.

"It's preferable to not being prepared," replied Baelish, if only to oppose the eunuch.

"Lord Baelish is right," Mace Tyrell agreed. "I'll ask my sons to send patrols to our borders. The
dornish will not take us by surprise."

Eddard ignored Lord Tyrell's pointless comment about the dornish. As Robert's Hand, he had learned to focus on the things he was actually able to solve, and the ancestral rivalry between the Martells and Tyrells was not one of them.

"Thank you, Lord Tyrell," he said before resuming his previous dialogue with the white knight. "You have faced the Golden Company before; I'd like you to prepare a strategy in case an invasion occurs, Ser Barristan."

"It has been many years, Lord Hand, but I'll do what I can."

"We will meet again in two days, my Lords," Eddard dragged the Council to an end.

Eddard and the Maester of Whispers exited the Small Hall together, and Eddard couldn't help feeling the intense stare of the other man on him. It had been five years since he had come to King's Landing, but he still felt extremely uncomfortable when he was close to the man. He felt as if he shouldn't think too loud or the eunuch would read his mind and use his secrets against him.

"Is something wrong, Lord Varys?"

"You are a good man, Lord Hand," Varys said, making Eddard frown as he didn't understand the purpose of such a comment. The Master of Whispers continued speaking before he could say something in reply. "I'm honestly surprised that you have stayed with us during such a long time."

Eddard's frown deepened. Years later, Eddard had stayed at King's Landing out of guilt, because he couldn't forgive himself for splitting his family, and distance offered him some passing sort of peace. But it had been Varys who had convinced him to stay, to take responsibility, he had said, for granting the Iron Throne to Robert. Eddard had done the best he could in that aspect.

"I take my duty to the Realm seriously, Lord Varys. I will stay for as long as the King deems my presence necessary," was the most neutral answer he could think of.

"That is good to know, Lord Hand." Varys started walking ahead of him. "It would be very unfortunate if you were to leave us," he said before he was out of Eddard's earshot.
Eddard stood frozen. He had never been good at understanding the double meaning of what was said in the court, but he could recognize a threat and, for all his skill, Varys had not been very subtle.

After a moment, Eddard resumed his walking. He had letters to write, an impending invasion to contain, and a Throne Room full of grievances waiting to be heard. Death threats were a common thing in King’s Landing, and there were worse things that could happen to him.

Arya

"...sister."

Arya frowned in her slumber; she wanted to stay where she was and ignore whoever was calling her.

"Little sister, we must keep moving," she recognized Jon's voice and remembered where she was, what they were doing. She had to wake up.

"I know," she said, opening her eyes. The first thing she saw was Jon's sad smile, and she wished she could forget her anger and pain if only to avoid causing Jon more distress. "How far are we?"

Jon considered his answer for a minute. "Another day at least, but we should be able to see the Lighthouse soon."

Arya only nodded, disheartened. They had been travelling for five days straight, barely sleeping, stopping only when it was strictly necessary, and she was tired of it. She understood that they have to get as far from Starfall as they could as fast as possible, but every day it became more difficult. She just wanted to find a place to lie down and sleep until she forgot about everything that had happened.
"I know it has been an exhausting journey," Jon offered her a hand to stand up. "You will have plenty of time to rest while I find a proper ship."

Arya felt terrible all over again. "And when will you rest, Jon?"

"I, little sister," he reached to touch her hair softly, "will take time to rest once we get to Essos and you are safe."

Arya's chest constricted at that, for she knew, even if he had not said it, that Jon blamed himself for what had happened. He blamed himself for pursuing Arianne Martell when he should have been watching after Arya, for not realizing they were being conducted into a hideous trap.

"I am with you." Arya took his hand in hers. "I am safe already."

"You know that is not true, little sister," Jon said, averting his eyes.

Arya reached for the side of his face immediately and forced him to meet her stare again. He was not going to allow Jon to keep that state of mind. "What happened- what they did to us was not your fault, Jon," she continued and shivered at the memory of the deceit, the viciousness of it. "They planned it, were waiting for us."

_We didn't stand a chance_, she thought but didn't say, because at least she could have avoided falling for something as stupid as the promise of love.

Jon was staring past her, towards the darkness and still refusing to face her. When he finally looked her in the eye, Arya was surprised at the guilt etched on his face. She could even see tears gathering at the corner of his eyes.

"It is my fault, Arya," he said, voice broken. "I was scared. I didn't know a thing about Essos, didn't know how I was going to take care of you." He stopped to swallow. "When the Magister appeared and offered to send us with them, I was relieved that I wouldn't have to do it alone, even if some part of me told me it was a bad idea."

Arya remained in silence. All of Jon's trouble had started the moment he decided to help her. It had
been because of her that their father had sent him to the Night's Watch; it had been because of her that he had left Westeros, and it had been because of her that the dornish princess had hurt him. But even after five years, he still refused to blame her for any of it.

"And when I knew enough for us to live on our own," he continued, "I refused to leave because I wanted to stay close to her." Jon shook his head. "I'm such a fucking idiot."

"Then I'm a bigger idiot for believing him," she said at last.

"Arya-"

"No, Jon," Arya interrupted him and gave a step back; she was not going to allow him to diminish her mistakes. "I had always known no one would want me, not for me, but I was stupid enough to believe someone like him could actually like who I am." She was shaking, had started to cry at without noticing; the pain and frustration she had been containing were now overflowing.

"Arya!" Jon grabbed her by the shoulders; he no longer seemed sad, but furious. "Don't talk about yourself like that. You-"

"Don't lie to me, Jon! Not now!" She shouted, vaguely remembering they were hiding from the Golden Company. "We both know it's true." She directed her face towards the clearing sky and breathed deeply before continuing, her voice levelled and distant. "Everyone at Winterfell knew," she shook her head and added with a bitter laugh, "no wonder mother was always worried about me." Arya lowered her face to look at Jon again and snorted. "To think that Sansa was always right."

Her tears were now rolling down her cheeks freely, but she didn't care anymore about being weak; she felt too broken to pretend it didn't hurt her.

Jon got closer to her and hugged her tightly. "You worth more than Winterfell, the Stark name, or any of those nonsenses Ladies are supposed to learn. You are smart, strong, and kind and brave," he said as he caressed her hair with tenderness. "And you will find someone, Arya. If that is what you want, you will find someone who will have enough common sense to understand how wonderful you are."

Arya released a shuddering breath and leaned into Jon's embrace. She loved him for his words. Arya knew Jon meant and believed every one of them, but she was done deluding herself. Her past
It had taken them an extra day to get to Oldtown. After Arya's breakdown, they had not been able to advance much that day, but she no longer felt as if she would start to cry anytime. She had had the opportunity to think more clearly about what she had learned. Leaving out her hurt and anger, it was still shocking to understand that the son of Rhaegar Targaryen, who was almost a character from a fairy tale, was alive and planned to reconquer the Seven Kingdoms. It could have been interesting if not for the role she had been supposed to play in all that. Perhaps it had been a source of additional motivation for the Targaryen to know he would take something from Robert Baratheon.

_They can kill each other for all I care_, had been her first conclusion.

Then, however, she thought about the war and the battles and all of the deaths that would entail, and she grew worried. As far as she and Jon knew, their father was still Hand of the King, which meant Winterfell would have to fight to protect the fat drunkard. Their siblings would be in danger if they intervened and worse if the Targaryen won the Throne. Arya wanted desperately to warn her family.

"Is everything all right, little sister?"

Jon was standing by the door of the inn's room, watching Arya. When she didn't answer immediately, he moved to sit by her side near the fireplace, and obviously concerned.

"Arya?" He searched her face.

For a moment, Arya considered not telling him what she had been thinking. After finding each other halfway between Starfall and the damn cabin, they had not talked about the invasion itself, what it meant for Westeros. And even if Arya had made her peace with her feelings for her father, she wasn't sure of how Jon felt about the past. After some consideration, she decided Jon would at least care for their siblings' safety.

"Jon," she started hesitantly, "shouldn't we tell someone about the invasion?"
Jon's eyes widened. "You mean like Robb or father?"

Arya bit her lip, before speaking again. "I know we were not happy with father before we left, but-
"

"I have been thinking the same," Jon blurted as he stared at the fire. "But we can just ask someone
to send a raven with this knowledge."

Arya had not considered they didn't have the means necessary to send the warning. Unlike when
they were at Winterfell, they didn't have free access to a rookery, and it wasn't safe to entrust
someone else, let alone a stranger with such a message.

An idea occurred to her, a tremendously dangerous and stupid one. Given how tense Jon was, it
was possible that he was thinking the same as her.

"What if we didn't go to Essos?" She paused to gather courage. "What if we went home?"

Aegon

"What is it about Stark girls that makes Targaryen lose their minds?" Those were the first words
his uncle directed him.

Aegon looked away. In the past few days, he had heard enough recriminations against his actions.
He had not expected anyone to understand his decision, but he was tired of the preaching. And
dealing with his uncle's acid humour was the last he wanted at the moment.

"Your snide comments don't help us now, Martell."
"Relax, Connington, I'm trying to bond with my nephew." Aegon saw Oberyn Martell casting a side glance at him before speaking again, "I would very much appreciate if you allowed me to speak with him in private."

"I don't see why-"

"Jon, just let him," Ashara, now completely stripped from her persona of Septa Lemore interceded before Connington could finish his protest.

Connington glared, but Oberyn smiled at Ashara. It was a real smile, not a smirk, honest and full of affection. "It is a great pleasure to have you among the living again, Ashara." He leaned in his seat and took her hand to kiss it. "We'll indulge in the past later."

Ashara rolled her eyes at his uncle but smiled in return nonetheless. "I'll be waiting for it." She stood and tugged at Connington's shoulder before giving Aegon an encouraging look that contrasted with the warning present in Connington's eyes.

What does he expect me to do? Thought Aegon, not noticing that his uncle had stood up and had walked to stand in front of him.

When Aegon noticed his presence, Oberyn had extended a hand to take his chin and turn his face towards him. Aegon did his best to hold his uncle's stare, but it was too hard because he didn't want the older man to scrutinize him. Not only did Aegon felt like shit, he knew he looked terrible. That was why they had delayed his introduction to the dornish Lords: Prince Aegon Targaryen couldn't make his first appearance with a purple bruise in the middle of his face.

"I must say, after speaking with Arianne, I expected you to be... different," Oberyn finally said, releasing Aegon's face.

Aegon turned away again. "I'm sorry I came out as a big disappointment," he mumbled.

"I don't think I called you a disappointment, nephew." Oberyn Martell took the chair in which Connington had been sitting, beside Aegon and flopped on it; his elbow is rested on the table and his chin on his hand in a way that reminded Aegon of Arianne. "But you look too much like your royal father for your own good. And the brooding attitude doesn't help."
Aegon didn't answer immediately, not knowing how he was supposed to take that remark. No one had ever suggested before it might not be a good thing to resemble his father.

"Don't repeat that in front of Connington."

Oberyn snorted, "The Silver Prince was far from perfect, in spite of what the gryphon wants to believe."

Aegon was aware of that, had never dared to say it in front of Connington, but it had been, in one way or another, his father's actions that had sparked the Rebellion. And that was bad enough without considering how much he must have hurt and insulted his mother.

Aegon hesitated before asking, "What about my mother?"

"Elia wasn't flawless either," his uncle's expression softened considerably, "but she was close."

Aegon smiled for the first time since he told the truth to Arya. Before everything had gotten complicated, he had expected this meeting, to find out more about a life he hadn't been old enough to remember.

"I know I ruined everything," he said, finally acknowledging he had been acting like a child.

Oberyn Martell reached for the jug of wine and served to cups, offering one to Aegon, but not drinking from his own.

"Don't take to heart what the gryphon tells you; that man was that uptight even back when life went easy on him."

Aegon shook his head. "I gave up the support of the North."

"You can't give up what you don't have, nephew," his uncle snorted. "Even if you had kept the girl with you, I doubt the Stark had supported your cause," he said spitefully. "That man is so stupidly
"Arya said something similar," Aegon said, realizing too late the mention of Arya might bring out unwanted memories for his uncle. "I know she-"

"Dorne doesn't hold anything against Arya Stark," his uncle reassured him. "I must admit I was interested in meeting her," he smirked at Aegon's bruised nose.

Aegon's mood fell again; the worst of that night had not been being hit by Arya but seeing in her eyes how much he had hurt her and failed her. She had left thinking Aegon didn't love her, and he had no way of making that right.

"Can we really win?" Aegon asked, aiming rather clumsily for a change of topic.

Oberyn Martell's expression went dark, fierce. "There is no other possible outcome." Even his tone sounded more severe. "We have enough reasons not to fail, and it has taken us long enough to get where we are."

Aegon thought about the family he never met, of his and Daenerys' exile, of how much Doran Martell had waited, how much he, Connington and Ashara had done for him. Aegon had a purpose, had had it long before he had met Arya, and it was larger than anything he felt for her. He might not want the Iron Throne itself, but he had to make justice.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know whether Oberyn came out right or out of character, but I can picture him at least trying to be reassuring with his beloved sister's son.

Anyway, we can officially start the countdown towards the end: 5 chapters to go. Still hoping I could be faster. Sigh...

Next Chapter: "THE ULTIMATE TREASON"
Bran

The raven had arrived right after sunset when the servants were setting the table for supper. Bran had not paid attention to the black wings themselves, but he had noticed the concerned expression of the Maester of the Castle when he ran through the marble halls to hand in the message to his aunt. Still, it was not until Lysa Arryn summoned him to her private solar, and especially after exchanging a stare with his uncle, that Bran started to worry himself.

Bran's cousin, Robert, was sitting at the head of the table as befitting to his position as Lord of the Vale and looked decidedly uninterested. He had recently turned six and ten, old enough to rule the Vale on his own right, but it was still his mother who made all the crucial decisions and kept the vassals in check.

When Bran entered, Robert made a face at him and turned to his mother beside him, "I don't want Brandon here, mother."
"Sweetrobin," his aunt started, still using the same syrupy tone only meant for her son, "it is necessary that Brandon stays here." His aunt stared at him as if he were responsible for whatever the content of the letter was.

Bran, as he had learned to do since his first days at the Eyrie, tried his best to ignore the interaction between mother and child. Truthfully, Bran was tired of the unwarranted hostility they kept showing him, but that was preferable to going back home and deal with his mother's criticisms after what had transpired with Meera.

"But you said it was a secret, mother. I don't want him to know the secret," he whined.

"Darling-"

"Stop coddling him, Lysa," his uncle interrupted abruptly, "he is the Lord of the Vale, not a toddler."

Robert recoiled at their uncle's tone and sunk in his chair, even Maester Colemon seemed intimidated at Brynden Tully's tone. Meanwhile, Bran shifted uncomfortably in his seat; he couldn't help but feel embarrassed on his cousin's behalf.

"Robert," his aunt's tone was only slightly firmer than before, "we need Brandon to stay here."

Bran considered that as very dangerous news for him, so he remained sitting stiffly in front of his aunt. Perhaps she was finally going to ask him to leave the Eyrie, but that wouldn't explain the presence of the other men in the room.

Once everyone was seated, his aunt spoke again. "This information shall remain a secret between us until we clarify the authenticity of the message," she warned and made a sign to Maester Colemon, after which the man extracted a parchment from his robes and set it on the table.

Bran had to squint but recognized his father's seal on the piece of paper, the one he used as Hand of the King.

"What does the Lord Hand requires from the Vale?" His uncle asked.
"It is a warning, uncle," his aunt clarified. "It is written there that the Seven Kingdoms shall prepare against an invasion from the Golden Company. They landed a few weeks ago somewhere in Dorne."

"I'm too old to fight against those fucking sellswords again!" Brynden Tully cursed, but then paused to think.

"Do I get to call the bannermen, mother?" Robert asked excitedly.

Bran felt a disgusting sensation in his guts. A few years ago, he would have also felt thrilled at the idea of facing one of the most famous sellsword companies in the world and defending the Realm. Now, however, after dealing with the Mountain Clans, he knew invasions were not a path to glory. Men died and the small folk got hurt.

"No, Robin, not yet."

"We have to send word to all the Houses. Why are you wasting time with all this secrecy, Lysa?"

"We have to confirm this information, uncle." His aunt turned and handed him the parchment. "Did your father write this, Brandon?"

Bran examined the letter again, more thoughtfully this time; it was not his father handwriting. "It has his seal," he said instead.

"Did he write it?" His aunt repeated the question.

"It is not his handwriting, but he delegates most of his official missives to a Maester or steward."

"But he didn't write it." She insisted.

"What do you want to hear Lysa?" His uncle interrupted, clearly frustrated. "The Lord Hand must have sent several copies of the same message to different Houses; it would be impossible for him
to write each one of them. It has his seal. What else do you need?"

"A seal can be stolen, uncle."

"Even so, Lysa, which would be the purpose of sending a false warning?"

"I don't trust anything that comes from King's Landing," Lysa Arryn declared.

"You are exaggerating, Lysa, and wasting precious time."

"No, uncle!" His aunt screamed, startling everyone. "I lived in that city. I know what they are capable of."

Bran would have liked to disagree, but he knew there was an alarming amount of truth in his aunt's words. His father had sent him and Sansa away because he thought the court was a dangerous place. He had seen how distrusting his father had become after years of living there. And, even Sansa had confided to him that she, more often than not, feared for the safety of their father and even Queen Margery.

"I'll ask my father to confirm this information," Bran decided, for once, agreeing with his aunt.

"Seriously, Brandon?" His uncle asked incredulously, and Bran could only lower his eyes in response. He didn't like having the man's disappointment directed at him, but that wasn't enough to change his mind.

"Thank you, Brandon," his aunt ignored their uncle, seeming rather pleased with the outcome of their meeting. "I'll advise you to be discreet and not write anything too obvious. I'll also write to Petyr and Robin will decide depending on the responses we receive, uncle."

"Do as you please!" His uncle stood up and stormed out of the room without looking back.

Bran released a long sigh at his uncle's stubbornness. It wouldn't matter how many times they explained the Black Fish why they refused to blindly believe in King's Landing; for him, as an honourable knight, the Hand's seal was enough to give his trust. Bran shook his head one last time
and excused himself from the solar to write to his father.

Both replies came with astonishing speed, both not only confirming that there was no conspiracy behind the warning but also that the Seven Kingdoms were about to suffer an invasion. The Black Fish, of course, was furious at him and his aunt but started to make plans to call the bannermen immediately.

"Gulltown is the perfect place to gather," Brynden Tully explained. "We still don't know where the enemy will launch the first attack, but gathering in a port city will give us the opportunity to send help to any location with more efficiency. We can start by having Robert request his vassals to prepare every available warship."

"Do I get to call the banners now, mother?" Robin brightened at the possibility.

"The Lord of the Vale will call the banners," his aunt Lysa started, nodding at her son, "but the men will remain near the Eyrie and ready to defend their liege Lord."

Bran turned abruptly at her words. "My father said-"

"I read your father's letter, Bradon." His aunt cast him an awful stare. "The Knights of the Vale will stay and defend the Vale."

"Are you planning to ignore the call of the King, Lysa?" His uncle's face had turned red from contained anger. "That is treason."

"The Vale has fought for that fat drunkard thrice already!" Her aunt started shouting. "It doesn't concern us if he can't keep the Realm for more than a few years every time!"

Bran saw the Black Fish clenching his fists and decided to intervene before he too, decided to start shouting and angered his aunt further. "I think I understand what you are saying, aunt Lysa," Bran started hesitantly. "But it would be better to act together. If the Capital were to fall, the rest of the Realm would follow, the Vale and the Eyrie included. We-"
"The Eyrie is impregnable!" Lysa Arryn interrupted him. "If you want to follow your father's instructions, Brandon, you are free to do so." The woman stood up and smirked down at him. "In fact, I think you should return to Winterfell. Given the difficult times ahead of us, dear Cat surely will find reassurance in having you by her side." She turned to face the Black Fish. "As for you, uncle, I'll have to remind you that as Guardian of the Bloody Gate your duty to the Lord of the Vale comes first."

Lysa Arryn walked out of the room with the Lord of the Vale and the Maester of the castle trailing behind her. Meanwhile, Bran and his great uncle were left to share a moment of silent preoccupation. Whatever reasons Bran had had to postpone his return to Winterfell had turned invalid now, he had to find a way to be of help to Robb and his father. The most pressing matter was to inform his father of his aunt's decision, then he would pack up his things and leave as she had requested.

"Brandon?" The Black Fish called when Bran stood; the eyes of the older man were still wide and full of disbelief, face reddened due to the irritation.

"I'm leaving, uncle," he provided in case his intentions didn't seem clear enough.

Brynden Tully stood up slowly. "I think I should leave too."

"You are the guardian of the Bloody Gate."

"Not anymore."

Bran saw the unwavering resolution of the old knight in his eyes. He was the kind of man who didn't allow titles get in the way of his sense of duty. Bran admired him for it and was more than relieved to know he wouldn't be leaving the Vale alone.
Aegon

In a sense, his introduction to the dornish Lords had gone better than expected. Ashara and Arianne had told him about the dornish loyalty and fire, but he had not expected to be received in such a way just because he was the son of Elia Martell. There had been little opposition to their plans of recovering the Iron Throne. In fact, what had caused more trouble had been the presence of the Golden Company and the mistrust their past actions caused. Reaching an agreement between the sellsword company and the dornish Lords had required hours of debate and shouts but both sides had reached a compromise.

However, despite their sympathy for Aegon and his cause and their strong desire to get justice, there was one matter that refrained them from getting into action. While Dorne and the Golden Company alone would be enough to declare war against Robert Baratheon, their numbers were not enough to succeed.

"What are your plans to get more men to join our cause, Your Grace?" Asked Lord Yronwood, who had been the most defiant among the attendants.

During the meeting, Aegon had said almost exclusively what Connington and his uncle had instructed, and he was pretty sure they had told him the answer to that specific question. Yet, when the man asked, all he could think about was Arya and how things had ended between them. He remained silent and sent a pleading stare to Connington, asking for his assistance.

The older man sighed before speaking instead of Aegon: "We have decided to wait until after we have secured Storm's End. A victory like that will show the Lords of Westeros our strength, and the Usurper's enemies will feel more inclined to join us.

"A sensible strategy, Lord Hand," the man nodded in agreement, but Aegon caught a glimpse of malice in his eyes. "Should we expect an alliance with Casterly Rock?" Lord Yronwood looked directly at his uncle.

Aegon fought to school his expression, bracing himself for his uncle's reply. He and Connington had already reached a resolution regarding that matter, knowing Tyrion Lannister was their strongest and most certain ally. There was, however, a great amount of animosity between Sunspear and Casterly Rock due to the role Tywin Lannister had played during the Rebellion, and the role Aegon's uncle had played in the capture of Tywin Lannister and subsequent devastation of the Westernlands. Aegon had been supposed to talk and convince Oberyn Martell to accept the alliance, but that had also been supposed to occur in private, not in front of the war council.
"Considering Tyrion Lannister shares our opinion regarding certain fat drunkard, I would say it would be reasonable to be open to proposing an alliance to him."

Aegon only registered those had been his uncle's words after he was done speaking. He was astounded, although not as much as Lord Yronwood.

"You seem quite confident, Prince Oberyn," Connington, having overcome his surprise was the first to comment.

Aegon's uncle shrugged nonchalantly. "Lord Tyrion and I have been exchanging missives for some time now. We happen to share various interests, including a profound desire for justice," he said and winked at Aegon.

This time, Aegon had not been able to rule his emotions and smiled; Oberyn Martell never ceased to amuse him. The rest of the Lord's restlessness had remained only until his uncle, using his characteristic charm and eloquence, had clarified Tyrion Lannister had barely been a child during the Rebellion and, thus, held no responsibility for his father's actions. By the end of the meeting, even Lord Yronwood had agreed to the alliance and Aegon came to suspect the man had brought up the subject just with the intention to cross his uncle, rather than causing real conflict.

Aegon remained in the Hall with Connington after everyone else had left. There was still much they needed to discuss in private.

"Varys' latest report arrived in the morrow," Connington started with a sigh.

Aegon looked up from the map he was trying to memorize. "Did he- are they bad news?" Aegon asked in the most indifferent tone he could muster, trying to play down how invested he was on Varys' accomplishments.

Connington set aside his own bunch of parchments and studied Aegon's face in silence during a moment. "He had to inform King's Landing about the presence of the Golden Company in Dorne."

"What! Why would he do that?" They rarely understood half of the actions Varys took, but that last one was practically betrayal.

Connington gestured widely with his hands. "He said something about maintaining the trust of the
Council, whatever that means," he muttered.

Aegon narrowed his eyes in suspicion; Connington's reaction didn't match their current predicament. There was something the man was not telling him, and Aegon immediately started to suspect the worse.

"You are taking this rather well, considering how difficult it will be to assault Storm's End if the garrison is expecting the attack."

"You don't need to tell me so, Your Grace, but it's done," Connington replied angrily, though nowhere close to his temper's full strength, which increased Aegon's terrible feeling. "The Spider said he would take care of it, so we better focus on managing your bannermen." The man returned his attention to his parchments.

Now Aegon knew for certain Connington was hiding something, and giving his continuous dismissive attitude, there was only one answer Aegon could think of.

"How?" Aegon managed to get the word past his clenched teeth.

"How what?"

"How is Varys going to take care of it?"

Connington threw the parchment he had been reading on top of the pile. "I don't know, Aegon. Varys doesn't inform me of everything he does."

Is that how you want to do it? Aegon needed answers now.

Aegon straightened, trying to recover at least a part of the confidence and regality he had posed during the council. "Stop lying to me, Connington, or else I'll have to reconsider choosing you as Hand."

Aegon held the older man's stare the best he could, trying his best to keep his act. He didn't like using his Prince persona with Connington, had not wanted to use it, especially when it was just the
two of them. However, he had realized it was the only way in which the other man found the disposition to listen to him. Old Griff had had absolute control over his son's life, while Jon Connington invariably showed deference towards Prince Aegon, son of Rhaegar. Aegon wondered whether his surrogate father was conscious of his change of attitude. Actually, it hurt him to think that after what they had gone through, their relationship was still nothing but an act.

Aegon saw Connington taking a deep breath. "He is planning on informing King's Landing about Arya Stark."

He had been expecting such a reply, but he felt his blood boiling all the same.

"Why wasn't I informed of this?" He almost shouted. "How long have you been aware of her location?" He demanded.

"We don't know where they are."

"Don't dare to even try to lie to me!" This time he shouted, even slammed his palms on the table's surface, which in turn triggered Connington's temper.

"Stop acting like a child and listen to what I'm saying, Aegon!" He ordered, using the same tone he had used over the years whenever Griff had been particularly difficult.

Aegon found some comfort in the other man's reaction. He didn't know if he could keep trusting Connington if the older man continued indulging him just because they had recovered their identities.

Connington waited until they had both calmed down before speaking again. "Varys has not found them. He is planning to spread rumours about her presence in Westeros as a mean to divert the Usurper's attention from the Golden Company."

Aegon fixed his stare on his clenched fists, impotent. "Why can't you leave them alone?" He asked weakly, nauseous because they kept finding ways to exploit Arya and Jon.

"I hold nothing against them, but you are my priority, Aegon." Connington's tone sounded softer and determined at the same time. "And I will use any means necessary to get you to your rightful place."
Aegon closed his eyes, defeated. He had decided to set Arya aside in favour of going for the Iron Throne. That didn't mean he was going to use her as a diversion for the Usurper and her family. Meeting Aegon had already caused her enough pain.

He considered his options briefly before pushing himself away from the table and directing to the door. "From now on, I will open Varys' missives personally," he said on his way out, not waiting for Connington's reply.

It was useless; he wasn't able to stop the eunuch's schemes or offer Arya help. Still, Aegon refused to be deceived again.

---

**Eddard**

Eddard Stark did not remember when was the last time he slept. The Seven Kingdoms were challenging enough even without the imminent threat of a foreign invasion or the spark of a civil war in not one but two of the kingdoms and for two entirely different reasons. And the reluctance of the Great Houses to cooperate was astounding.

The Princess of Dorne politely but firmly declined the help of the Crown and discredited the Council's apprehension regarding the presence of the Golden Company as dangerous. Tyrion Lannister and Robert Arryn refused to move their hosts beyond their borders, and Mace Tyrell had almost started a war against the Florents. It had taken the Queen's help to convince her father to step down, and Stannis' intervention to quiet down Axel Florent's complaints.

And then, there was Varys.

Despite his complicated relationship with the Spider, Eddard had never questioned his ability as
Master of Whispers. He couldn't begin to elucidate how he managed to get his reports and the accuracy of them. For as long as he had known him, the eunuch reported what he gathered from his little birds, but rarely expressed an opinion or tried to meddle in the decision making of the Council. However, ever since the rumours of political instability in Dorne had started to come from several sources, the Spider's competence had decreased on such a scale that even Eddard could notice. Furthermore, he seemed to disagree with almost every decision Eddard made. Robert, of course, had paid no mind to Eddard's worries.

The Hand of the King sighed, trying to focus on the matter at hand. *One step at a time,* he thought.

"Lord Baelish, it would be helpful if you could convince Lord Arryn to relinquish a fraction of his forces," he said. Getting the young Lord's acceptance was a formality; Bran had informed him some men didn't agree with their liege Lord and were ready to join the King's forces. Eddard simply wanted to avoid Lysa's later recriminations. "If we stop the Golden Company's advancements at Dorne, the Vale will itself would remain outside the battles."

"Lord Hand," Baelish started, talking to Eddard as though he was a stubborn child, "I've sent several missives to Lord Robert, but nothing I wrote was enough to change his mind. He has committed himself to the protection of his people."

Eddard contained an exasperated sigh. "This is-

"I might be able to convince Lord Robert if I speak to him in person," interrupted Baelish.

"Then you shall leave immediately," Eddard replied promptly, leaving Baelish speechless.

"Is it wise to send away the Maester of Coin just to get a few more swords, my Lord?" There was Varys, contradicting him again. "Aren't the men we have gathered enough to counter twenty thousand sellswords?"

*What's your deal, Varys?* Eddard grew more suspicious of the man every moment. It was clear he was interfering, but what truly worried Eddard was the obviousness of it. The Spider was trying to elicit a reaction, and Eddard was sure he would fall the moment he entered the eunuch's game. I have to end this, he decided he was tired of waiting and doubting. When the meeting ended, he would think of a way to deal with Varys.

"One can never be too cautious when it comes to the Golden Company," provided Ser Barristan.
"They have an impeccable reputation and fight for a living, while our men have lived in peace almost a decade. Numbers are important."

Varys turned to the white knight. "Ser, I believe-"

"Shut up, Spider! I didn't drink enough to sit through this." Robert waved a hand at the whole Council. "We've been here all fucking morning. Baelish, go get Ned his swords of the Vale. Ned, dismiss this damned meeting already before I piss myself."

"We are done here, my Lords," Eddard, for once, agreed with Robert.

Eddard watched, Baelish, Maester Pycelle and Mace Tyrell, who apparently was still pissed at Ned, leave as he massaged his temples. He really needed to get some sleep. Now that Baelish was on his way to the Vale, and Stannis was gathering the fleet at Dragonstone, he might be able to get some rest.

He didn't even get to stand.

"Your Grace, Lord Hand, there's something we must discuss."

"Whatever it was, you should have mentioned it during the meeting, Varys." Eddard stood.

"You heard the Hand, eunuch."

"It is a private matter, Your Grace, a delicate matter that couldn't be discussed with the whole Council." When that didn't get their interest, the Spider added, "it is about Lady Arya."

Robert actually flinched when he heard the eunuch. Eddard felt his frown deepen; the Others felt his frown deepen; the Others took him, he had never wanted to punch Varys more than at this moment. He risked a glance at Robert, who looked as if he was choking.

"I don't know what you are planning Varys," Eddard said with all the disdain he had been containing for years, "but don't dare to speak the name of my daughter again." He marched towards the door, not even bothering to excuse himself with the King.
"I found her."

Eddard's mind went blank with rage. In an instant, he was pinning Varys to the closest wall, pressing his forearm to the Spider's throat. "You have gone too far, eunuch," he hissed, increasing the strength of his hold while the Spider fought to breathe.

"Lord Hand, you have to calm down." The Lord Commander said somewhere behind him.

Eddard wasn't about to let go of the other man, but he was firmly pulled back by Robert. He had almost forgotten how strong the other man was.

"Come on Ned, we won't get answers if you kill him."

Eddard turned to glare at the King and was shocked to see how dark and deadly his stare was. He had not seen Robert wearing that stare in years, and even then it had only happened on the unfortunate event that someone mentioned Rhaegar.

"Speak now, Spider," the King ordered to the gasping eunuch, "and choose your words well."

"I never stopped-" the man paused and coughed, "never stopped searching for Lady Arya, Your Grace." He rubbed his hands together and stared between Robert and Eddard for a moment. "I received notice of-" there was more coughing "-a young woman who resembled Lady Lyanna walking around Oldtown. It took me some time, but I managed to confirm her identity."

"You overlooked her presence in Oldtown for six years?" Robert growled, and Eddard couldn't believe he had not attacked the eunuch himself already.

"I don't think she was in Oldtown all these years, Your Grace." Varys lowered his gaze. "I suspect he might have taken Lady Arya to the East."

Eddard felt his eyes widening. He knew what Varys was about to say, he had suspected it after receiving notice from Jon running away. He should have strangled the Spider when he had the chance.
Why would you come back, foolish children? Eddard didn't have time to think about anything else.

"What are you saying, Spider?"

"Lord Eddard's bastard, Your Grace, he was seen in the company of Lady Arya."

"Jon Snow left Winterfell with my brother," Eddard said hurriedly.

"But he never made it to the Night's Watch, did he, Lord Hand?" There was no trace of fear or worry on Varys' face anymore, he was completely confident on what he was saying.

This is what he had been waiting for, realized Eddard.

"That doesn't mean anything," Eddard tried to brush it off, wishing he was a better liar.

"I think it is more than a coincidence that they were found together after disappearing around the same time, Lord Eddard."

Robert remained awfully silent for a long time, then turned and walked away from Varys and Eddard. Eddard didn't dare to move, for he wasn't sure what was going on inside Robert's head. He had a good Queen by his side and heirs that were undoubtedly his; perhaps, he had lost interest in Arya long ago.

"Arrange her return to the Capital, Spider," the King said smoothly, and Eddard's hopes vanished. "The bastard will be executed for treason."

No. The air escaped from his chest suddenly. He had kept his promise for years, had lied and hurt Cat; this couldn't be happening now. Eddard tripped over his own feet to catch up with the King.

"Please, don't do it, Robert." Hesitantly, he placed a hand on the King's arm. "I'm sure he didn't do it to offend you. Jon- Jon-" He frantically looked for the words that would convince Robert. "Arya was too young, was terrified at the prospect of becoming Queen and Jon-" Eddard choked as the
name turned into ashes in his mouth; he swore he could smell blood and winter roses. "They were
close; he didn't know better, wanted her to be happy."

'I just wanted her to be happy, Ned,' Ben had told him in between sobs after the war.

"He committed treason," the King said calmly, unnerving Eddard, for he didn't know how to deal
with this Robert.

'Promise me, Ned.'

"I promised his mother I would keep him safe."

Robert snorted. "I always knew you were an honourable fool, Ned, but to go to these lengths to
keep the promise you made to a whore." Robert chuckled. "Let it go, Ned. I'm sure Cat will be
grateful." He patted Eddard on the shoulder and continued his way.

'Promise me, Ned.' Eddard's heart was beating too fast. 'Promise me, Ned.' His breathing was too
shallow. 'Promise me, Ned.' He was not thinking clearly. 'Promise me, Ned.' The smell of blood
and winter roses made him dizzy. 'Promise me, Ned.'

"If you truly loved Lyanna, you will spare his life."

Robert stilled abruptly. "You are not funny, Ned. Don't insult your sister like that," he warned. "If
you want a bastard that much, visit the Street of Silk."

"Jon is Lyanna's son, her flesh and blood." Eddard had not forgotten Lyanna's fear or the bodies of
Rhaenys and Aegon Targaryen wrapped in crimson Lannister cloaks, but he prayed to the Old
Gods for Robert's love to be strong enough.

There was a long, long silence, then, "you hid a dragonspawn from your King," Robert muttered,
and Eddard could have sworn he sounded hurt.

"I saw what they did to the children." Eddard closed his eyes. "They were innocent. Jon is
innocent."
He heard Robert's heavy steps getting closer, and when the sound stopped, he found the King towering over him with hard cold blue eyes.

"He is a fucking Targaryen! The blood of the Mad King!" Robert roared, finally losing his temper. "He is the blood of the man who strangled Brandon and roasted your father alive, have you forgotten?" Robert's face was twisted and red with anger. "He is the blood of the man who asked for our heads on a spike! He is living proof of what Rhaegar did to your sister!"

"He doesn't know," he tried. "He is not like them."

"He is a lot like them, stupid fool," Robert spat with repugnance. "You say they were close? I bet he felt attracted to his sister like all his depraved kin before him." Robert advanced, forcing him to step back more and more. "Have you considered what that dragon shit has been doing to your daughter all these years?"

"Jon would n-"

Eddard's words were silenced when Robert took him by the collar. Right then, Eddard was convinced the King would kill him right there, with his own hands.

"Your Grace, I think you should release Lord Eddard."

Eddard couldn't see past Robert's enormous figure, but he recognized Ser Barristan's voice. They were not alone, the damned Spider had heard everything, and Eddard was a fool. Even if he had managed to convince Robert, now three more people knew about Jon.

Unexpectedly, Robert tossed him aside, his breath still laboured.

"You have betrayed your King." Robert regarded Ser Barristan. "What is the punishment for treason, Selmy?"

"Your Grace, I don't think-"
"Answer the question!"

Barristan directed a pitiful gaze at Eddard. "Death, Your Grace."

Robert nodded.

The Spider looked too pleased with the outcome.

Eddard waited for Robert to summon Ilyn Payne.

"You are my brother, Ned, even more than fucking Renly or Stannis," he mumbled. "You lied for Lya, right?" Robert asked, and for a moment, he looked vulnerable, like the boy at the Eyrie who had just lost his parents.

"I did."

"Bring me the head of the dragonspawn, and we will forget this ever happened."

"Robert, please," he begged.

"Enough!" Robert's voice resounded like thunder inside the Council Room. "In the name of our friendship, for Lyanna, I'll give you one last chance. Throw this back at me, and the whole North will pay for it," he hissed.

Eddard couldn't even utter a reply, for his head was full with Lyanna's reproachful voice.

'You failed me, Ned.'
Sansa

When the Maester of Highgarden finished examining her, Sansa had her worries confirmed: she was with child. The old man had not even uttered a word; his disquieted expression, one that matched Sansa's, was all the proof she needed. She swallowed with some difficulty and had to clear her throat a couple of times before she was able to thank the Maester for his services.

"Should I inform Lord Willas, my Lady?" the man asked cautiously from the threshold.

Sansa almost winced at the mention of her husband but managed to ignore the sensation to answer in the most solemn tone she was able to muster at the moment.

"I'll talk to Willas personally, Maester."

The man nodded politely and retreated, while Sansa was left alone to wonder how she was going to deliver the news to her husband. She placed her hand over her still flat belly, resentful at the unfortunate timing. She knew the child she was carrying deserved much better thoughts, but their current circumstances were less than ideal, and she knew her husband would be, if possible, more frightened than her.

Sansa breathed deeply a couple of times, reminding herself that the best thing she could do for Willas at the moment, was to remain calm. She then schooled her expression into one of composure and directed her steps toward the library, where Willas used to seclude himself whenever he had a lot to think about.

She found her husband sitting on the windowsill that looked over the stalls and his carefully bred horses, his face relaxed. Sansa hated she would shatter this rare moment of peace, a privilege he had not been able to enjoy lately. Her heart broke even further when Willas noticed her presence and smiled sweetly at her, moving immediately to allow her to sit by his side. Sansa forced herself to smile before taking the offered seat.

"Do you think she'll like it?"
"What did you get her this time, Willas?" She asked, torn between amusement and exasperation. Sansa found immensely endearing that Willas was so fascinated with Valerie, but she didn't want him spoiling her.

Willas' smile brightened, and she allowed herself to forget why she needed to talk to him for a moment. Sansa looked out the window toward the place Willas was pointing; she had to search a moment before understanding what she was supposed to see, a pony.

"Valerie doesn't need a horse."

"It's a pony, my Lady." She turned to her husband, directing him a stare Willas affirmed she could only have learned from Lady Olenna. "She will need a good mount soon."

"She isn't even three, Willas; she is too young to ride anything."

"I introduced her to Aster the other day, and she loved him." Willas took her hand in his. "Mayhaps, she could be as good as your sister."

Sansa's heart melted at her husband's thoughtfulness. Of all the people that had surrounded her ever since she arrived at Highgarden, Willas was the only one who hadn't try to force Sansa to renounce to her memories of Arya. Maybe because, in some way, he had also lost his sister to Robert Baratheon, but he had always listened to her stories and regrets regarding Arya.

"I think that would be lovely, Willas."

They remained in silence for a while, staring outside the window, until Sansa decided she couldn't wait any longer.

"I spoke to the Maester," she started, eyes still fixed on the window. "He confirmed I'm with child."

She made a pause, considering how to proceed when she felt Willas' arms surrounding her. "Those are marvellous news, Sansa."
Sansa had to break his embrace to search his eyes; his reaction was nothing like she had expected. "I thought you wouldn't be pleased," she admitted.

Willas' face softened as he cupped her face. "Why wouldn't I be pleased, my love? You have considerably improved my day."

"This is hardly the right time."

At that, Willas removed his hand and sighed. "I never meant to worry you, Sansa." He looked away from her, ashamed. "Things shouldn't have gone the way they did, but-" he clenched his fists before turning to face her again, "we have reached an agreement. Everything will be fine now. I promise."

"An agreement?" It was the first time she heard about it.

"Axel Florent isn't asking for Garlan's head now that his son recovered, and mother promised to cease her accusations against Lady Selyse.

Sansa nodded. "How is Lady Leonette?"

"Sad, of course, but healthy according to Maester Lomys. He says she can still bear a strong child."

"That is wonderful." Sansa smiled and thanked the Seven for Lady Leonette.

She excused herself shortly after, to take care of Valerie and to think about the arrangement Willas had mentioned.

Sansa wasn't convinced it was that easy. Late Lady Olenna had taught her the ways of the southern court, and she found difficult to believe Garlan's confrontation with Alekyne Florent could be settled that easily. Not with Lord Mace using Margaery's good behaviour as Queen to extracting favours from King Robert. Sansa thanked the Old Gods for the fact that the King still listened to her father's advice over anyone else's. He had managed to stop the King from starting a war among the Houses of the Reach by granting the Florent's castle to Garlan. However, that had not stopped Lady Selyse from claiming she would get justice from her family with the help of a Red Priestess
she had received at Dragonstone. And though there was no proof that the Red Woman's magic had caused Lady Leonette's miscarriage, the idea made Sansa fear for the safety of her children. She wanted to believe Willas' words, but she couldn't get rid of the ominous feeling that something disastrous was about to happen.

A fortnight later, something disastrous indeed happened. Something completely unrelated to Sansa's fears, but way worse.

One of the guards knocked on the door of the chamber she shared with Willas in the middle of the night. The knocking and the frantic voice of the other man startled Sansa awake, and she would have run straight to Valerie's nursery if Willas had not caught hold of her. Her husband spoke with the guard in whispers before ordering him to escort Sansa to the nursery and assuring her they were not in danger, that he would find her as soon as he solved the situation.

Sansa's only source of comfort as she waited was her daughter's regular breathing, but she kept imagining one worse scenario after another. Had Axel Florent decided to attack Highgarden? Had the Red Woman sent some kind of magic to hurt them? Had the Golden Company trespassed the Reach's border? She had almost forgotten about the dornish civil war and the sellsword invasion. She hated not knowing. Lady Olenna had told her she always had to know.

Sansa waited for what seemed hours, and it was almost dawn by the time Loras entered the nursery with Valerie's wet nurse in tow, telling Sansa Willas was waiting for her in his solar.

"What happened, brother?" She asked, trying to keep up with Loras' long strides.

The knight's face betrayed nothing when he answered. "A group of mercenaries brought two prisoners."

The concise reply only confused her more. The mercenaries could belong to the Golden Company, but that didn't explain why Willas required her presence or who the prisoners were. Had Willas hired sellswords to deal with the Florents? She didn't dare to ask more questions because she wasn't sure she would like the answers.

Two guards posted at the solar's entrance let them pass without question. The room was almost completely dark, save for the lamp on Willas' desk.
Sansa recognized her husband's voice, but it took some time for her eyes to adjust in the dark and being able to see him. She kept walking, almost cautiously, and noticed the other person sitting across from him. Whoever it was, didn't move or speak after Willas had finished, and the silence, combined with the unkempt appearance of the stranger, made Sansa shiver. She saw Willas hold the stranger's stare, then sigh after the silence prolonged. When he looked away, he finally noticed Sansa's presence. He opened his mouth to say something, but Sansa spoke first.

"Who is this, Willas?"

Sansa's voice, unlike Willas' attempts, seemed to extract a reaction from the stranger, who stood abruptly and turned slowly to face her. Sansa gave half a step back and froze as soon as she found herself face to face with another woman.

The room was dark, the woman was wearing foreign clothes, her skin was tanned and her hair short, and it had been years, too many years, but she would have recognized those dark eyes anywhere. Sansa covered her mouth with her hands for a second before moving forward to hug her sister as she had never done before. Arya was as tall as Sansa and probably had not bathed in days, but it didn't matter. Sansa had prayed to the Old Gods and the New for this. She had promised she would be a better sister if she was ever given the chance.

"Oh, thank the Mother," Sansa whispered, giving a step back. "I'll have a bath and clean clothes prepared for you."

She moved, decided to take Arya with her. Arya, however, didn't move, barely reacted at all.

"Could you tell your husband to take Jon out of the cells?" Arya finally spoke, her tone completely flat; staring into the nothingness.

"Jon?"

Willas stood from behind his desk. "Lady Arya was found in the company of your bastard brother."
Somehow, that statement didn’t surprise Sansa. "Why is he in a cell?"

"He didn't do anything wrong," Arya muttered, and Sansa could hear the anger in her voice.

"Willas?" Sansa turned to her husband.

He averted his eyes. "We imprisoned him under the King's orders."

"What are his crimes?" Sansa asked, trying to ignore Arya's increasing breathing.

"He kidnapped Lady Arya when she was the King's betrothed."

*The King will execute him,* Sansa realized.

"Jon didn't kidnap me!" Arya shouted, slamming her hands on the desk. "I've told you, stupid cripple, that I ran away!"

For a moment, it seemed Arya would attack Willas, but Loras stepped out from the darkness behind Sansa and held her by the shoulder. Arya kept shouting but barely struggled in the knight's hold; she looked so weak and thin.

"Loras," Willas asked, "Lady Arya's accommodations must be ready. Please escort her there."

Arya seemed to deflate after that, allowing Loras to stir her towards the exit. Before leaving, Arya directed a tearful, pleading stare at Sansa.

"You know it wasn't him, Sansa," she said.

Sansa couldn't reply; she was exhausted, having gone from the fear of an invasion to the surprise of having Arya back, to the worry of what the King would do. She didn't notice she was trembling until Willas came to her and made her sit right where Arya had been moments before.
"What will happen to Arya?" She had no doubt of what would happen to Jon, even if his treason had been out of love for their sister.

Willas rubbed his face. "The King has arranged her safe return to King's Landing. She will return to your father's protection."

_The King wants Arya as his mistress._ Sansa was sure her father wouldn't allow it; the problem would be the King's retaliation. And Lord Tyrell would certainly consider Arya a threat to Margaery's crown.

Sansa observed her husband silently. Was he aware of what was about to happen?

'Men believe what they want to believe, Winter Rose. It is our duty to see the greater picture and guide them in the right direction.'

Lady Olenna had taught her methods to Sansa. However, after the old Lady's death, she had not made use of that knowledge, had trusted Willas' judgement almost blindly. After all, Willas was nothing like King Robert or Lord Mace; Sansa had no need to _guide_ him. It was only now that it occurred her that if she had taken a more active role in Willas' actions, had not chosen to remain oblivious, she could have prevented the issue with the Florents from escalating.

Sansa decided she couldn't make the same mistake twice.

Chapter End Notes

I think you should know it was the idea of this chapter that gave birth to Promise Me, specifically the scene between Robert and Eddard. I hope it turned out as good as it was in my mind because it took me ages to finish it.

4 more chapters till the end. At this rate, I'll finish by 2024, but I won't surrender. Please leave a comment or two or ten. I'm dying to read your feedback.

Finally, Next chapter: "WHERE LOYALTY LIES"
Thanks for reading.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!