The Powers That Be

by solitariusvirtus

Summary

Beleaguered father, Aerys Targaryen tries his best not to lose his temper in the face of the disaster that is Westerosi politics with the involvement of his children. Far be it from him to protest their hearts' desire, and yet protest he must when they set the realm on a path to destruction. His trusted sister-wife is there to help every step of the way.

AU! Westeros if all the dragon's children had survived. When one has so many princes to pick from, the one that was promised is a bit harder to find than expected.
Wollt ihr hören nun mein Lied,
viel kann ich euch sagen

Von der großen güldnen Zeit,
von Altvätertagen

Brynhild sitzt im hohen Saal,
strahlend dort vor allen

Keiner kann der stolzen Frau
als Freier wohl gefallen (...)

“Husband, I am begging you,” Rhaella pleaded with him, trying to come between him and their second-born. Rhaegar was still standing in the doorway, stone still. But Baelor was making matters all the more difficult. “Apologise to your father and brother right now,” she demanded of the boy. “And you as well, Shaena. This behaviour is beneath you.” Her daughter held up her chin with some difficulty. The defiance in her eyes did not weaver.

“If my brother wants her, then he shall have to fight me for her,” the child replied resolutely just as Aerys broke her hold on his arm. Her husband caught their son by the collar of his tunic and brought
his other hand flat across Baelor’s cheek. Shaena cried out.

But instead of pleading with father, she addressed Rhaegar. “Brother please, stop him. Please, for my sake, for the sake of your niece or nephew.” The words caused Rhaella a moment of panic. She gaped at Shaena. The girl cupped her middle pathetically, the protective stance only adding to the unbelievable reality.

Close to her as he was, Aerys’ anger turned upon his daughter, hand shooting out just as he hissed, “What did you say?” Before he could touch her, however, both her brother jumped into action, one pushing forth, the other pulling back. Rhaella closed her eyes against the stab of pain which took her over.

Where had they gone wrong? This was supposed to be perfect, to right all the wrongs, bring the realm together. And they had failed once more. “Don’t, father,” she heard the voice of her eldest son. “What’s done is done and,” he trailed off. The mother opened her eyes, trying to understand his pause. Rhaegar let go of Aerys and straightened himself. “It is late. Causing a fuss will only call attention to the situation.”

Ever pragmatic, her eldest saw himself without despite his sister’s attempt to call back his attention. Rhaella followed, leaving Aerys to speak with the two. She wished to see the comfort of the one child who was blameless in the situation.

Aenar stood against the wall, still folding a flickering candle between his fingers. He bowed his head as his brother passed him by. Undoubtedly he still suffered under the effects of his ill-timed confession and the guilt stemming from not having done so at an earlier time. Rhaella drew in a sharp breath and approached the child – he was still her son despite the moment of weakness and his pain was hers too. And yet what to say to him. “You ought to go sleep. We shall discuss the matter come morning.” He hesitated, lanky frame moving slightly in his indecision. For a moment compassion gave her pause, until she heard the footsteps of her other son. Resolve hardening, she repeated her request. “Aenar, go.” He nodded. Rhaella did not wait to see him carry it out.

She ran after Rhaegar, catching up to him. Rhaella caught him by the sleeve and halted his footfall. “My son,” she said softly when he did not turn towards her. Rhaegar simply stood there, facing the wall, an uncomfortable silence between them. “Do not carry anger in your heart towards them.” She asked it of him as mother to all of them. “They don’t know any better.”

“Apparently they knew well enough what to do to shame me,” he replied tersely. “And father. And grandfather. Have you considered what we will say to Lord Stark now? Something along the lines of, we are deeply regretful to inform you that Prince Baelor will no longer to able to wed your daughter. I am certain his lordship will be all kindness and understanding.”

“We can find a solution, Rhaegar. This needs not hamper our plans for the realm.” She placed one hand on his cheek, silently willing him to face her. “There are brews and the servants are loyal. We will keep this quiet.”

He let out a low chuckle. “You would be willing to take the risk?” he demanded, just then turning his head. “What if this child is the one? Would you willingly kill it before we even know?” She’s not thought of that. “And even if you did, lady mother, it would help me naught. Shaena has proven herself willing enough to go along with my brother. I would not have her even at the King’s request.”

There was no reason in keep him any further. “We will find a solution together,” she promised, releasing him. What had possessed those two to bring havoc upon them all, she wondered as she watched her oldest son depart further down the hall, muttering to himself unintelligible words. Why
her Shaena, who had until this point been a good, obedient daughter? And how had she missed it?

Rhaella has spent so much of her time encouraging her children to find affection elsewhere. Her and Aerys had gone so far as to send the boys squiring in the house of their prospective spouse’s family. Rhaegar and Shaena were supposed to be the exception. The witch had promised them the prince that was promised. That had been the sole reason for which she and Aerys had sacrificed what could have been some great alliances, trying to make do with lesser ones, only for Baelor to destroy all their hard work.

She did not even have the energy to be angry at the boy.

Turning around she caught sight of her husband approaching. Baelor walked behind him, his cheek an angry red. Aerys sent him off to his bedchamber with a few choice words. He then turned towards her. “How could you allow this to happen?” the question was quiet, sounding as tired as she felt.

“I did not know. Do you truly think I would have allowed him anywhere near her?” He sighed, brushing a hand over his face. “We have to go to the King.”

“Nay. We should decide this amongst ourselves. Go to him with a solution at least.” Rhaella nodded at those words. Aerys took her hand and placed it atop of his. “Two moon turns. We should not have called him from Winterfell.”

“Who could have imagined?” she offered uncertainly. They’d showed so very little signs. Nothing suspicious had ever passed between them before her eyes. “Rhaegar will not have her under any circumstances now.”

“And neither should he. If our daughter thinks so little of the position afforded to her, the she does not deserve it after all.” Rhaella grimaced. He softened. “If we allow this to go unpunished we make a statement. One which will offend House Stark.”

The North was not to be trifled with, she understood, but even so, what would he have them do? “This child might be the prince we’ve been waiting for. Aerys, we must persevere. House Stark shall have to be pleased another way. We have sons, if not even Velaena could wed one of Lord Stark’s sons.”

“Aye, we have Daeron, who is not fit to wed anyone and then the babes. Which one should we sent to the wolves?” His anger elicited a glare from her. She was trying. Aerys licked his lips and heaved a second sigh. “I am sorry. The anger has yet to leave me. You know very well Daeron would shame us. As for Gaemon, Aegon and Jaehaerys, they are a risk.”

“If he goes unsatisfied our trade could fall apart. It shall have to be Velaena. If they wed by proxy, they need not worry over the matter any longer.” There was only one small detail, of course, that she had willfully ignored. Her husband gave her a dry look.

“If we lose House Royce, we will have no one to oppose Arryn. If ‘tis only the threadbare Arryn-Tully-Stark alliance we can rely on, then the Father knows how this will end. Velaena must go to House Royce. If all negotiation with House Stark fall through you can expect a reaction from Arryn and Tully. Royce is indispensable.”

“That leaves us with only one choice,” she pointed out uncomfortably. “There will be talk. The court will speculate.”

“Do you think the court will keep quiet when your daughter is as big as a house?” he snapped yet
again. There was no pleasing the man. “Do you think for one moment she has not made us a laughingstock?”

“I believe Shaena is young and foolish and has landed us in a difficult situation,” she answered calmly. “We can yell at one another, husband, or we can try to find a solution. The choice is yours.” He was still so much of a child at times. “Rhaegar knows his duty, thanks the gods. And House Stark will have a trade up.”

“Aye, and Lord Rickard shall demand even higher a position at my court,” Aerys grumbled. “As if that will help a house that has shown little interest until now.”

“Tywin will balance him.” Aerys flashed her a moody look at the mention of his companion. Rhaella raised one eye-brow. “He is still getting a Prince, is he not?”

“Not the Prince he wished for, thanked be the gods.”

Aenar sat down next to him, light-violet eyes fixed upon his face. “I truly did not think they would go through with it.” The excuse sounded weak. His brother bit into a full lower lip. “But you said it yourself, what’s done is done. Shaena would speak to you.”

He threw his brother an empty stare. If Shaena wanted to have words, she ought to gather her courage, for obviously she had enough of it, and come seek him out, not send their hapless sibling to track him down. Disappointed, Rhaegar returned his attention to the scroll. It seemed to him that if he read the blasted prophecy enough times the situation would return to normal. Was that too much to ask? “Rhaegar, I know you are upset—”

“I am not upset,” he cut Aenar off. “Upset,” Rhaegar scoffed. “I am upset when my horse throws a shoe. I am upset when a string breaks on my harp. I am upset when I’m caught in the downpour.” His brother blinked slowly, the silent encouragement not lost of him. “Why would I be upset at those
close to me betraying everything we stand for? Nay, I am not upset. I am livid.”

“I can tell.” Aenar placed a hand on his shoulder. “But Shaena and Baelor have always been close. You knew that.” He had known; but he had thought they knew better than to giver in. “You could have insisted on wedding her when she flowered.”

Might be he should have. Rhaegar leaned back in his seat. “She wanted time.” Had he known what the time would be used for, he would have dragged her to the nearest sept. “How is this Lady Lyanna?” At Aenar’s startled look he shook his head. “What, did you believe there would be no repercussions.”

“I would hesitate to call wedding Lyanna Stark a repercussion. She did throw lettuce leaves at me over the table though, so I’d not put greenery on her plate at the wedding feast if I were you.” How comforting a vision. Rhaegar closed his eyes in annoyance. “Come now, she was barely a decade old or so.”

“That’s old enough to know one’s manners,” he answered. “So she is a messy eater. What else?” He could lock her in a room all of her own. It was not necessary that he attend her while she ate.

“I did not say she is a messy eater,” Aenar protested. “Devious, might be. But you know, she always seemed exceedingly fond of Baelor.” He nodded his head. “This shall likely cause her some discomfort.”

Aye, poor Lady Lyanna who would be elevated to the position of wife to the Crown Prince. “My heart weeps for her,” Rhaegar deadpanned. Never mind that all his plans had crumbled in a pile of ash. Nay, what truly mattered was that his siblings and Lady Lyanna would have to face some discomfort. At least with the lady he could afford to show some sympathy; she had likely not known what his brother planned.

“It should weep for Baelor when she puts her hands on him. I’ve seen her with a sword in hand.” Aenar was trying to cheer him up some, Rhaegar understood. And yet even the image of a women-child chasing Baelor about with a practice sword did not lift his spirits. “Have you considered that this is the will of the Seven? Might be Lady Lyanna is the just the person you need.”

“Certainly, if we are to avoid a conflict with House Stark.” At the very least he hoped the girl could keep from throwing food around the table. “Shall you tell me something useful about her or do I need to ask the Spider?”

“Varys would likely not know of whom you speak,” Aenar chuckled. “I will tell you that she is daring and unremorseful and she cheats at cards. Took thirty coppers off of Baelor when they played. At the very least she would be an asset during any negotiation with the Iron Bank.”

“The more I hear about her the more my heart falls under her spell. These are just the words a man wants to hear. Are you certain it’s only cheating? Might be she steals as well.” His brother laughed. Rhaegar was decidedly less amused.

“No stealing. I think it has to do with her being competitive. And Baelor was forever goading her. To be perfectly honest, I would have cheated him out of a fortune had I been in her stead. I liked her well enough, brother, and I am certain you shall too as long as you remember to try to know her.” Aenar pulled back slightly, threading fingers through his hair. “I took a few lessons with her, you know, she is not dull, nor lazy. It might be that compared to Shaena she is less polished, but she can learn. That at least should make matters easier.”

“Then you can have her and I shall wed Cersei Lannister,” Rhaegar suggested just to needle his
younger sibling. He could tell when someone was selling him something. “That ought to be a better outcome.”

“I shall be very cross with you if you do try, but I doubt Cersei would abandon me for you.” And he doubted Aenar would allow anything of the sort as well. He truly was taken with Lord Lannister’s daughter. The misfortune of an honest woman, Rhaegar truly felt for his brother. “Besides, father would rather take himself off to the ruins of the Lord Darklyn’s keep and sleep there a fortnight than allow it.”

“A pity.” It seemed he would have to learn to avoid lettuce at the dinner table and interdict cards. Lady Lyanna was already proving herself the very best sort of company. “Is there naught else you would have me know?”

“About Cersei?” Aenar questioned, slightly confused. Leave his brother for a few moments and his thoughts drifted to Casterly Rock.

“Since I am planning to steal her from you,” he responded easily, trailing off with a shrug.

“That sounds perfectly reasonable,” Old Aegon said, eyes drifting towards the window. “And now you see why I insisted you wed them all before long.” His melancholy mood seemed to dominate the chamber. Despite the sunlight streaming within, the desolate feeling hampered any sort of relief. “I say we send Velaena to Lord Royce now.”

“If we do so, we signal that aught is wrong, Your Majesty,” Aerys could not help but contradict. Rhaella nudged him lightly. He nudged her back. “It would be better to wait until the tourney, or even after. Once the matter with House Stark has been settled.” The Wolf, Aerys dared think, would be more eager for position than he would be for revenge, more so if he proposed his daughter wed the man who would soon be Crown Prince. It was only a matter of presenting it as a choice. “After we have secured the North we can move to the Vale.”
“If you believe so,” the King allowed. He’d lost much of his interest in running the realm after the death of his beloved lady wife. While Aerys had some sympathy for that, he had little patience for games.

“Your Grace, if you have another suggestion, we shall follow it.” The scroll he’d placed before the King was still unsigned. “Just say the word, dear grandfather.” If he ever became so dodged in his old age, he certainly hoped someone would do him the service of feeding him Nightshade. Rhaella caught his hand underneath the table, squeezing it in warning. Why couldn’t he simply demand the old codger sign the damned thing?

“I suppose not,” the old man sighed, lifting his quill with affected difficulty. If he was so eager to die, Aerys would gladly aid him. The King signed at long last just when Rhaella’s clasp was becoming iron.

After that, the road became much easier. Smooth sailing, as it were. Aerys snatched his prize and hid it away, bowing to the King. His lady wife curtsied, having let go of his hand. Praise the Father, it would be too much to endure scrutiny over that.

Together, he and she, made their way without. “Eight children. Eight. Each more troublesome than the other. I swear, Rhaella, if they were not mine, I’d send them all up the Trident. The very thought that I still have three to wed off is nothing short of horrifying.”

“What a horrible thing to say,” his sister laughed. “Instead of being grateful to the gods.”

“I will be grateful to the gods when I’m no longer awoken from my sleep in the middle of the night by a swarm of infants running along the corridors.” Rhaella hid a smile beneath her palm. “Admit it, you agree.”

“It will be nice to have you all to myself once you are no longer needed to chase off night terrors.” He grinned at that, pride swelling in his breast.

“Eight, Rhaella, eight of them in all and I’ve been chasing off night terrors for the past twenty odd years. Eight weddings. Horrible.”

Chapter End Notes

Great. Now I finally get why Brynhild is pronounced Brünhild. Don't I feel stupid...lolm
El Sueño De La Hija Del Rey

M’apari a la puerta vide la luna entera
M’apari a la ventana vide la estrella Diana
M’apari al pozo vide un pilar de oro
Con tres paxaricos picando el oro

La luna entera es la tu suegra
La estrella Diana es la tu cuñada
Los tres paxaricos son tus cuñadicos
Y el pilar de oro el hijo del rey tu novio

Lyanna smiled benignly down at the boy helping her from the wheelhouse. His hand was trembling. She smothered a sigh and silently thanked her lady mother for the last minute talk. She was not certain how she would have weathered through this horrid reception otherwise. It was those knowing looks that needles her for the most part. Those lord and ladies gazing at her, trying to figure out what had driven the Prince away, what had pushed him into the arms of another. What in the seven hells was so wrong with Lady Lyanna Stark that the man would rather risk his neck by stealing his brother’s bride?
Forcing her back into a straight line she swept her gaze over the gathering. Baelor stood out to her. Aenar she knew as well. But Lyanna did not linger, upon the first for shame and anger consumed her, and the latter because she had a need to see the man she’d wed rather than the one who’d be her good-brother.

Rhaegar Targaryen she found standing by his father’s side, close to his grandfather. A dragon through and through, she thought as her eyes took in the details, a small smile forcing its way across her lips. There was no denying that he was handsome. Even better looking than Robert Baratheon and the gods knew that man could turn a woman’s head like no other.

The King approached, his gait slow. Her father stepped forth as well, bowing. She curtsied easily at her mother’s side and blinked unrepentantly all through the greetings, tuning out every last word. She was much too busy watching her soon to be spouse. He’s lingered back, keeping company with his own family. But he was watching her back. Unfortunately, the distance between them made it nigh impossible to guess as to whether he was displeased or not. Nevertheless before long she was upon Brandon’s arm and approaching the Crown Prince.

Aerys Targaryen seized her up. He’d never seen her, she recalled, excepting a Lysene miniature her father had had commissioned and sent to court. Lyanna curtsied, inclining her head in show of modesty at his mundane questions. She answered with feigned placidity, eyes darting between him and his oldest son. But the young man asked naught of her thus she could not speak to him. Lyanna swallowed her disappointment as they were led within the keep. She’d wondered if she might catch a moment to make her request.

Back at her mother’s side, she leaned her head in to hear the woman speak. “Remember, my sweet girl, keep a pleasant air about you and act as though no one were watching. Their attention will fade with time.” Not fast enough for her liking. Still, she nodded resignedly and occupied her seat at the high table where they were led. It was to be but a short announcement of her betrothal to the Crown Prince, following which the King would let all and sundry know the wedding was close to follow.

She bore the stares with the most subtle smile she’d ever managed to produce and hoped naught would show to them she was merely acting her way through a rehearsed scene. How many times had mother admonished her? Lyanna glanced once more towards the eldest Prince. He gazed back at her with something akin to suspicion.

But soon after it was over and she was led to her own bedchamber. The servant girl she’d brought along from Winterfell laid out dressed upon the bed, chatting amiably as Lyanna inspected them. “This one shall make your eyes stand out,” she gestured to the ever so delicately embroidered first choice. “But this one is far lovelier. And costlier.”

Which was better? To be thought desperate or a snob? Lyanna laughed to herself and considered her options. “I know not. Might be I should allow you to choose.”

The servant girl tasked softly. “Spilled milk is not worth weeping over,” she advised, holding up the first of the dresses. She placed it gingerly in Lyanna’s arms. “His Grace is a good-looking man,” she ventured unabashedly, giving her a wink to go with the sentiment.

For a brief moment, Lyanna thought the girl spoke of Baelor and her stomach squeezed painfully. Until she realised it was Rhaegar who benefitted from the appreciation. “Aye. The gods have blessed him.” And her, one might suppose. It was certainly a face one would not mind waking to. If, of course, this husband did not jilt her as well. The thought gave her pause.

He was to have wedded his own sister. Surely a man would not act in such a manner unless he was in love. The ruling house kept strange rules, and yet she could not imagine anyone might enter that
manner of union without some affection to justify it. The sourness returned. “Missy, do you think—“ Thankfully she stopped herself before she could burden a servant with such thoughts.

But Missy, who must have guessed where the pain had gathered, closed her trunk with a sharp sound and came to tower over her. “Doubt does not suit you, my lady. Is it right for a maiden to cause herself grief for the blindness of fools?”

“Hush,” she forced out. “If someone were to hear, ‘twould end badly.” No matter how she’d been put off by the rejection, Lyanna did not wish to make the blot even worse.

“He ought to have known better than to lie stones in your path,” the servant girl muttered nonetheless, helping Lyanna with the preparations. She accepted the words with a shrug and made no more fuss upon the matter. Bad enough that those below would talk long and hard about it. And damn Baelor for his monumental stupidity. Before his own brother’s wedding too. If she didn’t know any better she’d think he had wished to shame her and his own kin beyond what ought to be permitted.

A knock on the door cut into those musings. “Enter,” she called, thinking it might be one of the other servants come to bring food or word or some such occasion prompting the knocking.

But no servant stood in her doorway when she turned. To her great distress, it was Baelor himself who greeted her with an appropriately apologetic look. Steeling her heart against any shred of pity, she stepped towards him with a glare. “Your Grace, ‘tis most inappropriate of you to have come here. Pray leave.”

A sad smile crossed his lips. “Is that what is to become of us, Lya? You’ve been like a sister to me.” Bristling at the words, she closed her eyes to regain her bearings. “A sister? I think not. I’ve seen what you do to your sisters.” His flinch was almost palpable. “And do not call me by such a name. I am to be the wife of your eldest brother. I deserve your respect.”

“Lyanna, I pray you—” His mouth snapped shut at the glare she shot his way.

“I am ‘my lady’ to you, Your Grace. Calling me in any other manner would be distasteful at this point.” Blood roared within her, covering even the words he spoke. She had to struggle to figure his speech out.

“As you wish then, lady. I came to apologise. I truly am sorry to have caused you distress.” It would be so easy to laugh his apology off. To send him on his way with a strung of curses or even a sharp object. But she had no need to be petty, though she might wish it.

Inclining her head, she spoke. “Much obliged for your kindness, Your Grace. Your apology is accepted. In truth, I suppose I ought to give my thanks. I am now to be mother to some future king.” She laughed mirthlessly.

Lyanna had never entertained any manner of ardent affection for her betrothed. As she gazed at him, it was not her heart that protested his presence, but her mind, rallying furiously at his daring. As if his apology would fix her pride. “I understand I should congratulate Your Grace as well.”


“Indeed. Some would say much too fast. If I may be excused, I must prepare for the feast.” She saw the moment he realised he’d overstayed his welcome. Baelor bowed stiffly to her, the easy manner of the past seeming but a dream, and took his leave with a murmur. She did not care that she’d mollified
him. Lyanna turned back towards Missy. The servant girl shook her head.

“You did well, my lady, no need for despondency.” It was all she said upon the matter before returning to the matter of preparations. “We shall make sure you outshine each and every lady present.” Lyanna certainly hoped so. It was her only change to live through the embarrassment.

Missy moved away from her detailing with much vigour the plans she had.

Rhaegar paused as she gazed into his eyes, the plea behind her orbs sincere. “It would be best to settle upon a firm understanding of what this marriage entails,” Lady Lyanna continued to his great shock. Aenar had done her little justice. “And if Your Grace thinks my demands are too high, then you need correct me.”

His shoulders dropped, the heaviness easing its way out of him. “I am not an unreasonable man, my lady,” he let her know. “But I shan’t allow for further gossip. We must wed sooner rather than later. I have no time to give you.”

“I did not mean to postpone the wedding,” the maiden assured, blinking slowly. “But if I could have a few moments of your time. I’ve made a list.” That struck him as odd. What woman came prepared to wed with a list in tow. “A short one,” she hurriedly added. Supposedly at the look on his face.

“And it cannot wait until the morrow?” He cast a discreet glance at the hall filled with people. A good few pairs of eyes watched them.

“It would be better not to.” His eyes slid right back to her, studying the graceful bow of her upper lip. “Your Grace knows how precarious the situation is.”

“I thought you enjoyed a gamble.” She’d no answer ready for that. It was apparent by the way her mouth gaped. A full mouth which a man might be pardoned for admiring. A mouth all the more delectable when considering the mind it was attached to.
“Only when I know myself to be the winner.” She offered a tremulous smile. “My marriage is not one such risk I wish to take. I am begging Your Grace; just a few minutes is all I need.” The persistence had him, his curiosity pushing him further into the conversation.

“We’ve hours yet. Speak freely.” She started. Lady Lyanna leaned away from him. Rhaegar mirrored her actions, straightening himself. When had he leaned in? “Go on, lady, speak whatever is on your mind.”

She tapped her chin lightly. “My list. A few requests.” The maiden bit her lower lip. He nodded in what he hoped was encouragement. “I wish to keep my current servant girl. I know ’tis custom that I receive ladies-in-waiting after my marriage, but Missy is most important to me.” Her lips pursed as silence fell between them.

It took a few moments to recognise that she waited on his answer. Rhaegar nodded his head absently. “If you wish it. Shall I make a request of you as well?” The woman did not reply immediately. She seemed to consider his words before giving a tentative motion of her head. But he had no request prepared. Rhaegar sighed. “Whatever the details of your courtship with my brother, I must ask if it ever progressed beyond what is deemed appropriate.”

Her face crumbled and for a moment anger flared within him. At himself. But then she shook her head and looked away, he noted, towards his brother. Her gaze returned just as quick. “Never. Upon my honour.” He had no reason to suspect her honour. Rhaegar rewarded her with a brief smile. “As for my second request,” she paused, a flush setting her cheeks on fire, “that is, I would be grateful if–” She was shaking. He realised if only because his hand had come to grip hers. “I mean that,” she trailed off once more.

“Lady, unless your wish is that we should live as chastely as a pair of septas at prayer, you needn’t fear my wrath.”

Peals of unexpected laughter sprang from her lips. He relaxed a second time, knowing he’d done the right thing. “Certainly not; I do wish for children, Your Grace. It was to be my third request.” She’d even stopped trembling. Lady Lyanna cleared her throat. “I wish us to live with dignity and respect. I’ve little need of loud scenes and such.”

“It is good then that I am not prone to such behaviour.” A servant moved closer to fill their cups and they both fell silent. Rhaegar looked down at their hands, still entwined. He waited for the boy to depart. “Well, my lady, what is your request?”

She blushed fiercely. “I understand men have certain needs,” she began, still uncertain. Rhaegar considered what might follow. Surely she did not mean to regulate their couplings. “And I shall not protest if Your Grace avails himself of whatever aid necessary.” It was his turn to gape. Catching his reaction the woman shook her head. “I do not mean to sound brazen.” Well, she was doing a dashed good job. “But I would ask that such liaisons be kept as discreet as possible. It would benefit neither of us if it were to become common knowledge.”

She’d come to this marriage expecting the worst, he understood upon further inspection of her request. Clenching his teeth against any denial that might have sprung forth, Rhaegar considered her position. She’d known Baelor, but she did not know him. Pushing back his anger, Rhaegar tightened his hold on her hand. “Provided you do not bar me from your bedchamber, I do not anticipate any of my needs will require such aid.”

The lady produced a sharp little sound. Filled with satisfaction at such a response, he dragged his thumb over the back of her hand. “I did not mean to be indelicate,” she murmured after a brief pause, settling herself in her chair more comfortably.
“I thought it best to be frank,” he dispensed, ignoring the missish answer. “Well, my lady, do you plan to bar me?”

“Now Your Grace is pulling my leg.” She did not sound for all the world as if she minded. “Tis best to be frank.” The hand he was holding jostled lightly. “I believe we are being scrutinised.”

“Does it bother you?” Gazing about to meet the eyes of those observing them, Rhaegar plastered a serene smile for their benefit. “I do believe ‘tis forgivable for a man to hold his intended’s hand in this day and age.”

“Far be it from me to deny anyone’s rights.” Aught flittered behind her stare. “I believe I’ve made two requests, Your Grace.”

“And have you any more?” he questioned languidly. She replied in the negative. “Well then, that gives me the right to two more requests.” He made a show of thinking upon the matter. “I’ve a mind to travel, my lady. I find myself not at all pleased with sitting in one place for long. My request would be that you join me.”

“Travel where?” The dubious look of her face caused him to smile.

“The kingdoms. Beyond even.” Lady Lyanna raised one eyebrow at that. “It does one little good to remain waiting for fortune’s say. The King may not be in the first blush of his youth, but as you can see he has no need of heirs at the moment. I’ve no keep of my own to manage and outside this marriage no ties to bind me.”

“And your other request?” Her free hand had begun plucking at her skirts. He wondered what she was thinking about.

A trencher clattered to the floor shattering the illusion of intimacy. His betrothed pulled her hand away and like most others stared at the source of the ruckus. Rhaegar levelled a cold stare Baelor’s way. His brother merely shook his head in apology.

His lady awarded him with her attention once more. “Your request,” she prodded when he did not break the silence.

An insane thought made his way through his skull. It might set tongues wagging. Worse yet, it might make him look addled. But he wanted to do it. And thus Rhaegar damned the consequences, recalling what happened when one waited too long. “My last request is very simple. I desire a kiss.”

Her eyes widened. “A kiss?” she echoed, slightly louder than before. No one heard her though over the sounds of murmurs. “Here? In front of all the court?”

By way of reply, he tugged her hand back in his and raised it to his lips. A hush fell over them, no doubt made deafening as all eyes came to rest on him and her. Devoid of shame, he pressed his lips to her knuckles. Then he deposed the limb in her lap and leaned back in his seat, picking up his wine cup.

“I do believe we’ll get on famously,” he told her after taking a sip of the beverage, ignoring the conversations that had started up once more around them.

“Like a house on fire, I am certain,” she volunteered, regaining her earlier disposition. “Your Grace is very kind.”

He froze. Kindness was a virtue. But looking at the woman, the last thing he wanted to be to her was kind. Lady Lyanna took no notice though, for Aenar having perceived an opening launched into a
lively conversation. With some lingering despondency, Rhaegar saw that she was much easier in her manner with her brother. He recalled then the fondness with which his siblings had spoken of her.

The quicker they were wedded, the better.
Danse Macabre

Zig et zig et zag, chacun se trémousse,
On entend claquer les os des danseurs,
Un couple lascif s'assoit sur la mousse
Comme pour goûter d'anciennes douceurs.

Zig et zig et zag, la mort continue
De racler sans fin son aigre instrument.
Un voile est tombé ! La danseuse est nue !
Son danseur la serre amoureusement.

The pinched frown on her daughter's face gave Lyarra brief pause. "I understand, daughter. Truly I do." She considered her own situation without much heart. Lyarra had known who she would wed for as long as she could recall. "But you seemed to rub along decently enough."

"And that you can tell from a handful of glances along the table?" Lyanna picked up the rhythm of the combing process, tearing a few strands. She winced and glared at the ivory confection before throwing it upon the stool carelessly. One of the teeth broke and clattered to the floor.

"The comb is not at fault here," Lyarra pointed out, moving to pick up the severed digit. "Pray do not destroy it beyond use."

"Apologies," her daughter mumbled softly. She retrieved the comb and ran a finger over the stump. "I am not myself."

That much was true. Lyarra gave a sharp nod and sat down. "I've managed to buy you a few days, sweetling, but both the Crown Prince and his son are determined the ceremony should be no later than the end of a fortnight." In fact, the mere proposition of a moon's turn of waiting had elicited a manner of reply Lyarra had only thought possible in the face of grievous propositions. "Her Grace is
sympathetic to your cause but since both her husband and her child push for it she has declined intervening."

Her child's face fell. "I'd expected it," she confessed after a moment of resigned silence. "How does one win a man's favour in such short a time?"

Hearty laughter broke past her lips. Lyarra could not rightly help it. "You do not need his favour. Only should you desire his regard must you win him over. "This about time I told you a thing or two about the dealings of man and woman." Lyanna grimaced. She'd been ever reticent to speak with her of such matters and for the life of her Lyarra understood it not. If not her own mother, who should explain it to her. A shake of the head has the girl seated and waiting, meek as a lamb. Not at all herself. "Why do you want his favour?"

Colour heightening, her little she-wolf traced the distance between herself and the door, as though she planned to sprint into a run at any moment. Lyarra had anticipated such a reaction thus she merely crossed her arms over her chest. She would break at some point and they had a whole night ahead of them.

True to form, the girl released a pent up sigh and closed her eyes. "It would make him a kind husband to me."

Lyarra entertained the notion as her face broke into a gentle smile. "’Tis a good enough start, but his favour can only last that long before you'll have to search for some other manner of protection. You spoke a great deal to him. Anticipation is key here. Thus, my dear, what have you learned?"

Puzzled, the daughter shook her head. “Apparently to wed me.” She combed her fingers through her hair. “I do not rightly know what to make of him, mother. He wants to travel, and says I should go with him, but how am I to establish a position in court and be of aid if we’re on the road?”

“If he does not care about this matter then you should not let on that you do. Where does he wish to travel?” Lyanna shrugged. “Sweetling, are you by chance opposed to it? Did you not say it would be best to wed a man whose position would allow for such?”

Pursed lips clarified a lot of it. But nowhere near enough for Lyarra to say a thing. “It feels as though we are running from something. I am not guilty. He is not guilty. We are not the ones who should be cowering. Why should I pay for choices not my own?”

“It is the manner of such understandings. And if he wants to go, all the better. I should like little else than to run that boy through, but you know that would cause quite the scene. We’ve worked too hard to reach where we are.”

Lyanna huffed. “I know. But it is still not fair.”

“Life rarely is.” Lyarra leaned back into her seat and studied the forlorn creature facing her. “Is that all?” She’d expected more somehow.

But her words were encouragement enough for all other objections to pour out. “People will talk, more than they do now. I am wedding a man I’ve barely exchanged a few words with and I am truly afraid that I cannot measure up to the Princess. You’ve seen her.”

As had all other courtiers, smiling at the side of her brother as if they’d not caused trouble. Lyarra hummed slowly. “She is a good-looking girl. But ‘tis the nature of these dragons. I expect a change of scenery is more than welcomed.”

“Blast her pretty face,” her daughter cursed, waving her hand dismissively. “What if he loves her?”
“Love fades.” The other froze, eyes widening perceptibly. “Have I shocked you?” Lyarra laughed. “Surely I have thought you better. Love is sweet, but it cannot change a man’s nature. Or a woman’s. The fact is she’s already betrayed him. Even if she somehow managed to hold onto his heart, she’s lost his trust. And without that, she has naught.”

“You are certain?” The question seemed somewhat forced, yet equally relieved. Had her poor daughter fallen for the Prince’s charm? Or was it pride? Lyarra pushed the thought aside and shook her head by manner of response.

“These things can be won back as well with enough diligence.”

“So you suggest that I keep her from winning back his trust?” The displeased set of Lyanna’s lips set her on edge.

“That would depend on whether he is capable of trusting once more. I am only saying you need to have a care. This is your life ahead of you, after all.”

Aerys rolled his eyes and held the candle higher. “And what exactly do you propose we do?” he questioned as his sister moved around him. Rhaella was winding the thread around her finger, a warm chuckle on her lips. “Woman, there’s enough trouble to keep you busy for days yet. Leave the boy to woo her. If he sets his mind to it, you’ll see they’ll be wedded in a few days.”

“With the way he is, he’s just as likely to frighten her off. You’ve seen him at the feast. The poor thing was overwhelmed. She even asked for a moon’s turn more.” She rolled her eyes back at him once she deciphered his expression. “Come now, the faster ‘tis underway the better. I am not growing any younger and I should like to see at least a couple of grandchildren during my lifetime.”

He cursed under his breath and shook his arm to loosen her grip. “Mother save us. Why don’t you just throw her in his bed and be done with it?” It was how his wedding had gone and likely any of the weddings within their damned family. Aerys met her steady gaze and tried not to step back at what he saw in there. “Good gods, you’re considering it.”
“Not as such,” she assured him with a brief shake of the head, sending silver curls flying. “That would likely have her in a swoon and I’d be left with no grandchild besides.” A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. She was hatching a plan and he would be obliged to aid, lest she make a complete disaster of it all. “Lord husband, what if,” she paused at his grimace, “what if, by chance, an accident of faith, the two should find themselves all alone?”

He closed his eyes against the telltale signs of a headache and tried not to take to heart that she truly meant to go through with it. “These matters are not for you to decide over. Leave it be.”

Her huff caused him to blink. “You mean are all the same. You think the sun rises and sets upon you. I’ll have you know, I was the one who hanged the sun where it is.”

He laughed. “Wife, have a care with that tongue of yours. It’s been flaying me so much I can feel it even in my dreams. Just not where I’d rather it be.” Her answer was a light slap to his arm. “Surely you can be sweet to me at least once in a little while. These old bones can’t take much more of this cruelty.”

“Those old bones never even creaked after the feast. I cannot recall a single complaint from you, my good lord.” She placed her hand in his and stepped backwards. “Unless you’ve been hiding your weakness from me.” The teasing trailing of her fingers along his arm made him shiver.

“I’ve been hiding aught, I have,” he confessed, grabbing her wrist. “Allow me, lady wife.” The gods willing, he would keep her long enough to dissuade her from putting any of her notions into practice.

The long corridor leading to the library seemed to stretch out interminably. Lyanna ran her fingers through her hair all the way to the beginning of a loose braid and stifled a hiss of annoyance at the forgotten impediment. Winterfell was greater in size, the corridors narrower, the lancets higher and slimmer. But she still managed to lose her way in a keep half the size with good lighting and enough servants to fill a dozen such constructions. Forsooth the gods were laughing at her. And the blame she placed upon her mother’s shoulders for insisting that Missy remain with her and help her embroider. What fault had she that her disposition made any attempt at such minute work as useful as
Locating at long last the searched for chamber, Lyanna opened the door slowly and glanced within. It took only a couple of rows of bound volumes to figure out she had indeed landed where she was supposed to. Congratulating herself for correctly negotiating the maze of corridors, she entered fully, expecting to see a few acolytes, some maester, a lord or ser lounging about. But nay, the chamber was empty. Save for a fire burning in the hearth, there was little else but stacks upon stacks of books and scrolls.

Curious. Taking it in with a note of suspicion, she carefully made her way around the chamber until she reached a table nestled away near a lancet, light streaming from without over the polished wood. An inkwell rested on its surface, quill still dipped within. More than enough proof that she was not at all alone.

As though in confirmation, footsteps came from behind. She turned around hoping to catch whoever it was that moved about.

Lyanna blinked owlishly. Either she had conjured up a spirit in the form of her betrothed, or Rhaegar Targaryen stood before her with a quizzical look and what looked to be a ledger in his hand. Since the art of witchcraft was lost on her, she could only conclude the latter was the answer she searched for. On the heels of that realisation she very nearly tripped over herself in observing protocol. “Your Grace, I did not expect to find you here.” Her eyes fell upon the ground.

The soft thud of leather hitting wood made her glance up. Rhaegar was still eyeing her, but to her utter consternation he said naught. “Apologies for having disturbed you. I could go, if Your Grace preferred his solitude.”

A smile quirked his lips. Out of place, entirely too strange for the situation. She tensed. And then he chuckled. “It seems, my lady, the both of us have fallen in a trap.” Her face must have scrunched in confusion for he explained further, the trace of mirth not entirely gone from his voice. “I was to find aught for my father in one of these ledgers.” He gestured towards the other books. “Or so I’d thought.”

“I was merely bored, Your Grace,” she returned with a shake of the head. What would he believe of her if he thought she was following him around like some ninny?

“And therein resides the genius of the plan. I do not suppose you were sent, by chance, on your very own.” Suspicion returned. It strengthened, grew and coiled until it gripped her fully. “Not one servant about, in the middle of the day no less, not even a maester or acolyte. You do not find it strange?”

“For all I know,” Lyanna volunteered after further deliberation, “Your Grace enjoys reading alone.” Fixing him with a cool stare, she tried her best to appear nonchalant. “Might be ‘twas your plan all along.” The sheer impertinence of the accusation ought to have been enough to strike her down.

But the man must have found her words the epitome of amusing, for he laughed once more. “Believe you me, my lady, had I wanted you alone, the library would not be the place of my choosing.” That roused her interest.

She moved closer, peering at the leather bound volume, absently fingering the spine after she’d picked it up. “Are you saying ‘tis not an adequate chamber?” She opened the book and perused the first few pages. It was some sort of balance, she realised. Lyanna placed it back and gazed up at the man. The intense stare he answered with was enough to make her knees knobbly.
“It would depend,” he said in the end, occupying an available seat at the table.

“On?” she prodded, pulling out a second chair. If the whole keep was so desperate to sew them one to the other, she might as well oblige.

“On what one has in mind.” He opened the ledger and hurriedly searched through the pages. He must have known what he was searching for as within a minute he found it. Lyanna kept quiet and watched him intently. Better put, she watched him reach for the quill and shake the excess ink off with an elegant yet deliberately firm motion. She drew in a sharp breath.

“And what does Your Grace have in mind that would make the library inadequate?” The question caught him just as the quill was poised over the page. He looked away from his work, eyes clashing with hers, The play of emotions lasted long enough for her to catch a glimpse of something dark, something which she could not name, but that caused anticipatory butterflies to flutter in her stomach.

The scratch of quill on paper broke the enchantment. Tension ebbed away, leaving behind a sense of unfulfilled need. She pursed her lips and turned her gaze to the paper. He’d circled a letter. He circled another a few lines over and then a third. The quill was placed next to the inkwell.

Rhaegar turned the pages towards her, shoving the volume her way. She caught it midslide and gazed at the lines. “Do you still believe we were not the victims of a well-crafted plot?” The inquiry was met with a light start.

Lyanna could still not believe what her eyes were seeing. “I daresay these instructions are not mine,” she bit out after a fair moment of breathless wonder. “What does Your Grace plan to do? It is only the two of us here.”

“I am well aware.” Keen was the song her blood sang at those words. Just the pair of them surrounded by old tomes and the slight light from a high lancet. “What I have yet to determine is whether I should do as I am ordered here or elsewhere.”

She stood to her feet and moved around until she stood at his side. “No one is watching,” Lyanna said helpfully, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. “Consider it a request, Your Grace.”

“What?” he questioned softly, face turned towards hers. He was going to make her say it. Hesitation halted her progress. She could back out. But it would be a pity to wonder later. “A kiss.”

Long fingers pressed their way along the back of her neck, the touch heavy despite only the lightest pressure being applied. Foreign lips met hers, moving at an angle. She shivered when an arm encircled her waist. There was no inexorable pull, but for the one of her own limbs. He demanded naught of her. It occurred to her that he was allowing her to kiss him rather than kissing her. Which was a strange notion given that their lips were mashed together.

She pulled back with a shallow sigh and searched his face. He gave no clue as to what he was thinking. The arm slung around her waist kept her from moving. “I believe it is my turn to make a request now.” She nodded, feeling somewhat put out by the levelled response.

“Aye. Your Grace has a request as well.” The fingers at the base of her neck dug slightly harder into her skin, the presence unmistakable. Pressure began along her waist as well until she sat perched on his knee, much in the manner she would have done as a child. Excepting that her thoughts had been of a more innocent ilk at that age.

He cocked his head to the side. “I am tempted to save it for later.” She squirmed, not certain if she
ought to pull herself towards him.

“Why?” But she was some dashed idiot. Lyanna cursed herself silently. It was as though she was reverting to the mindset of a child.

“It might shock you.” She froze, all thoughts fleeing from sight. There were a great number of things which might shock her.

“I am certain we can reach an understanding.” Her skin tingled where he’d touched.

“If I said I wanted your permission to kiss you whenever I want,” she inched closer by his own design, “however I want,” and closer still, “and for as long I wish it,” until she was on his lap, face flaming as he trailed off.

“Aye,” she consented upon a shaky breath, feeling as though she’d just wrapped her soul up and offered it to some wicked devil. The butterflies returned.

In the next moment she found herself on her feet, hands scrambling for purchase against the table as he walked off.

Where was her kiss to seal the deal?

Drat him.

Lyanna gaped after him, unable to find her voice.
Eu știu c-ai să mă-nșeli chiar mâine...
Dar fiindcă azi mi te dai toată,
Am să te iert -
E vechi păcatul
Și nu ești prima vinovată!...

În cinstea ta,
Cea mai frumoasă din toate fetele ce mint,
Am ars miresme-otrăvitoare în trepieduri de argint,
În pat ți-am presărat garoafe
Și maci -
Tot flori însângerate -
Și cu parfum de brad pătat-am dantela pernelor curate,
Iar în covorul din perete ca și-ntr-o glastră am înfipt
Trei ramuri verzi de lămâiță
Și-un ram uscat de-Eucalipt.

Arthur gave him a long look, resting against Dawn’s hilt. He was breathing hard, shoulders rising before they fell sharply back down. “I’d never have guessed one little she-wolf could do you so much damage. Try to keep your head.” The smirk on his face did not mitigate the sting of his loss. The smile dropped at his lack of response. “Never say she’s got you by the—“

His own sword came to rest throat-lever across his friend’s shoulder. “Measure your words.” That bit of advice garnered raised eyebrows from more than just Dayne.

Ser Whent pushed his way between the two of them. “Your Grace, the boy may speak foolishly, but a man ought not to allow himself to be so easily led.” Unable to decide if he should shorten both of
them by a head, Rhaegar retreated with a light disapproving sound.

“Come now,” Arthur returned benignly, “you’ll wed her soon enough and have your fill.” His grip returned on Dawn. He unearthed the sword and returned it to its initial place.

He meant well. Both of them did, but neither Arthur nor Oswell were him. Their betrothed certainly hadn’t taken off with close kin, a spit in the face of everything they’d offered. If he thought too long upon Lady Lyanna then it had little to do with her charms. Or rather not everything to do with those. Although Blind Tom would be able to see those, he suspected. Rhaegar shook his head ruefully.

“What would you know, Dayne? I don’t recall that you’ve had a woman of your own.” That eased the tension. Oswell’s booming laughter followed after.

“See what impertinence buys you, lad?” he jested, clapping a hand on his brother’s back. The fellow knight murmured aught beneath the force of the slap and kept himself steady as though by sheer force of will.

“I’m done,” he muttered, walking to put the training blade away. His mind was not in it and his side was already sore from where Dayne had hit with the flat of his blade. It stung still, truth be told, and he had this und dismissable urge to look and see whether a bruise had formed. Gritting his teeth against the minor annoyance, he was jostled out of his thoughts when a heavy arm slung its way around his shoulders.

“You might well be done, Your Grace, but I’m not.” Arthur offered a grin at the distaste he was certain was written all over his features. “So, is this truly all about the lady?”

Blinking away the surge of irritation, he waved a dismissive hand. “You’re making mountains out of molehills. And reading too much in the matter of Lady Lyanna.” By the glance his friend sent his way, he could already tell his words had been discarded.

Arthur cleared his throat subtly and let go. “If you’re really meaning to pursue her, what are you even doing here with us?” The question fell between them in the lulling silence. When he offered naught, the knight went on. “There is little maidens find more infuriating than a half-hearted attempt at wooing.”

“Aye. And you certainly know your way around women,” he muttered in answer, shaking his head. “Spare me and save your lessons for someone who needs them.”

The crooked grin he received for his effort was only slightly mocking. He shrugged and patted Rhaegar’s shoulder. “There now. No need to bristle just because she’s worked you into a corner.” The faux pity only aggravated his state. Rhaegar struggled not to punch the knight. Arthur was truly testing his patience.

“I fear I’m the one who’s managed to work himself into a corner on my own.” Combing his fingers through his hair he released a sigh. “The blasted woman wants to wait half a moon’s turn more. What in the seven hells that will accomplish, I do not know.”

“Is that what has you so sour?” They’d begun walking towards a shaded area of the yard where no one stood. “’Tis pertaining to the wedding at any rate. She did not seem hesitant to me.”

“Baelor watched her all through the banquet.” He’d not wanted to think about it. He did not even know why he made mention of it. But Arthur was his friend. He would not judge him too harshly. “Shaena too. Sometimes I fear this family of mine shall rend my sanity to shreds.”

“He’s had plenty of opportunity to stake his claim had he wanted her. Might be, Your Grace, you are
the one who reads too much into the matter.” The suggestion gave him pause. Arthur leaned against a tree. “And if she wanted your brother, truly, she could have forced his hand.”

Rhaegar did not know much of Winterfell. Not even the layout. He supposed it was just as easy for a maiden to sneak out of her bedchamber in there as it was in the Red Keep. “She swears all remained proper between them.”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” the Kingsguard shrugged. Once more, his suspicion was roused. “You need but wait until the wedding night.” A grin followed, the telltale drop of salacious challenge swift to appear. “If you’re of a mind to be as proper as your brother.” Rhaegar stared at him, not uttering a word. If he spoke the possibility, he would consider it. “Otherwise, Your Grace, what is anticipating one’s vows a few days early going to ruin?”

“You are suggesting I bed her. Outside my rights too.” It was not a bad idea. Certainly not the worst Arthur had presented him with. And yet, sweet as the notion was, he could well perceive how she would bear it. Were he just some lord like any other, it would matter less. It all depended, truly, on which customs would be followed.

“I am suggesting you do what you believe is necessary. Bed her or nay, ’tis up to you, my friend.” The Kingsguard slapped his shoulder bruisingly. “I trust you’ll figure it out on your own.”

Better than be hounded by uncertainty, Rhaegar considered as he dismissed Arthur. The Dornishman took his leave with a few grumbled lines, no doubt lamenting his current position. In truth he suspected his friend carried remnants of guilt for not having warned him in time. Not that he could have. Not even the formidable Arthur Dayne was able to read the mind of a woman such as his sister. Shaena had certainly schemed with utmost care.

Fear struck him. Rhaegar knew it was foolish. Not all women were Shaena. Lady Lyanna was not Shaena. He hoped not. Something in him did not even wish to consider the notion that she might be like his kin. Closing his eyes against the feeling, Rhaegar drew in a deep breath. He still had their bargain to look forward to. Surely that would tell him what he needed to know.

With that in mind, he made his way back to his own chambers to clean himself and don fresh clothes. Before long the rest of the keep would be awake and he’d have no peace. Thus he took his time, slowly following through a well established routine as the sun climbed higher and higher from whatever pit it had crashed into during the night.

Once done, he made his way back into the corridors, wondering which road he ought to take. There was the library, most likely unoccupied at this hour. But then, he could take a risk and make for an entirely different chamber. Arthur’s words still fresh in his mind rang out. He swallowed against the stirring in the pit of his stomach.

Slow, measured steps carried him away from the door he had been standing before. The uncertain footfalls stopped at the stairs. He glanced down. From his vantage point he could make out a bit of the floor below. It would be a mere few steps. There were no guards at those doors. He doubted there had ever been such need. For a brief moment he considered praying. But then, who should be entreat? Westeros valued rarely ever hinted at anything outside the chivalric code. The Lysene goddess of love would be an apt choice, but if he allowed himself to beg her favour he feared the consequences. With a deep sigh, he took the stairs one by one in his downward climb, all the while guessing in the maiden had woken from her slumber.

Her chamber he found easily enough as soon as he’d landed his feet upon solid, even ground. There was not even the whisper of another human about, likely due to the ungodly hour. He did not rap, although he should have. Nay, he simply pushed tentatively at the door, waiting to see what hand
fate dealt him.

Lady luck must have been on his side for the oiled hinges gave a feeble protest before allowing him entrance. He took the opportunity and slid within, closing the door softly in his wake.

She heard the door. Lyanna had not been asleep. For the most part she woke early in the day but preferred to lie abed, nestled in warm furs until a more decent hour. When, however, she heard movement from without, all instincts kicked in, driving fuzziness away in one sharp swipe.

At first she’d thought it was Missy, returning from wherever it was she’s spent the night. Her money was on a hayloft, but she would never truly inquire. Yet when she glanced from beneath her lashes, the form standing in the doorway was distinctly not Missy’s. In fact, it was much too all to be her companion and entirely too male to not mean trouble. Thus Lyanna jumped to a sitting position, eyes widening in order to better see the intruder.

Shock gripped her firmly. She’d expected a number of things, all more wild and farfetched than the other, but what was in front of her was not one of them. Eyes still wide, she relaxed her grip on the short knife she’d been holding, allowing the weapon to drop. A lurch of something caught in the back of her throat. A scream by the sting of it. She swallowed it back and leaned against the headboard of the bed, trying her best for nonchalance. For if there was one thing she knew about men, then that was they liked to pursue.

“Well prepared,” he said, presumably by way of greeting, eyeing the cold metal visible from between the creased furs. “Is it a habit of yours to sleep with a blade in your hand?” He stepped closer until he was at the foot of the bed.

Lyanna offered a dim smile, not entirely comfortable, but curious nonetheless. “It is. How else am I to greet visitors sneaking about in my bedchamber?” She reached for the weapon once more as if to prove her point, but he held one hand up.

“You say that as though I’ve no legitimate cause to be here.” But did he? She pinned him with a
questioning stare and dragged the blade closer. “You’ve forgotten so fast?”

Blushing to the tip of her ears, she shook her head and turned to deposit the knife beneath her pillow. In that time he’d moved even closer, choosing to sit on the edge of the bed. That was where she saw him when turning around. “Does Your Grace make a habit of entering unsuspecting maidens’ bedchambers often?”

He shook his head. “Only yours. Had I known it was half so entertaining, I might have attempted it more.” At those words, she gave an indignant huff and crossed her arms over her chest. The Prince grinned. “I think I’ll stick to this chamber only,” he allowed after a few moments. Lyanna told herself she was not relieved, but rather annoyed. That was the reason for which her chest felt as if it were caving in.

“You needn’t force yourself, Your Grace.” His stare kept her in place otherwise she might have moved to throw him out. The thought gave her pause. She looked him over. It was at times hard to tell the true girth of a man by the clothes he wore. So many layers. But he’d done her the service of not wearing formal attire. His form left her in no doubt that she’d be pushing all day without result.

He did not have Brandon’s bulk. Her brother was both tall and sturdy, enough so that at times she’d found herself wondering if he was at all her kin. But even Ned, who was markedly different in built gave her much trouble to move. Nay, she would not allow herself to be fooled by the apparent slimness.

“Now why would you say that?” he chuckled lightly. Her lips pursed in annoyance. She’d waited for him after night had fallen. But still he had not appeared. “My lady,” the man probed, hand reaching for one of her own. She drew herself just out of reach.

“You left me there,” she accused, the word tumbling out much bitterer than they’d sounded in her mind. If it was possible that smile on his face became even more irritating when triumph laced it. She gnashed her teeth together and glared. “As I said, Your Grace, do not force yourself.”

This time, he allowed no escape. Leaning in, he took hold of her shoulders and in one flowing motion pulled her to a kneeling position. “You’ve no sense of self-preservation.” The admonishment, spoken as softly as the caress of silk, was sweetened by a light kiss to her lips. Instinctually, she attempted to pull away, more startled than frightened.

But his lips merely followed the path of hers, face moving slightly for a deeper touch. She ought to ask Missy for a more detailed description of kissing when she had the chance. Lyanna tried to follow his lead, lips moving in trembling motions, not quite certain how well she was doing.

He released her after a few moments. He blinked down at her, hands cupping her face. The bush of his thumb against her skin left her trembling. Why that should be she could not tell. But air was rapidly exiting her lungs and naught came to replace it. The distance between them closed until he was no more than a hairsbreadth away. He did not kiss her lips again though.

Contact between his lips and her throat very near had her jumping off of the bed. Her skittishness had him looking up. “Remember, a request of yours from one of mine.” She nodded. It was not unpleasant. Hands moving to grip his arms, Lyanna leaned in, the scrape of his teeth causing a giggle to spill past her lips.

“Are there many kinds of kisses?” she asked after gathering her courage.

Rising from his task, the man before her considered her silently for all of a couple of heartbeats. “Aye.”
Nodding her head, she tugged on one of his arms. “And will you kiss me often?”

The smirk reappeared. “Aye.” He was enjoying it, she perceived and drew herself closer, rising slowly over him. “What are you doing?”

“Moving closer. It’s cold.” Her upper half certainly was cold. Fortunately beneath the furs the heat was akin to a desert. “Winterfell is heated by hot springs. I never thought I would feel cold outside it though.” His arms curled around her. Apparently men had uses besides making her melt in a puddle, they were also providers of warmth. She settled against him until she was fairly crushed to his chest.

“No sense of self-preservation,” he repeated an earlier sentiment. “Or are you trying to provoke me?”

“I truly am cold,” she protested the notion that she might have aught to hide by her actions, “but if it serves to give you a taste of frustration, I shan’t protest to that. You see, Your Grace, I’ve a taste for revenge.”

The muffled sound of unrepentant amusement rubbed along her spine, leaving a tingling sensation in its wake. “Look at me.”

She did. And he, devil that he was, took her lips again. This time though aught hot and wet traced the seam of her lower lip. She gasped softly at the feeling, figuring out just what it was. But by then his tongue had already initiated a tentative dance with her own, stroking and coaxing. It was truly unfair that he could play her as easy as a fiddle. Grasping handfuls of his tunic she tried to contain her excitement. Easier said than done when heat unfurled in the pit of her stomach, fever climbing its way to her head. Before long her lungs were begging for air.

“Revenge truly is sweet,” he noted, the pleased note in his voice more than enough to make her blush harder. “Were you that displeased with me?” By way of reply, she stroked her lips to his, the tip of her tongue barely spearing to dab into the game itself.

She pushed slightly away. “Missy should return soon now. You’d best find your way without before she arrives. Betrothed or not, it’ll be a scandal.”

“And what can they do to us?” he teased despite the fact that he’d already begun moving,

Lyanna opened her mouth to answer but his lips chased any reply from her mind, leaving her to the mercy of an ancient dance. Seemingly satisfied with his success, the Prince abandoned her for the hallways, not before glancing once over his shoulder, as though he feared she might disappear.

She was too busy stroking a finger to her swollen lips to give much thought to the gesture. A smile had already curled them, despite her best attempts to keep a stern face. Falling back against her mound of pillows, she allowed herself a content sigh, stretching out.

Might be it would be best to dress herself and find some excuse to test her new knowledge. A ride or a stroll through the gardens. She’d find aught. She always did. If it came to worst, she’d challenge him to a hand of cards.
The Wife's Lament

Eald is þes eorðsele, eal ic eom oflongad,
sindon dena dimme, duna uphea,
bitre burgtunas, brerum beweaxne,
wic wynna leas. Ful oft mec her wraþe begeat
fromsiþ frean. Frynd sind on eorðan,
leofe lifgende, leger weardiað,
þonne ic on uhtan ana gonge
under actreo geond þas eorðscrafu.
þær ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg,
þær ic wepan mæg mine wrecsiþas,
earfoþa fela; forþon ic æfre ne mæg
þære modceare minre gerestan,
ne ealles þæs longaþes þe mec on þissum life begeat.
A scyle geong mon wesan geomormod,
heard heortan gepoht, swylce habban sceal
bliþe gebæro, eac þon breostceare,
sinsorgna gedreag, sy æt him sylfum gelong
eal his worulde wyn, sy ful wide fah
feorres folclondes, þæt min freond siteð
under stanhlípe storme behrimed,
wine werigmod, vætre beflowen
on dreorsele. Dreogeð se min wine
micle modceare; he gemon to oft
wynlicran wic. Wa bið þam þe sceal
of langøpe leofes abidan.
She’d never been the mildest tempered creature. Lyanna would never think so shy away from such knowledge. Her temper oft got the best of her even when she meant to keep it in check. Not that she’d ever attempted to curb it but for the occasion upon which she’d learned of Baelor’s betrayal. If it could be called as such even. Her limits she knew very well.

The girl standing before her offered a shy, even friendly smile, as though Lyanna was supposed to open her arms to her and receive her as she would a sister. “Your Grace,” she greeted, trying her best to erase all inflection from her words.

The grin wavered. “Lady Lyanna, a fine morning to you.” Those eyes, much like her brother’s eased their way over her. Whatever results her search had yielded, Lyanna would not know, for she’d turned her face away, pretending to find much interest in a tome of natural remedies.

She traced the spine with her finger, hoping that the pretence would be enough to drive the other away. Yet the girl would not budge. Silence stretched out between them, offering the embracing comfort of a wet blanket. She sighed. Perceiving that her behaviour bordered yet upon rudeness, Lyanna gave in, and returned her eyes to the slightly pale face. “A fine morning to you as well, Your Grace. Although I wonder if Your Grace should be gallivanting about in such a delicate state.”

If the implication insulted her, Shaena Targaryen did not show it. She sat down at the table, taking those words to be assent. No doubt she’d never in her life faced the consequences of her actions. Neither had Lyanna, truth be told, yet in that moment she wished little else than to heap upon her a tirade the likes of which she’d never seen.

Shaena Targaryen gazed fixedly at her, the morning glow giving her flowing ringlets the shine of fine white gold. Though tall and well-formed, there was aught almost fragile in her mannerism; the way she moved was reminiscent of a wild swan on the surface of an uninhabited lake. The smile gained courage and she once more hid her worries behind a friendly mask even as Lyanna narrowed her eyes at her, not at all inclined to be generous.

“I was hoping we have words,” she said after a moment, shifting in her seat.

Have words? What did she want, to exchange her precious knowledge with Lyanna? “Your Grace is truly kind.” She much feared she’d develop a forked tongue if she stayed in her presence any longer. One lie upon another. “I would be most pleased if you should indeed wish to have words.” Might be she could find a book to hit her with or even some excuse to get away. She’d come to the library in search of Rhaegar. His sister could rot for all she cared.

“We’ve not started on the best of terms,” the other began, the tremor in her voice exposing the unease beneath her speech. “It was my hope I could explain myself. Might be, might be being a woman such as I am, you would understand.”

“Understand what?” Lyanna whispered, near breathless. If it were possible to have fury choke a
person to death, than she feared she was the victim of such an assault. Still, the Princess seemed not to take note of it. Instead, she breathed out in relief and grabbed Lyanna by the arm, nails digging into her skin through the material of her kirtle.

“Gratitude, my lady. I’d feared approaching you upon your arrival, but I can see I was mistaken.” She’d not been mistaken. Lyanna did not correct her though. “I suppose I ought to start at the very beginning. I’ve loved Baelor for as long as I can remember.”

In truth, Lyanna had expected something of the nature. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep silent. Shaena went on. “Despite being told I was to wed Rhaegar, there was never a moment in which I wished for that. I cannot explain it but to say ‘twas love that pushed me. Two broken hearts seemed such a bitter price to pay, when Baelor loved me too. And it would have wounded my dear brother if I wedded him but gave my heart to another. And it would have in the end wounded you as well, my lady.”

Her nostrils flared. “I imagine I would have learned to live with the pain, Your Grace. You’ve done me too great service.” The hand on her arm retreated. Tears welled up the other’s eyes.

“You’ve a right to your anger, but I pray you do not take it out on Baelor. I was the one who chose him.” At those words something melted within Lyanna. It was not that she’d suddenly gained a measure of forgiveness, but rather that, as the Princess allowed her tears to run down, the ice encasing her heart cracked. “I know ‘twas selfish of us. But I truly love him.”

“Just as long as you do not claim higher purpose,” she offered gently, reaching out to pat the other’s hand in an almost motherly fashion. “It is not my place to cast any manner of judgement, Your Grace. I am not yet part of your kith and kin. ‘Tis best I speak naught on such matters.”

“It pains you,” Shaena observed, “it costs you dearly to say those words does it not? I understand. I would not be half as gracious were I in your shoes.” She wiped away at her tears. “I just wish for all of us to get along. ‘Tis not too much.”

Nay. It was forsooth a sensible thing to ask. “Why? Did he mistreat you? Raise his hand at you? I want to know why. Love is sweet, Your Grace, but I wish for the bitterness of truth.” There, she’d said it. There was naught more to fear but whatever answer her companion gave.

Aught akin to horror crossed the other’s features. “Never. In all my years, never once has he been a tyrant to me. My brother is good and kind and he would not bring harm to anyone. I’ve never known a better man.”

“And yet, all these qualities are not enough to endear him to you.” It was the height of strangeness. She’d praise the man with such effusiveness, but would not take her himself. It felt as if she were trying to sell Lyanna a lame horse. And she’d never been one to be cheated with ease. “The truth, Your Grace.”

The Princess’ face reddened, the colour in her cheeks heightening to such a degree that Lyanna was tempted to take back her request. But just for a moment. “You’ve the right of it, of course. How I must look to you, trying to pass my brother on as if it meant naught. You have not grown in this keep, my lady, and many a thing you know not about my kin.”

With a nod of the head she accepted the words. “Which is why I am here. To learn.” Not truly. She’d come to wed. But she was learning, thus Lyanna contented herself with that. “Do not fear that what you reveal might change my mind. I shall wed His Grace come rain or shine.” Nay, she had not come here, after all, to suffer a second scandal, and of her own making too.
“Since young I’ve been told this tale that one day, to one of us, kin of the dragonriders of old, a son would be born. A prince of ice and fire, the tale said. And he would be the greatest man to ever step foot upon these lands. When my mother was yet a girl, a woods witch prophesised that from her and my father would spring the line of this great man. I was to continue that lines with Rhaegar. Do you know when he was born, my brother?”

Lyanna blinked. What did that matter? “He was born the same year Summerhall burned down.” It was common knowledge.

“He was born as the flames devoured the keep,” Shaena corrected. “You’ve not grown with him. All he cares for is that prophecy of his. He would have turned me into a broodmare until he found his prince, He’s always been convinced that Summerhall burning meant aught.”

The confession gave her pause. “Your Grace, even now you carry within you a child,” she pointed out with nary a trace of emotion.

“A child born out of love,” came the desperate gasp. “I chose Baelor.”

“I see.” Lyanna stood. “I understand, Your Grace.” She was uncertain herself whether she truly understood. The woman had traded brothers, not so much as destiny. It was only then that she realised her knees were trembling lightly, her legs even. And for the life of her, she could not understand the reaction. The man wanted a wife for the same reason all men wanted wives. It did not bother her.

The palfrey threw its head back, trampling against the floors. The stable boy gave Lady Lyanna an apologetic look. “Your Grace, we tried, but she’s been kicking at the door since nightfall.” The leg did not look in the best of shapes. She would not be riding anytime soon. The evident despondency of her face caused a flash of something to course through him.

“My lady,” he addressed her, placing an arm on her shoulder to force her gaze away from the beast. She allowed the distraction with a light grimace. “Leave the horse in the care of the stable master for
the day and ride another.”

She agreed with a slow nod and looked about with stark uncertainty. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but these horses are coursers.” They were for the most part even-tempered geldings as far as he knew. But he glanced about as well, wondering at what the implied protest was.

It occurred to him, within a few moments, that her mare was one of those creatures with an exceedingly small frame. He knew the type of horse for he’d seen its kind before. But it was rarely used outside of light cavalry. And yet he seemed to recall there had been a few of those in the stables as well.

“No matter, we have enough time, my lady, to find a horse to your liking.” Her disposition brightened at his words. Rhaegar, in sight of all and sundry, took her by the hand and led her away, two stable boys ambling behind them, waiting upon orders.

He had to wonder at the way the whole matter had evolved. Still, he could do little but try his best not to allow suspicion to creep up upon him. Fist he’d learned his sister had come upon Lady Lyanna in the library and the acolyte who’d overheard them told him a fair account of their conversation. Yet she’d made no mention of it to him. The she-wolf looked for all the world as though she’s shared little more than a greeting. Somewhat lost at her composed attitude. He would understand it much better if she were made of stone, and yet no stone had rested against him in her bedchamber.

Then, miraculously, her fingers curled around his hand for a brief moment, a hesitant touch, before relaxing once more. He looked to her to find her eyes roaming the stalls. Without pause, he glanced back towards the two boys and waved them away. They understood without words and slunk towards a more remote corner where their presence would not be keenly manifested. It was not the most private arrangement one could find, but Rhaegar thought it enough.

“I’ve a mind to ask after those boys, Your Grace,” she murmured after the moment had passed. Had she wished to protest, she might have done so as soon as she had noticed. Yet her reaction was to face him and place the length of her arm between them, palm resting on his chest, near his heart. “It is dangerous on one’s own.”

“Your sense has returned?” The question slipped past his lips. “My gods, and all it took was a few moments.”

She laughed, the clear sound ringing around them. “Do not blaspheme, Your Grace. The gods may take revenge. As for my sense, I assure you, ‘tis not that which puts a barrier between us. There are too many eyes and ears about.”

His hand climbed to her wrist, cradling the small shape fondly. “And that matters?” Using the gentles of pressures, he pried the limb away and this time pressed his lips to the centre of her palm. The same one that had very nearly touched his heart. Her shiver was visible. “I’m enjoying our game. Aren’t you?”

He watched her intently, from the light way she squared her shoulders to the slight jutting of her lower lip to those eyes with dilated pupils. Her answer was at first a knowing smile. Then she managed words. “Are you? Then I’ve no recourse but to enjoy it as well.”

Those words were enough to confound him. He let go. The lady blinked. Had he been mistaken? “You needn’t pretend.” His assurance elicited another knowing glance. He would not last. “I know about what Shaena did.”

“I was not going to make mention of the matter,” she returned, her eyes wandering over to another
stall. “But I suppose a keep is no place for secrets. So, Your Grace, would you have words as well?”

Lyanna leaned over to pat the snout of one of the beasts. “Or would you rather I spoke.”

“‘Tis only right to give you the road,” he forced himself to say. He’d not listened close enough to his sister and that had gained him much trouble. A mistake repeated twice was naught other but a sin. A terrible thing to carry.

Bearing the bleakness of the King’s executioner, the she-wolf asked, “Did you want her?” His breath caught. He’d expected some questions from her. But that was not one of them. When he gave no reply, she turned the full heat of her stare upon him and he saw in her eyes the uncertainty. She was measuring, as all women did.

Relief washed over him. “She was promised to me. I never gave it any thought. Desire was the furthest thing from my mind.” Rhaegar spoke no lie. Shaena had always been a sister to him. He’d known he had to wed her someday, but the prospect had neither thrilled or displeased him. His sister had just been an integral part of his plans.

“But you need her. For this child.” Having given up petting the courser, she stepped closer. “You need her, do you not?”

It surprised even him how swift denial came. “There was no explicit mention of such a need. ‘Twas a bloodline, is all.”

Lyanna was standing out of reach, seemingly uncertain of what she wished to do. “I’ve been told I lack tact. But I’ve never been entirely certain when and where I ought to stop. If I asked for aught which is yet more brazen, would Your Grace be honest?”

She waited upon his answer as the condemned waited upon the hangman’s presence. It was his chance. His only chance, he realised. “I would be honest.” It was not so much about her wedding him. At the point at which they stood, she would become his bride regardless of answer. But she was working towards shaping their alliance. An uneasy enough agreement fraught with much trouble from its very conception.

The woman drew in a deep breath, the swell of her chest rising to attention. Eyes upon him, Lyanna stepped even closer until she was standing against him, arms rising as though in embrace. She rose on her tiptoes. “The most important query between us is whether you desire me? Without thought to your prophecy, Your Grace. Just me.”

His hands worked their way down her sides, gripping tightly at her slim hips. Did he desire her? He would have laughed if he did not know that despite their best attempts to remain invisible, servants milled about, and they’d wonder more at mad laughter than at mad want. “How would you know if I lied?” The question gave her a start, as evidenced by the way she jumped in his hold. But Rhaegar did not let go. She’d been the instigator. He was only going along.

“I will. I trust in your honesty.” When she knew so very little of him. “You’ve no reason to lie.” He hadn’t. If he chose to throw her aside, he would still have less to lose than her. Excepting his teeth, might be, if her brothers took it into their head to avenge her.

But Rhaegar had no fear of that. “You do not need to stop. Not with me.” His grip grew in strength. He wondered briefly why she did not pull away, fearing he might bruise her. But if Lyanna minded the heavy handling, she showed no sign for it. “I know not what matter it makes, but I want you. A less patient man might have used actions to prove his point.” With that he pushed her away lightly. “Be grateful I’ve yet the mind for it.” His hands remained on her hips, anchoring her.
“The tree that does not bend in the storm breaks.” He chuckled at her words. Whether she meant she was the tree, he could not guess. “If I told you I wish to wed on the morrow, what would you say?”

“Wed me on this night, sweet lady,” he answered at once. “Wed me at sundown or before the moon is high upon the sky. But do not make me wait until the morrow. Be kind and take pity on me.”

“Only if Your Grace keeps his word and take me riding,” her sing-song answer dispelled his fears. “Else it shall be another week more.”

“I’ll have expired from the sheer pain of it by then.”
Idus Aprilis Habitum Est Concilium Hoc In Monte Romarici

Veris in temporibus sub Aprilis Idibus
habuit concilium Romarici montium
puellaris contio montis in coenobio.

Tale non audivimus nec fuisse credimus
in terrarum spatio a mundi principio.
Tale numquam factum est sed neque futurum est.

In eo concilio de solo negotio
Amoris tractatum est, quod in nullo factum est;
sed de Evangelio nulla fuit mentio.

Nemo qui vir dicitur illuc intromititur.
Quidam tamen aderant qui de longe venerant.
Non fuerunt laici sed honesti clerici.

Ianua Tullensibus aperitur omnibus
quorum ad solacium factum est concilium.
Hos honestos sentiunt, intus et suscipiunt.

“Aenar, what is this about?” she laughed even as the Prince pulled her along, his steps uneven in the most comedic of ways. He looked as though he was fleeing battle. Which was naught as she’d expected when he came to find her. But then, Aenar was the fearful brother. Still, that did not mean he had need to rip her arm from the body. She tugged on the limb, hoping to free it. “Slow down.”

No such good fortune. His grip was iron-hard. “Your Grace, I’ll fall.”

That stopped him short. Aenar turned around with a sheepish expression. “’Tis best if we move as
fast as possible. Pray, ask no more questions and follow along.” It was not as though she’d received adequate answers as it were. Lyanna sighed heavily and caught hold of her skirts with her free hand. The impediment was lifted slightly allowing for more mobility.

“This had better be worth it,” she warned when he began leading her once more. Aenar was not a prankster. He enthused at watching other go about their devious ways and seemed to always know when a plot was being hatched, but he never so much as breathed the wrong way. The gods knew what a straight-laced, staid mind like his could have come up with.

She would rather be with her own betrothed. But apparently their morning ride had given him enough time in her company for the time being and he’d hied himself off with a solemn promise of return. Lyanna had been deposited before her door, with her mother close by and Missy smiling at the sight of her.

It was near noon when Aenar had come for her, a small smile on his face and a proposition she could not refuse. After Rhaegar had departed, her sole preoccupation had been avoiding mother’s prodding questions. The sudden appearance of salvation was both unexpected and thoroughly welcomed. Thus she found herself being dragged about the gardens with nary a guard in sight. In fact, it seemed as though the entire population of the keep had decided to keep away from this particular spot, although why they should eluded her. Which, of course, gave rise to many a suspicion.

Not regarding her safety. Aenar hadn’t a thought towards her that went beyond vague appreciation, she was certain. But rather her mind strained to piece together these strange requests of members of the royal family. If Rhaegar was most direct in his approach, the others not so much and they were the ones who worried her. The danger was that she’d be caught in the webs they weaved and never find her way out of that maze of scheming and deception. She hadn’t been raised to wed a Prince for naught.

Still, there was little she could do at this point. She’d agreed to go along and now she had to see it through, no matter that she’d rather hunt down dragons of her own. Her feet moved of their own accord, pumping strongly to keep up with Aenar’s ground-eating strides.

But at long last they reached whatever point he’d been searching for. He let go of her arm, pain flaring in her wrist from the grip he’d exerted. She, who’d not been expecting to be so swiftly let go of, stumbled over her feet and nearly tumbled to the ground. And then, when she saw who made his way into the path, she did wish she’d tumbled. Anger rose to a roaring peak.

“Your Grace, I do not appreciate jests done in poor taste.” Aenar turned at her words and gave her a pleading look. Like the drawstring of a purse, her lips pulled in a firm line, unimpressed. “I do believe I shall return,” she promptly spoke loudly over any protests that might have ensued.

“Father’s beard,” the other Prince exploded. “Will you spend your whole life in a huff? I’ve already apologise. What else do you wish me to do?” His bristling did not elicit much of a reaction from her. “I am not your enemy.”

Gritting her teeth, Lyanna moved around Aenar, but he, reading her too well, caught her by the waist and stopped her mounting assault. “My lady, pray keep your calm. My brother only wishes to speak to you and mend the fences.”

The only thing she was going to men though was his head, with the flat of her palm; Lyanna struggled against the man’s hold. “I do not care for his wishes. I believe I have told you, Your Grace, that I do not care for further conversation.”

Baelor rolled his eyes and nodded towards Aenar who released her. “Well, I do care. So sit down
and listen.”

Her mouth fell open, but his hands were already on her shoulders, pushing her upon a stone bench. The cool, smooth stone beneath her rendered her as much a prisoner as chains would. Baelor kept himself in front of her with Aenar moving away, just out if earshot. He remained yet close enough to intervene should there be need. For whose benefit he planned to do so, she could hardly tell. What Lyanna did know, however, was that as soon as she’d heard whatever it was that Baelor insisted he tell her, she would find a way to have both their heads knocked over something proper. If only her brother had come along. But nay, ‘twas only father and he would just as likely blow the matter out of proportions.

Settling upon the cold surface, she leaned away from Baelor’s touch, reining in the impulse to brush at her shoulders. She would not give him any satisfaction. Lyanna blinked up at him, her eyes only furtively moving towards the other Prince. Her mind focused on the slow movements. It seemed almost as though he was guarding. “Well, Your Grace, get on with it. I haven’t all day.” She just wished to return to her own bedchamber and plan. The tightness of his face inspired very little desire for conversation in her.

“I know, my lady. I promise not to abuse your good will.” He was pulling her leg; Lyanna ought to have expected as much. “But I must be allowed to explain myself. If you will.” She nodded, unwilling to answer with words. “I thought you knew. I thought I’d explained it better.”

“Explained what better?” Instinctively, she narrowed her eyes.

“That I never meant to cause trouble. Shaena and I merely meant to let our parents know and not make a fuss.” It was the earnest look on his face that did her in. She could do little more but sigh and relax her shoulders. “I was going to write. Before I left, do you remember what I told you?”

Struck dumb, she struggled to keep her thoughts orderly as his words recalled to mind their last conversation before he’d left for King’s Landing. She ought to have caught on since that time. “To wait on your word, and that I should be very glad when I’d received it.”

“I meant to speak with my brother myself. This has all turned out to be a night terror.” He sat down next to her. “I should have been more careful, but I confess Shaena took me by surprise when she announced she was with child. I did not move fast enough.”

“And when were you planning to tell your kin?” she cut in, crossing her arms over her chest. “When she grew as big as a house? Before her wedding day? Before our wedding day?”

“Before any of it could degenerate into a conflict. Do you not see, Lyanna? A house divided shall perish at the first attack from without.” His shoulders rose, as though such a gesture might aid him. “Since ‘tis all done now, would it not be better if we attempted to work together. You needn’t speak to me again, if you do not wish it, but I’ve no desire for animosity between us.”

Her eyebrow rose high. Arms fell at her sides. “And why would you ask this of me. Should you not go to your brother with this? As his wife I shall, naturally, follow his lead, and if he should wish to cooperate with you, then so shall I.”

Baelor glanced up at the skies. “Rhaegar will never let it go on his own. You don’t know him like I do. He is not a man one crosses with an easy heart.”

“Then you ought to have thought better about it,” she replied dryly, shifting slightly as the folds of her kirtle trembled as a gust of wind rolled past them. “I would not dream to intervene in such a conflict.” A smile curled her lips. “Did you think I would take a risk for you now?”
His ashen face was the first response she received. “It amuses you, I suppose, to see yourself as receiving the short end of the stick. I thought you were better.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” She rose from her seat and shook out her skirts. “I must away, Your Grace.”

Mother smiled, lips curling in what Lyanna had always thought was her best weapon yet. Lyarra Stark was not shy though. She displayed a thin ribbon of teeth before the smile collapsed into a less showy version. But the Crown Prince had been won over at the very beginning. In fact, he smiled back at her in a way that was decidedly telling. If ever there was need of charming enemies into submission, Lyanna would make certain to volunteer her mother for the task. Before long the enemies would be soundly defeated. And without so much as a drop of blood shed.

“And so, Your Grace, I thought it best that we still leave a few days between then and the wedding. I am certain the High Septon can work on his delivery in such a time frame.” She was not at all pleased though. Lyanna fought against a frown, eyes locking with Rhaegar’s. He’d not protested to the delay, though she thought he might, but she supposed that dragging the High Septon from his sickbed would not help matters any.

Rhaegar’s mother was nodding approvingly. “We have worked the details between the two of us,” Rhaella said, a light grin pinned to her face. “It is the best solution.”

Lyanna was certain that if her features pinched anymore than they did in that moment, her visage would crack like a broken looking glass. Relaxing her features, she forced a light breath into her lungs. She nearly missed the signal that the conversation was over. Nevertheless, over it was, for her mother’s hand was upon her shoulder.

“Come along, Lyanna.” They departed with light bobs, leaving behind the members of the royal family. Her mother must have sensed her displeasure, for her hand caught hers and gave a light squeeze. “You truly had your heart set on the morrow, child?”
“Why not? ’Tis all because the septon is ill that it cannot happen. I still do not understand why it cannot simply be another septon to do it. It is just words, after all.” She swayed lightly as they reached the stairs, the sudden flare of anger upsetting her balance.

“This is their custom. And it seems to be that the High Septon is indispensible to their cause. A few days is not long, and you must admit your decision arrived most unexpectedly. After all, you’d requested half a moon’s turn.” That she could not argue with. But still, Lyanna did not let go of her annoyance. “Tell me truly now, why do you wish to wed in such haste?”

Those words she could not say. Lyanna shrugged, as though unknowing. “I just wish to wed.” Her mother made no comment, but simply led her to her own bedchamber and sat her down. With a knowing look, she moved to the chest at the end of the bed. The lid rose, then fell.

“Lyanna, Lyanna.” Her mother released a lone loud breath. “If you wish to wed, then we must speak.” Her own expression hastily lost its hint of pleasure. Lyanna knew what that meant. She closed her eyes. “It cannot be avoided.”

“I’ve no wish to avoid it.” But she did wish to avoid it. With three brothers and living in a gargantuan keep, Lyanna did not think her knowledge could have been avoided even if she’d actively tried. More to the point, Brandon’s frequent visits home provided a lot of late night entertainment. From the hushed titters she sometimes heard to that one sighting of her brother shamelessly wandering the halls with only his breeches on, every little instance would make it impossible to remain ignorant.

And mother must have gone through it too. She had the children to show for it. And kissing was nice. She’d enjoyed that. Lyarra cleared her throat. Lyanna’s attention snapped to her mother. “Are you certain?” The teasing note was lost in a worried glance at her hasty nod. “Might be it would be better to begin with what you know.”

Effectively jumping from her position, Lyanna’s eyes widened. “How would I know aught at all? Mother, I thought I was not supposed to be aware of any of it.” Or at the very least that she was not supposed to let on that she knew. The knowing look quelled her protests. “Very well. But it is ubiquitous and I could not avoid it. And besides, ’twas Benjen who tricked me into walking in the stables that late.”

Her mother’s smile returned, wider than before. “Horses. I should have known.” She shook her head. “Humans are not horses.” The simple assertion had Lyanna blinking. “It is not quite as you saw. There, there, no need to allow your imagination to run wild.”

Lyanna frowned. “My imagination is perfectly proper, mother.” She flushed. But her mother took that with a good dose of indulgence and held out to her a kirtle. Lyanna accepted the offering. “are we truly to have this conversation now?”

“I’d been hoping we might be done with it, unless you wish me to tell you on your wedding day only.” That seemed even crueler. Her resigned mien was all her mother needed to begin. “Luckily for us, my dear, we are not mares and are not expected to endure boorish attention with a whinnie and a toss of the head.”

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“Then what is one supposed to do?” A wealth of information though her mother might be, the ease with which she went about explaining put Lyanna ill at ease.

“Barter.” Thrown into confusion, Lyanna resisted the urge to demand a pertinent explanation. “Your betrothed looks as though he might appreciate it.” That she knew how to do and from the knowing look on mother’s face, she too was aware of it. Birds had gone atwittering, it seemed. “Now let me
That did not sound particularly pleasing. It seemed she would be subjected to the talk regardless of her wishes. Best prepare herself and father all good memories for protection.

If clothes could be set on fire by a prolonged stare and a few accompanying mumbles, Lady Lyanna’s kirtle would be at that point during their meal, very likely a heap of ash at their feet. Not that the thought sat ill with him necessarily, but the way the girl acted, one would swear she’d just been told on the morrow she would be executed. Her disconcert translated into clipped conversation. “I am well, Your Grace.” The assurance flew straight past him.

“Do not make it a habit.” She glanced up at his words, eyes widening almost imperceptibly. “If you do not wish to discuss it, simply say that.” Aenar looked ready to speak. He circumvented his brother’s attempt to gain her attention with a sharp, quelling look. His brother deflated.

The lady cleared her throat. “The subject is,” she paused, lips puckering lightly, “delicate,” his betrothed settled, hands folding in her lap. The display of primness left him cold. He’d know there was aught amiss. “I would not make mention of it in company.”

Intrigued, he leaned in towards her. “You mean you would discuss it if we were alone?” Excellent, he’d needed a reason to pursue her into a hopefully private chamber. Her skin glowed a dull red and she sputtered a reply which never truly made sense. But he was more than satisfied with that and allowed her the peace she undoubtedly craved to finish her meal. He concentrated on his own food, mind working through the reasons for which she might have taken on so sullenly.

As though by mistake her leg touched against his and when he gazed at her, he noted her eyes were on him as well. She said naught. But there was something in her eyes. He could not decipher what it was he saw and she then looked away, leaving him without even the mystery to hand onto.

Time seemed to crawl. It always did when one wished to be in an entirely different place. But somehow he bore the annoyance with good grace. The easy conversation around them flowed to
create a low hum in the background. But when came the time for them to stand, he was swift to move, settling a hand on the small of Lyanna’s back. Her spine quivered. She looked up at him questioningly.

“It seems we’ve matters to speak of.” She gave a slow nod. The smile on her face faltered for just a moment “If you would only look a little less as though I had a mind to eat you up.”

Before she could answer though, Aenar appeared at her side. “Brother, you do know ‘tis not at all the thing to moon over one’s betrothed?”

“I’ll give you reason to moon if you don’t see yourself off,” he answered smoothly. A fly in his ointment, Aenar chuckled.

“That is sure to aid you charm your way into the lady’s heart,” his brother jested. “If you do mean to whisk her off, I suggest you do it before her kin catches on. I believe her father is notorious for his short temper.”

Rolling his eyes, Rhaegar heaved a sigh. Her father had brought her to be wedded. He could hardly protest when the plan worked. Instead of trying to shoo his sibling off once more, he simply guided Lyanna along until they were out in the hallway. But he steered her away from the main hallway.

“Your Grace, is this advisable?” she questioned, stepping over a raised threshold.

“Once we are wedded, we’ll be spending a great amount of time together.” Lyanna gave him a look. “And we will share a host of troubles, I imagine. Now how are we to solve aught if you won’t speak to me.” She blinked, shoulders poised for a shrug. “I am not a mind reader.”

“Take a guess,” she suggested nonchalantly, moving about until she reached a lancet. “I will be better on the morrow.” Unfortunately for her, the morrow was a few long hours away, and he did not care to wait that particular amount of time. “Truly.”

“You said you would speak of whatever it was that bothered you provided we were alone. Now we are.”

Something flared in her eyes. “I never–“

“Very well, you implied it then.”

Her lips pursed. “I am to be wedded soon. Is that not enough?”

“So am I, my lady, and yet I somehow found the wherewithal to string more than a couple of words together in your presence.” Chagrined, she crossed her arms over her chest. Her cheeks burned.

“I do not expect Your Grace would understand.”

“Understand what?” He moved closer, but as she was already glued to the wall, Lyanna had nowhere to retreat. Thus she did not budge an inch.

“That it would embarrass me greatly to put it into words,” the woman finally snapped.

That particular manner of refusal brought a few possibilities to mind. “My lady, if you expect honesty of me, then I demand be paid back in the same coin.”

She swallowed and swayed, as though she meant to move away, but she never left her spot. “I can read men at cards in a tick. One look and I see what their intent is. I thought it would aid me, you
know. But then, I had no idea Baelor meant to do what he’s done and now this.”

“This?” he repeated, the word bouncing odd the walls as he trapped her between his arms. “What is this? And what does my brother have to do with it?”

A horrified chortle slithered past her lips. “You didn’t protest too much at the delay.”

So that had been it. If she was trying to dig him an early grave, she managed it wonderfully. He’d not meant to think about that as it brought earlier words to mind. And then he reminded himself that well as she could read men, she’d likely no idea how to read want. Biting back a smile, he snaked a hand behind her back, peeling her away from the wall she’d pressed herself against.

“What is so amusing?”

“You make anger look very appealing.” His fingers were already twining in her hair.
M-așteptă când soarele apune
Să te răpesc
Așteaptă mult și bine
N-am să sosesc

Pentru că sunt mai tare ca sabia lui Zorro
Întru călare-n bar pe calul din Malboro
Și nu mă pierd
Când spre tine alerg

Her face scrunched up in confusion. “But, Your Grace, that would not be proper at all.” It amused him, just mildly, that she would hold on to propriety in such circumstances. “We cannot simply take off. They’ll wonder where we’ve gone. They might even search.” Her cheeks reddened, lips pressing together as though to suppress the possibility.

Rhaegar surreptitiously glanced at those milling about. “Is it not the privilege of a married mad to take some comfort that his wife will not needlessly oppose him?” His eyes returned to Lyanna’s face, now brighter than before. The blush ran down towards her neck and chest, a light dusting.

“That is the case, aye.” She nodded. Though the gesture was aimed at him, her orbs darted to and fro. “Yet what should they say of us? The sun is yet upon the sky. Your Grace, the High Septon is still about.”

The one good thing that had come out of waiting was that the wedding vows had been exchanged even before it struck noon. That left Rhaegar and his bride in the peculiar position of having a wealth of hors between themselves and the bedding. Which naturally was not aught he took kindly to. Rhaegar had wedded with a purpose in mind.
“And what do you suppose he shall do? He’d already wedded us.” A quiet grin spread across his lips at her affronted look. “I find you are particularly difficult to divest of your maidenly virtue.” Or if not that, than a rather strange specimen caught between prudish sensibilities and wanton desire. Which suited him well enough. If only she would cease worrying about the thoughts of others. “Lady wife, there will be a great many willing to think the worst of us. Why should we allow them any say in our enjoyment though?”

The she-wolf sighed, visibly deflating. “You shall be king one day. What good would come out of alienating potential allies?”

“We’ll make other allies,” he returned simply, slipping his hand around hers. “Besides, I do believe, I’ve no desire to settle for the life of a courtier. I’m certain we shall have time aplenty to know enough lord and ladies that when we are the recipients of this dubious honour which you so freely make use of, we’ll have cartloads of allies.”

Lyanna gave no answer, but she was worrying her lower lip between her teeth, the maddening string of motions particularly egregious considering he was this close to slinging her over his shoulder. “What of our kin. Surely they would take offence at this breach of protocol.”

“Fortunately, lady wife, I wedded you, not your family, nor did you wed mine. And I imagine provided we do not proceed before them they shan’t be too offended. As I understand it, ’tis quite forgivable these days to spend time with one’s spouse.”

“Naught I say shall convince you this is folly.” Lyanna had not put it as a question to him, but he gave a slight, hesitant nod for good measure.

“Unless you do not wish to.” For a brief moment she seemed taken aback. But then understanding suffused her features. Instead of answering right away, the woman turned her face so that a stumbling Lord Royce was in her line of sight. He willed her to offer answer though, by entwining their fingers together and kneading his thumb into the back of her hand.

If by some incredible turnabout she concluded she did not wish to, what would he do? He’d thought whatever misgivings plagued her a few days past, they had been resolved; with, it had to be said, the patience of a saint on his part. But if by some astronomical misfortune that were the case, he supposed he ought to explain to her what exactly she’d agreed to, just in case her mind had been elsewhere.

Thankfully, it would not come to it, for once her gaze slid back to his, Lyanna gave a light nod and leaned in. “Very well. I agree. Let us do as you say.”

Exhaling in relief, Rhaegar continued to hold her hand. “I knew my charm would win you over, eventually.” His assured answer elicited a giggle from her.

“’Twas not so much the charm,” she managed. A servant approached, filling her cup. He raised one eyebrow at that. “I am terrified that I might have to do my duty towards these charming guests and my dress could not possibly survive such banter, let alone my dignity. ’Tis not a custom of the North, you know.”

“What do they do in the North, steal the maidens from their beds?” He was teasing and she caught on, she must have, for her smile never waned.

“Not at all, we are not savages.” Her lips stretched wider. “Or might be we are just a little savage. I would not mind the stealing bit necessarily, Your Grace.” A shrug moved her shoulders.
“I’ll keep that in mind.” Which was no lie. He would at one point or another, make the time to steal her away. From Winterfell. In fact, the idea gained appeal by the moment. “Come along then, lady wife, and let us see if we can run off together without anyone taking note.”

The plan was fairly simple to get across. Since the great hall allowed for many comings and goings, all they had to do was slowly make their way through those gathered and reach the door. From there on, they could proceed up the stairs towards an adequate bedchamber and promptly lock the door. Lyanna nodded along, genuine interest seeping along the lines of excitement.

And off they went. As to not make their intentions obvious each had taken a different path towards the door, speaking to guests and generally maintaining an air of careless cheer.

Myles when he’d reached him clapped an arm around his shoulders. “Your Grace, I see your wolf is roaming about unchecked. Is that wise? By the face drunk Os is pulling, I’d say trouble is brewing.”

“The North hasn’t any hothouse plants to give out, my friend; I thought, great expert that you were, this detail would have no escaped you.” Myles chuckled at the blatant rebuff and took a swing of his ale. Still, Rhaegar took a peek over his shoulder. Lyanna was indeed speaking to the man but her smile was cool, as though she was impervious to his advances.

“Your mouth says one thing and your eyes another,” his friend jolted him out of the perusal. “Never fear, I thought I saw Dayne somewhere nearby. Your lady is safe from any drunken babbling about her great beauty and such. Of course, until Your Grace has a few cups.”

“How ill-thought out to drink myself into such a state it would be. I do not plan to do aught of the kind.” But then again Myles did not know why the two of them had left the dais. And he did not wish to enlighten him. Thus Rhaegar merely offered a thin smile.

Richard materialised at their side as well in the ensuing silence. “Your Grace, I see Dayne has taken it upon himself to ward off any attention given to the bride. Shall we expect to have out finger rapped as well later?”

“It would depend,” he replied, resisting the urge to search for Lyanna a second time. Arthur, for all his teasing, was worthy of his trust.

“Do tell,” Richard encouraged, holding his own cup with the greatest care. One would be pardoned in guessing he loved the damned thing as much as he would a wife. “We’re all agog.”

“On whether you deserve a rap or not. And knowing the two of you, I’d venture that you do.” Boisterous laughter answered his quip.

“The lady would not complain of it. You’ve said it yourself, she’s no need of careful handling,” Myles chipped in after he’d calmed somewhat. “I’d wager my fortune that she would not complain at the attention."

“You mean your two coppers,” a new voice insinuated its way into the conversation. Arthur Dayne stood at their left. “Best keep those for whores, my friend. I’m sure they’ll be more appreciative. Your Grace, for some odd reason, Lord Velaryon is most interested in exchanging words. Might be it would be wise to indulge him.”

Given that he was not a fool and knew well enough Lord Velaryon had been in his cups after the first two drinks he’d had, the man could simply not hold his liquor, Rhaegar dared a glance to where he’d last seen Lyanna. This time, she was very near the door, speaking to a maiden whose named escaped him.
“I suppose I ought to,” he agreed to Arthur’s suggestion, careful to ignore the knowing look sent his way. After all, he was the one who had a tad more to win in this life. Lord Velaryon was resting upon a bench arranged against the wall, as though the drink had felled him, not simply addled his brains.

She slipped without, a faint excuse still upon her lips as she disengaged from her collocutor. Her nerves jangled unpleasantly. It did not thrill her to have to lie on that particular account. The trouble was, she’d never been a master liar except to assure her adversaries that she had a worse hand than she truly did. Still, she’d managed to somehow swallow the task.

Once in the corridor, she flattened herself against the cool stones, waiting for the arrival of her husband. Although, the one thing she could hardly understand was why he could not wait a few hours longer. Granted, ‘twas not particularly pleasing to have to wait, but it would surely mean lesser fuss. As matters stood, she half feared the keep would be knocking on doors, or worse yet tearing them down.

She breathed in deeply, eyes closing for a brief conversation with the gods. While she could not be certain those higher beings listened to the requests of a lowly mortal such as herself, given the weirwood was some distance away from where she stood, Lyanna was fairly certain her own heart felt all the better for it.

Aught touched her shoulder, forcing her eyes opened. She’d never even heard his footfalls upon the ground. For all that her husband made his presence clear, fingers splayed upon her shoulder. “You did very well.”

“You took too long.” The words very nearly did not leave her lips. Rhaegar took the teasing with good cheer, hand sliding from shoulder to elbow, gripping just below. “I thought you’d changed your mind,” Lyanna advanced, seeing that she was well received.

“Gods nay. I fear courtiers are difficult to throw over. Shall we proceed?” Able to recognise the look in his eyes as foreshadowing for aught thrilling, she nodded vigorously. “Away we go then. Come,
we haven’t much time.”

Naturally they did not. She dug her fingers into the folds of her dress and lifted, the hem climbing higher as she took the first step forth. From experience, she was prepared for a lively gait and no room for complaints. Rhaegar did not disappoint. Unlike his brother though, he took the necessary precautions, such as keeping a measured grip upon her. Then again, there was quite the difference between a good-brother and a husband. Lyanna smiled to herself, feeling slightly foolish that she wasted her time with these thoughts.

The stairs loomed ahead and they might have reached them faster yet had it not been for a person appearing at their top. With a graceful tug, Rhaegar had them both nestled in the shadows of an alcove, pressed together tightly. The pad of his index finger pressed against her lips.

“Did you see that?” a female voice questioned. “I thought I saw someone just there.” She must have been pointing to a spot.

“’Twas only your imagination.” Her companion was female as well, although by voice she sounded older. “Why would anyone be out here when the food and drink is within? Best you hurry along.”

Since her back was pressed against the solid wall, she had no hope of turning and seeing whose discerning gaze they’d escaped. But Rhaegar must have been able to see them clearly for he shook his head down at her, mouthing that they ought to wait. So wait they did, until naught could be heard.

A few heartbeats trickled by. “Have they gone?” The man glanced down upon her. He nodded, and regrettably pulled away. There was aught about the closeness which left her with a bitter taste of dissatisfaction at his departure. She endured it bravely, nevertheless, not allowing a breath of protest past her lips.

Once ensuring they were no longer in danger of being caught, Rhaegar led them up the stairs. It was reminiscent of olden days in which she’d snuck about with her youngest brother, up to no good. Yet it was vastly different at the same time. Undeniably, her heart beat loudly and the back of her neck pickled uncomfortably with the rush of adrenaline. She wondered, for as long as she allowed her mind to do so, whether they would find the experience mutually pleasing.

Her mother’s words rang in her mind. The gift the Lady of Winterfell had was that all her explanations were of a vague, yet near tangible kind. Which worked to leave Lyanna equally baffled and wound up. She would have to make do with the meagre knowledge Missy had passed onto her.

They’d reached the first floor and passed her bedchamber. With a look towards the door, she wondered if they would stop there. But then her husband simply tugged her along, amusement bleeding into his gaze. “Might be another time, lady wife.” She pulled a face at that, concern fleeing to Missy.

“Might be not, Your Grace,” she murmured. Her servant would likely fall to the floor and never get up if she saw them. It was not Lyanna’s wish to be searching for adequate replacement. Mercifully, it would not be the case. They mounted another round of stairs, this time Rhaegar’s steps slightly less measured.

And then they stood in front of his bedchamber, just the two of them. He did not reach for the door instantly, but allowed his eyes to linger upon her. It was as though he questioned her agreement. Thus her hand reached out to push against the door. It opened with nary a sound, not even a creak of protest at the treatment it received.
She turned away and entered before her mind could convince her to do otherwise. She shoved thoughts of uncertainty from her mind and glanced over her shoulder to make certain he’d followed. She need not have, for he was but a step behind. With his back turned to her, he bared the door against intrusion. Her heart hammered away in her chest. That was it. She was truly going to become a wife, in the shortest amount of time possible.

He turned to face her and she realised with some consternation that the chamber was bathed in light. An attack of shyness had her eyes roaming their surroundings, stopping upon the four-poster bed. It was a rather large specimen, evidently meant to hold more than one person. Her gaze slid back to him, lips parting gently.

He, on the other hand, was not at all lost. In fact, much in the manner of knights in battle, stepped towards her without a drop of bashfulness. It was well that at the very least one of them knew what to make of it, for her limbs had gone numb. “Your Grace–“

“Rhaegar,” he cut in. “There is no need for such formalities when ‘tis just the two of us.” Steering her around, he positioned her so that she faced the window. She felt his fingers at her back. “What did you wish to say?”

“There is too much light.” Between her mother and the septas the Queen had had speaking to her, Lyanna had gathered it was expected that she do her wifely duty in the dark. Or at least as close to it as possible.

From behind her came a chuckle. “You are ever giving me reason to be glad I wedded you.” Her kirtle loosened enough that she had to catch it against her bosom. Warm lips pressed to her skin, where the topmost ribbon of the lacing would have stood. Her back arched involuntarily. “Light is good. It means I can see you.”

She blinked, her mind struggling to understand the reasoning as he walked around her, effectively blocking the light from without. “Why would you want to?” A lady was as beautiful as her artifice was exquisite. If he stripped away all of her fine silks, what armour did she have left? As she ruminated upon the matter, Rhaegar gently coaxed her hands into releasing the front of her kirtle.

The light shift beneath peeked as he pushed the garment down until her arms were trapped against her body. “It makes everything better.” Such a simple answer. Lyanna looked up into his face, trying to gauge his sincerity. All she saw was unguarded hunger.

Aught like amazement slipped into her veins. Had she done that? She must have. “Kiss me?”

He did. A tender press of lips, cajoling her mouth to open to his own. This Lyanna knew how to handle. She parted her lips and waited not for him to move but mounted a campaign of her own. Then her arms were free of their shackled and wrapping around Rhaegar’s shoulders as he hoisted her up. Even though she’d not danced such a dance before, her limbs followed the song without trouble.

A rather peculiar pressure against her abdomen caused a small moan to flitter past her lips. She’d not been prepared for that when he dragged her against him. But it was not unpleasant. By the dull burn in the pit of her stomach, it was encouraging.
“Your Grace,” the woman said, lips quirking slightly, “might be I could be of aid.” Rhaella slid her
gaze from the door towards Lyarra Stark. The she-wolf blinked, her smile never faltering. She’d
been in an exceptionally good mood for a while. But then that might be the ale.

“I was looking for the newlyweds,” she admitted after a moment of silent consideration. “But they
seem to have vanished into thin air.” Once more, she allowed her gaze to venture from lancets to
doors, hoping she’d catch a glimpse of her good-daughter and her son. “I could have sworn she’d
been speaking to some other maidens.”

“I do believe I saw His Grace with his squires and Ser Dayne.” Both of them looked in that
direction. The squires were still drinking, and Ser Arthur Dayne supervised them, as though to
proclaim one or the other as winner. Alas, no sight of her son.

They shared a look. “Might be if we took a turn about the hall.” It was a long hall. Rhaella nodded
her head, looping her arm through Lyarra’s. They proceeded towards the edge and made a slow turn
along the length of the floors.

While she glanced at the seated guests, the other checked the standing rows. To no avail. Either their
children had discovered a manner of becoming invisible, or they were not within the chamber. Out of
the two, Rhaella preferred neither. How was she to keep a close eye on them? She’d thought
delaying them might work.

“Is it rather hot in here,” she dared, prompting the other woman to look at her. “Let us go without for
but a moment.”

Apparently propriety counted as little to those two as it had to Aegon the Fourth. Though they
searched up and down, there was neither hide nor hair of them. Convinced they’d scoured every last
inch they could think of, the two stopped in the middle of the long corridor. Lyarra made to move
forth, no doubt return to her husband’s side, but Rhaella’s eyes lingered upon the spiralling stairs, an
idea taking root in her mind.

“My good-daughter, just how anxious was she at the prospect of her wifely duties.” Her
companion’s eyes widened a fraction. Rhaella did not repeat her question, but she schooled her
features into a mask of cool neutrality.

“My good-son, just how eager was he to do his own duties by his new wife?” the Northerner
retorted in kind, her face flushing with one she could only assume was irritation. “I do not think it fair
you blame aught on my child. She was perfectly content to wait.”

“And yet when my son pressed her she followed through with nary a protest.” It was one thing to
suggest a couple was well-matched, it was quite another to insult her child and expect it to be taken
with good grace. “Look at this. What shall we do when the guests learn they’ve taken off?”

A sullen silence stretched between them. Lyarra let go of her arm and stepped away. “I daresay it
would be best to find them and pull them apart. With a bit of good fortune we shall be just on time.”
But Rhaella was already shaking her head, the force of her motion nearly undoing the pins holding
her tresses up.

“Pulling them apart at this point might be a mistake. What will said if we bring them back as though
we’ve a couple of errant children on our hands? Nay, ‘tis best we pretend ignorance and when
comes the time for the bedding announce the matters has been resolved.” These Northerners; might
be it had been a mistake taking them on for Rhaegar.

“That might just cause more of a problem,” Lady Stark protested. “My daughter would have never
instigated such a scene. She’s a good gods-fearing girl. Would it have been so hard for him to just
wait?” Her lips pursed, head cocking to the side. “I do mean to sound frantic, but my husband shan’t
take kindly to this. Rickard has always been protective of her.”

Rhaella shrugged. “My husband is the same. He swore to lock Velaena away in the Maidenvault as
soon as she arrives here. But given recent events, it is inevitable that she be sent off sooner than he
would have liked. I take it Lord Stark would have waited yet longer to have his daughter wed.”

“Since the day she was born, he’s been telling me that she’ll be a maiden old in age by the time he’d
be able to bear giving her away.” The girl was five-and-ten, hardly that old. “He would have made
Prince Baelor wait at least a couple years longer.”

“And Baelor might have done just that. Rhaegar is not like his brother. Not in that respect. I think he
was charmed from the very beginning.” In that moment a knowing look reflected in the she-wolf’s
eyes. “For better or worse they are man and wife now.”

“It would be unthinkable, I suppose, to come between them.” All the anger deflated from the other. “She enjoyed his company since they sat down together. Do you think the first grandchild shall arrive before the year is past?” A calculating look embossed the woman’s face. She seemed to have begun the counting herself.

Rhaella joined her, numbering the moon turns on her fingers. “If she somehow conceived by the end of this turn,” she answered, a thoughtful sound following on the heels of that. “How long did it take for your firstborn to arrive?”

“Twas two years into my marriage.” Lyarra Stark shook her head. “A lusty babe that one. I thought for certain I would perish birthing him.”

“I had Rhaegar one year into mine.” Might be Lady Lyanna would conceive. “We could give her some motherwort. A brew of that for several days and her womb should quicken with ease. Or we could ask the Grand Maester for aught more potent.”

“I know not. Let us wait a little while. Naught may be lost by it.” Save for hours of counting that was. But neither said a word. “I daresay he desires a son for a first. All men do. But then, a daughter is not so bad either. It’s good omen.”

“A son would be wonderful. And if ’tis a daughter, I am certain it shall only push them to try harder for an heir.” They willingly avoided the issue of her own daughter being in the family way. In fact, though she’d made passing mention of Baelor, the woman had not even hinted towards Shaena. “Shall we return to the hall?”

“We must. Someone might take note of our absence.” Lady Lyarra glanced about. So far only the two of them had gone without. But with the drink and food, more were bound to come out, if only to give work to the keep’s servants. “I shall speak to my lord husband, prepare him.”

Rhaella nodded her head encouragingly. “Go ahead then, I should like to have a few moments.” The she-wolf bobbed her head and returned slowly to the hall, leaving behind her naught but a trail of half-hearted silence.

On her own, Rhaella sieved through the hidden spots for a second time. As before, her son and good-daughter were wholly absent. Their disappearance could only be explained by her earlier intuition. A small prayer lifted from her lips. She would simply have to make it so that all the guests could barely stand on their feet, let alone remember a fragment of what had occurred. It was the conclusion she reached by the end of her search. And none too gladly for it meant her work was doubled.

If only that boy of hers had not rushed ahead. Despite her earlier words, she was well-aware that Rhaegar had been the one to lead his wife away. After all, he’d been prepared to take her to wife the day after she arrived. Her head pulsed with the telltale signs of a migraine. She had need of Aerys. He would know how to best break the news to the guests, but moreover, it was his duty as host. Naught quite like unburdening herself to him.

Rhaella slipped into the great hall as well and slowly made her way to her husband’s side. Once she was down, she tapped his arm lightly. “Do not drink heavily, husband, it seems we have a bit of a problem.”

At her words he replaced his cup upon the table and levelled a scowl her way. “My eldest has just wedded, woman. What do you mean I should not drink heavily?”
“Only that he’s made off with the bride besides,” she offered in a measured voice. Aerys’s eyes grew wider. “Nay, never fear, I do not wish you to go after them.”

“Then what would you have me do?” her brother grumbled, none too pleased to have been robbed of his drink.

“I should like it of you devised a way to keep our guests from tearing down a few doors in their dissatisfaction.”

Her shallow breathing washed over his shoulder, the sting of her bite causing his flesh to throb in the pleasant aftermath. Had he had a mind to look, he was certain the indents her teeth left into his flesh would still be visible. But for the life of him, he could not move. She was still quivering around him, the trembling movements a sort of promise, when a groan spilled past her lips. He could not detect pain, though he did not miss the hazy eyes when he made an effort and lifted off of her.

Rhaegar pulled out, regretful at the loss of heat. She sucked in a breath and followed his retreat with a gentle tilt of her hips. The misty quality of her gaze receded and she blinked away any remnants of obscurity.

“Are you well?” he managed on the heel of a pant.

Even with the curtains guarding them from the sun without, there was more than enough light to make her out clearly. A bit too clearly by his reaction. The poor girl couldn’t be expected to keep up with him deprived of rest. Lyanna pushed herself up on her elbows and nodded; the well of sympathy in him bursting over.

“You’re trembling.” He couldn’t even feel it. Though he did not doubt her words, Rhaegar was unaware that he had been doing just that. “Are you well?” Laughter bubbled on his lips, suppressed only by the fact that his lungs were still getting their fill of air.
Mirroring her earlier reply, he bobbed his head affirmatively. Her swollen lips parted as though in preparation for speech, but only her tongue came out to lick over the taut flesh. He cursed himself silently for following the motion with his eyes. Unaware of his scrutiny, his young wife struggled to lift herself against the headboard. “Is it always like this?”

Why, she was a well full of questions. His attention sharpened, perceiving an advantage in her curiosity. “Like what?” he returned her question, keeping himself away from touching her. Contact would only make his suffering worse.

“So,” she trailed off after the first word, gesturing helplessly. “I do not know a word for it.” The admission of defeat brought a smile to his lips.

“What did you expect?” he pressed, relentless in his pursuit. Her whole face reddened, the blush sliding down her neck to her breasts. Fortunate the man whose wife was as open as that. He waited upon her response.

“I would not know what to expect. They only tell you what your duty is a little while before you wed.” ‘Tis most unfair.” Her lower lip jutted out in a pout. “And then, that very explanation sounds as though it would be hardship.”

Having never been put into such a situation himself, Rhaegar could only lean in expectantly. “Never say they claim it would be thunder and lightning. It was your lady mother you explained it to you, aye?”

She nodded. “And the septas the Queen sent. But that does not mean I was anymore informed after.” Lyanna breathed in, bosom rising with the depths of it. When she noticed him looking, she exhaled, before deliberately repeating the motion in an even more exaggerated manner.

“It seems to me you are knowledgeable enough,” Rhaegar ventured leaning in to kiss her. “Well then was it better than you had expected?” It was a tricky question to ask of her, for though she’d been a maiden, he was rather certain she would not spare his feelings if she was displeased, shyness or not.

His hand slipped between her legs, touching her gently just as she opened her mouth to speak. A hiss came out. “What are you doing?” She did not pull away. But her hand did grip his wrist. “Why are you–“

Rhaegar slid his lips against hers, quelling the question. She was still slick and though her first instinct had been to clamp shut, the intrusion was in the end accepted with a soft moan. She clenched around him. “Does it hurt?” He’d lost himself during the last of it and might have used her rougher than he’d intended.

“Nay.” A flash of aught passed over her features before it was buried away. “It stings; just a tad. I’m just glad we fit.” As though there had ever been question of that. Her expression turned thoughtful. “Does this mean we shall do it again?”

He shook his head, moving gently within her. “Later might be.” With how she was, he would only hurt her. Although the gods knew he wanted to. Disappointment bled into her features. The hand of his wrist retreated. “Don’t take on so,” Rhaegar warned, the flat of his palm meeting soft curls. “I can’t be expected to cause my own wife pain.” He did increase his pace though until she shook like a newborn thing in the first breeze.

If he had to guess, he’d say her maidenhead had been the hurdle. Lyanna hadn’t complained and she’d even attempted to hold her sobs in and for a little while he’d thought he might get away with more than one time. But that was just being greedy.
Lyanna pressed against him, her hips lifting at his retreat, the silent plea just shy of sending his senses tumbling. Rhaegar would not allow for it though. He clamped a metaphorical iron fist around his urges and restrained them. Might be after she’d slept for a few hours. His wife reached out for him, arms flying around his neck when he leaned in close. He slipped a second finger in, pushing them to the knuckles. A whimper drew forth from her lips.

“Too much?” The question was a ghost in her unkempt hair as he held himself still.

“Nay. Please move.” Her tone was clipped. The thrust of her hips was significantly stronger than before.

So he moved, until her breathing was uneven and shaky her lips parting upon a cry. The ring muscles tightened around his fingers. With time, they’d manage to find a rhythm all of their own. But for now, it would have to do. He pulled out of her, his other hand stroking her hair. She pressed forth into his touch, her skin hot and damp where it brushed against his.

In the end she disengaged from him.

“What was that?” she questioned after a few moments, drawing the sheets tighter around her. He suspected the experience had left her too raw. She did not like not having her guard up, he was beginning to understand, nor was she thrilled at any gaps in her understanding.

“Pleasure.” She seemed to accept the answer, for she settled against the pillows once more. He plopped down next to her, on his back, careful to draw the covering over both of them. “It’s aught we were made for, among many other things.”

A hum reached his ears. It was only then that he realised he’d closed his eyes. Rhaegar did not open them, even when she spoke. “I think I understand now why they never tell maidens about this.” A giggle followed. “I cannot imagine anyone not wishing for pleasure.” Her fingers were on his shoulder, stroking. She stopped abruptly. “Did you find yours?”

Thanked be the gods for his unknowing wife. He had to open his eyes and gaze at her then, if only to witness her expression. “Had I found anymore of it, I might have done as Ossifer Plumm.”

Confusion suffused her features. “How would that even be possible? He dies in his old age.” Was that what innocent maidens were told? Rhaegar grinned. “Did he not? Husband.”

“Rumour has it he died on his wedding night,” he said, keeping his voice smooth, “upon seeing his bride unclothed.” Her colour rose. “I never believed that. Dead men don’t sire children.”

“That one seemed not to have much trouble with it. Although Brandon told me it was King Aegon the Unworthy who sired the child.” She lowered herself until her head was resting upon his shoulder. “Why would you believe it was Lord Plumm’s?”

“Was Aegon ever shy of acknowledging his bastards? Had that child been sired by him, the whole realm would have been privy to the secret.” His arm slipped around her, holding her to his side.

“So it can kill? Pleasure?” The hushed awe sent a thrill down his spine.

“In more than one way.” None of which he would be detailing for her, for his own good and for hers as well. “Best you get some rest, lady wife, before ’tis too late for that.”

No answer was forthcoming from her. He looked into her face to see that her eyes were closed, lashes dipping in a kiss. Rhaegar chuckled to himself and gave her a light squeeze. A murmur of protest left her lips but she did not open her eyes. So he closed his own eyes yet again and slid off
into unconsciousness, his wife’s weight.
“Your Majesty,” Aerys spoke softly, taking note that two knights stood far off, despite their gazes following the two of them without blinking. It reminded him of days past, when his father had yet lived. He sighed and moved closer to his grandfather. “‘Tis cold without, might be it would be better to return.”

The man gave no sign that he’d heard. In truth, Aerys had grown used to these spells. They would be speaking and the next he knew the King was wandering off, in a daze, taking whichever road he thought best. Or rather whichever road his memory picked out that particular day. He followed the man closer to the weirwood, coming to stand just behind him.

Aegon glanced over his shoulder, the flicker of awareness in his eyes mitigated only by the laxness of the rest of his features. Instead of turning to face him, though, the King opted to stare back into the carved face, one hand reaching out to touch the dried sap. The stroke of his fingers upon it made
Aerys wonder whether ‘twas the absence of Black Betha or the queer feeling weddings brought which had promoted this display. He would never put such a question forth though.

“Duncan would sometimes come here. Betha encouraged him, you know.” He heard rather than saw the smile in his voice. “Never seen aught stranger. She would not put one foot before the other to reach this place, but she’d send Duncan in her stead.”

Aerys shrugged. His grandmother was in some ways a stranger to him still. She’d never been overly fond of him and he had never been any closer to her. Not that his own mother would have permitted it. “I did not know my uncle kept the old faith.” The mention have been made, he now thought back to what he could remember of Duncan Targaryen. He’d never seemed fond of any manner of gods, be they old or new. The only thing that mattered to him was his bride.

“When the mood struck him, he could be the most pious of men.” Aegon pulled back his hand. The early morning breeze raked its fingers through his hair. “The old gods, the new ones, the Valyrian ones even. No god spared him though.”

Summerhall. Aerys shuddered at the memory. He’d barely managed to pull Rhaella out of the flames. “No man may ride more than one horse at a time,” he allowed himself to speak. His grandfather grunted, the sound akin to agreement. “Do you come here to speak to them, your lady wife and your son?”

“The dead don’t speak, boy. They are too busy mourning.” That he could believe. Aerys shook his head though and glanced at the carved face. The King continued. “It is peaceful here and the troubles of the realm seem far off. Old men enjoy their peace. So tell me, what does Lord Stark desire now that he’s give us a daughter?”

“He is willing to prolong his wait on the remaining bride price as long as his youngest son is found a position at court. It would be wise to indulge him, at least until Velaena is wedded and we’ve the coin to give in full.” It turned out the Crown was fairly fortunate the North had not decided to meddle earlier. Had they been at more of a disadvantage, he suspected Lord Stark might have robbed them blind. “I did not expect him to be so inflexible.”

A cough left the King’s throat. Might be his health was crumbling. Aerys would not put stock in that though. “The power if the North is not to be neglected. If you believe it best, pay the bride price, but know you that the Iron Bank becomes restless?”

“Trade has grown in recent years; if we raise the tax on merchants’ profits, we could easily put an end to our debt. Or we could make use of the Lannister gold mines. Lord Tywin would not hesitate to lend aid, especially if his daughter can be a bride all the sooner for it.”

“The gods save us from what comes after.” Aegon shook his head. “You know the man better than I. One favour calls another and before you know it, you’ll be a clawless dragon. I’ve seen many men of Tywin’s like. More than enough to know you should not seek his favour unless in great need.”

“And the need of the realm is not great?” Aerys protested. He liked the notion no more than the King, but if not Tywin, then who could possibly raise such a sum. “I can oppose him in any scheme he devises. I know his mind.”

“Debt is a heavy bond.” The King turned to look him in the eyes. “My fear is for you. You have yet to see the force required in ending such demands. Do you think that Lord Tywin shall forget he’s done you a favour just because you’ve repaid him? Nay, he shall not and he shall never let you do so either. What will you do under the harsh scrutiny of others should he so choose to avail himself of his saviour status.”
“A moral debt may be circumvented, Your Grace. I need not do aught else but wait for him to take the wrong path.” His brow furrowed heavily, trying to discover aught which might suggest that Tywin would ultimately overstep.

“What punishment can one dole out to a man whose child shall be as a daughter to you?” And therein lay the problem. A glimmer in the King’s gaze quelled the answer Aerys thought of. “No matter your choice, the honour of our house will suffer. My sons have done more than enough to attract the censure of the realm with their folly. I need you and yours to bring back the grace of the Dragon.”

To that he could not say aught else, but incline his head forth and consider the words. If only there were some way to keep the peace with all and sundry.

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Missy clucked her tongue, though the impish grin gave away her amusement. Behind her, a new face poked within. Lyanna did not recognise the woman though. Thus she turned fully around, abandoning her reflection in the looking glass. “What is this then, have I visitors at such an early hour?”

“Not as such, Your Grace,” the woman behind her servant girl spoke. She entered fully and her garb immediately indicated her position. “I was sent on the orders of His Grace the Crown Prince to keep company with Your Grace until you have chosen maidens of the court or from without.”

Lyanna nodded and bade Missy leave to be off. The servant girl offered but a shrug before she grabbed the linens that she’d left upon the bed and hurried out the door. In the meantime she beckoned the septa forth and nodded towards an empty chair. “I did not expect that His Grace might concern himself with such matters. What is your name?”

“Rohanne, Your Grace.” The septa arranged her skirts about her, the dull grey seemingly out of place amid the cheerfully coloured silk on the seat. Lyanna joined her so that they were facing one
another.

“Rohanne,” she repeated upon a sigh like release of breath. “If we are to keep company you must call me by name when ‘tis just the two of us. After all, in this chamber both you and I are just women, aye?”

A nod came from the woman. “As my lady commands.” She stopped herself from laughing at the fact that the septa had not, indeed, made use of her name. Might be later. Lyanna leaned back in her seat. “Have you given any thought to the companions you wish for?”

“That I haven’t. Would it not be better to observe the ladies before I make any decision?” She reached out for a cake from the tray that had been brought earlier. “I have heard the choice is best made keeping in mind I must gather support alongside their friendship. But the trouble is danger is never far behind.”

“My lady was right from the start. Observing them would be best. I could make a list if any requirements are needed.” Studying the young woman’s face, Lyanna thought upon the proposition for a few moments. A list; that was just what she needed. A vigorous nod came in answer. “Well, my lady, what do you seek in a companion.”

“Blind devotion and mute adoration, preferably four legs and a lolling tongue.” She could not resist temptation. A wide smile broke over her face. “My apologies, human companions I oft find inferior to canine ones.”

“Presumably so do the rest of us. Unfortunately, I have it on good authority these companions must be human.” Good humour from a septa? That was most unexpected. The woman smiled in return and tapped one foot lightly to the floor. “Best we concentrate on what makes good human company.”

Somehow Lyanna reined in her disappointment. “Let us proceed.” As to the matter of companions, she’d not lied when she let it be understood that nary a thought for the topic crossed her mind. Benjen had been her most constant companion and then there had been Baelor and Missy. Unfortunately, it had never truly occurred to her that she might have to accommodate others. She rattled a few characteristics off the top of her mind, wondering briefly whether such a paragon could possibly exist.

But the septa did not seem concerned in the least. She had retrieved a quill and ink as Lyanna spoke and was writing down her words upon a strip of paper. They sieved together though the members currently at court, debating the worth of pursuing several acquaintances.

“Consider, my lady, that the Redwynes have considerable influence, moreover, there are breaches to be mended there. Rya Redwyne is arguably the best choice of the lot; smart, accomplished and, above all, measured. Her sister Serra would do as well, were she not to be wedded so soon.” She acquiesced to the septa’s words upon further consideration.

“Shiera Blackwood seems as though she’d be worth co-opting. She is kin to the deceased Queen, is she not?” And of the old faith besides. “A bit young though. Would her family allow her into my keeping, do you think?”

Septa Rohanne made an approving sound. “There is always Donella Lolliston, if Shiera’s kin will not permit it. A bit of a wondering eye on that one, but when she puts her mind to something, you can be certain the task will be accomplished.” She scribbled that one down as well. “And last, but not least, Mercia Coldwater. It is said her father wishes to wed her into House Royce.”
“The next Lady Royce, I see,” Lyanna laughed. “I will be sure to encourage the match. What does Lord Royce think?”

“He would be glad to have his line extended, as far as I know, my lady.” The septa waved her head in a manner that suggested dismissal. “It is Lady Mercia who finds she needs time.”

Well, that one she knew how to solve. She relaxed in her seat and allowed a satisfied smile to curve her lips. “I believe we have enough options for the beginning. Say, good septa, were you named for the famed Rohanne Webber, by chance?”

The woman had a smile of her own for that. “More than that, my lady; I was born into her house. For all the good that did me, I haven’t the lady’s fortune of making a home of my own. My mother was widowed young and decided I should be given to the Faith.”

“I am sorry for your loss. It must have been difficult to endure.” Platitudes had a way of making one feel inadequate.

“It has been long enough that any discomfort is negligible. And I cannot rightly complain.” Her writing was back upon the table. “I shall inquire into these options for a start and will return with answers.”

Pain bloomed in his side, disturbing his balance. Aenar took advantage of it and knocked his across the chest, sending him reeling backwards. “Make a deal with me,” his brother called, resting the flat of his sword against one shoulder, a lopsided grin across his face.

Rhaegar struck his sword into the ground and shielded his gaze against the sun. “What manner of deal do you have in mind?”

Aenar rubbed a thumb to the corner of his mouth, the split lip still bled. “I’ve been thinking, now that you are a wedded man, chances are, you are a happier one as well.” A small snort punctuated the meaning; more than enough for Rhaegar to reach for the handle of his sword. “Now see here; I am
your brother. And I only mean that I am pleased.”

“And I only meant to have a weapon close at hand,” he returned without a moment’s hesitation. “Aenar, do you want aught of me, or do you simply feel like wasting my time?” He could have been back in his chamber with Lyanna. In fact, Rhaegar was growing more and more annoyed by the second, thinking that he could have easily convinced her bride there was no need to go without, and yet he hadn’t, in a bid to simulate at least a modicum of decorum.

Respectability be damned, he would rather be locked in his bedchamber.

“I feel like I’ve a proposition and you ought to listen to it.” Rhaegar nodded. “After you left, father and Lord Stark had a most interesting discussion. It was about Lady Lyanna’s bride price. Have you taken the time to look over the marriage contract?”

The only contract there was had been between Lyanna and Baelor. Rhaegar hadn’t had the desire to look it over before, let alone after Lyanna became his betrothed. Thus he answered in the simplest of manner. He denied having seen it. “I thought so,” Aenar spoke. “Had you done so, you might have seen the provisions father made. I think he was even more certain than you that naught would impede that wedding. Lady Lyanna’s bride price was augmented with a considerable sum when Baelor withdrew.”

“The deposit?” It was only common that a deposit be made in the first place. “How high was it set?”

“The deposit was of five hundred dragons initially. And father added five hundred more. But the contract kept to only five hundred. The trouble is, the penalty from withdrawing requires that four times the deposit be paid.”

“So Lord Stark demands that he be paid four times those five hundred dragons?” Absurd, given that he had had a wedding. Rhaegar straightened, releasing the hilt. “He demanded four thousand, but since the contract suffered no modifications his expectations were drastically lowered. Be that as it may, four thousand or fifteen hundred dragons, it’s all the same to us; we cannot shoulder it. Especially now that Lord Darklyn has begun making trouble once more.”

“And what would you have me do?” It sounded as though the North was trying to force the Crown’s hand, although what they could possibly do now that they’d wedded, Rhaegar couldn’t fathom. “I doubt I could produce the coin.”

“Nay, but you are the Crown prince’s oldest son and you wish to travel the realm.” Aenar stepped forth until they were near enough to speak in hushed tones. “Denys Darklyn is not a fool. But the trade in his land is dying. He’d be willing to pay good coin for a reprieve, and even better for a charter. You know father would never allow for it unless he had good reason to and the King is too easily swayed.”

“I should think gold dragons are as good a reason as any when there is need,” he offered, dubious. “Lord Darklyn has threatened many a time to stop paying his taxes and has failed just as many times to keep his oath. Why should now be the time he chooses to go through with it?”

“To put it simply, because Lord Lannister has confiscated one of their ships. I’ve seen the message addressed to the King. The loss is a heavy one and he swears that should the situation not be rectified he will no longer be paying the tithes. But you know as well as I that what the Lion takes he does not give back.”

“You want me to find a way to give Lord Darklyn his goods back and at the same time make certain
Lord Lannister does not intervene?” Aenar nodded, as though that single motion would somehow aid him. Rhaegar groaned. “Brother, has it ever occurred to you that you, as Lady Cersei betrothed, might write to the man?”

“I would never. I do believe my opinion shall only matter once the vows have been exchanged and even than I cannot be too certain. The trouble with Tywin Lannister is that he’d already the notoriety necessary to do as he wills. As for Lord Darklyn, a little bit of aid goes a long way.” The younger brother pulled out a strip of paper and slid it into Rhaegar’s hand. “You haven’t much time to consider it, the matter has yet to reach the King, but it soon shall. By the morrow, I am certain it will be discussed.”

And that was that apparently. Aenar retreated and positioned his blade for attack. Rhaegar wasted no time in retrieving his own steel and blocking the blow. He pushed back, the sudden shove forcing Aenar to change his guard so that he might protect his torso. Still, he managed to kick his legs from under him, the younger dragon crashing onto his back with a grunt.

“Don’t stand so close to the enemy if you can help it,” Rhaegar advised, bringing the tip of his sword to rest between the head and shoulder of his fallen foe. “It could bring about your death when you least expect it.”

The weapon clattered to the ground and he held a hand out.
Society is indeed a contract. It is a partnership ... not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.

His whole body froze at the sight, muscles contracting painfully as the slow trickle of anger sieved through the small cracks of his control. He did not mind per se that the King and his father would wish to discuss the matter with Baelor as well, but he did not wish himself present to heart it. Nevertheless, Baelor did enter the solar and Aenar followed close behind. And he had no choice but to remain where he was and continue.

“The galleon carried a large amount of silk and spices, not to mention the silver,” he spoke, praying his voice showed naught of his agitation. “Lord Darklyn has a right to intervene when the interests of his people call for it. And Lord Lannister ought to know the sea that far from the coast does not belong to him.”

“That is what Lord Darklyn claims,” his father shook his head, “Tywin writes they entered Lannister territory and refused to pay the levy. To confiscate those goods was the only solution. We are having our leg pulled, and in not even remotely amusing a fashion.”

Aenar chose that particular moment to jump into the conversation. “And what if Lord Darklyn refuses to pay his taxes any longer. Even with recent developments in King’s Landing, Duskendale’s profits are not to be neglected. If you take the proverbial, the body shall be useless.”

“And if we give in, it shall only open the floodgates. Do you truly believe Lord Darklyn shall stop at only one demand?” The King grumbled aught else Rhaegar did not catch. But the look on his face was telling. “Duskendale shall pay its taxes, like the rest of the realm.”
“Not in the Crown offered no sigh of good-faith in exchange,” Aenar impressed upon them with utmost urgency. “We can try finding a solution now, before ‘tis too late, or we can wait to collect tax and when they give us naught descend upon them with an army. The cost will be greater to keep men at siege than it would be to negotiate.”

“I am in agreement with my brother,” Rhaegar intervened. “If Lord Darklyn turns out to be too demanding, then we can always summon that army. But it should not be the case that we allow our fears to rule us from the very beginning. The man, after all, is trying to protect him home. Laudable in anyone, I should say.”

“Laudable,” Aerys muttered upon a sigh. “Matters are not that simple. There is a rivalry between those two that shan’t fade simply because they’ve negotiated. Your intentions are good, but you have not seen the lengths to which they can go in order to achieve their goals.”

“Then we shall quell the rivalry,” Baelor spoke up. “By word or force of arms, it makes no matter, as long as they quieten, does it?”

“If the Lion takes it into his head that ‘tis a slight upon his house, it will end badly,” their father answered, his fear clear. The Lannister question had haunted the lands ever since Tywin Lannister took up arms and subjugated the Westerlands in the wake of his father’s disastrous lordship. A single slight was one slight too many and he would retaliate. “We do not afford that army you speak of, not against Tywin Lannister.”

“Then we had best make certain it does not come to it,” Rhaegar pressed. “Let us at the very least attempt to solve the matter before we declare it a lost cause.” He doubted Lord Lannister would mount an attack if his own presence was made known. Even those great forces had to take into account that there were six other kingdoms who would not take it amiss if they were promised a bit of land. How many landless knights waited with baited breaths?

“A pleased Lord Darklyn might very well supply us with the needed coin to appease our other creditors,” Aenar put it to them. “The gods know their patience is as thin as a thread. If we act timely, we can use this situation to our advantage.”

“And there is naught lost by trying. If, on the other hand, we neglect our duty, it could well turn out that a great many number of lords have dissatisfactions for which they’d withhold the toll which is due. The question that should be asked here is if we can afford that.” For once in his life, Baelor was thinking straight. Rhaegar would have been pleased in any other circumstances.

Their father seemed to be of a mind. The Crown Prince stood from his seat. “Then you ought to have done yours. Do you know what manner of trouble you have caused us? Did you think at all about aught else but your own desires?”

Pleased as she was to hear his brother given a stern dressing down, Rhaegar knew it was neither the place nor the time. “Your Majesty, Your Grace, let us not deviate from the subject. I am willing to go myself and negotiate matters with Lord Darklyn. Should that fail, I trust you will know best what to do.”

“And how can you be certain Lord Darklyn shan’t take it as sign that he is being set upon by the Crown?” the King questioned, his imperturbable calm restoring some sanity to the tension-filled chamber. “You know as well as I that the sight of guards would inspire fear in his heart; especially if he means to withhold our due.”

“There is a simple enough solution to that,” Aenar offered after a moment of silence. “If my brother uses the guise of a visit to conduct his business no one should look at it askance.”
His heart hammered away in his chest as realisation settled. His first instinct was to refuse. But his mind stopped the words from coming. Caught between the urgency of the matter and his duty towards a fledgling relationship, he could do little but turn to gaze at his brother. Yet Aenar was completely serious.

Rhaegar entered his bedchamber, the palm rubbing at the back of his neck pausing midstroke as his eyes landed on the figure sitting upon the edge of the bed. His wife, seated comfortably was watching him back, a slight smile stuck to her lips as though she’d been waiting just for him to share it with. The ache pounding at his temples dulled.

“So this is where you’ve run off to,” he managed, breaking his gaze away from her face. The wide tub placed near the hearth gave him a fair idea of what she’d been up to.

All day long he’d been going back and forth with the King and his father, arguing over what they ought to do with the debt until he thought he’d go blue in the face and choke upon his own words. But then they’d reached a standstill, each more than willing to pursue other activities for the time being. He’d only thought of his own bedchamber and his lovely wife. And there she was, with her legs upon the wooden chest, gazing intently at him.

“I am glad you found your way back, husband,” she said, gesturing towards the tub. “I thought you might wish to relax a tad. After such a difficult day.” Did she know? Rhaegar simply nodded, touched by the sentiment. Lyanna slid off and landed upon her feet. “Have you eaten aught?”

“Aye.” His curt answer was followed by a moment’s lack of attention, as he deposited his sword in its customary place, before he unclasped his cloak. His wife caught the garment in her arms and wrapped it in a neat square, placing it away upon a stood. He’d not expected her to move so fast. But Lyanna took no notice of that, for her fingers fiddled with the strings of his tunic.

“And you are certain you wish for naught else? I could send for something,” the woman offered,
managing to undo the first of the knots with sheer insistence. She moved to the other. “You’ve been locked in that solar for so long. I was worried.”

“Why?” The gentle prodding was met with a hard stare. She made no outward reply, but she stilled herself. Rhaegar looked down into her face, resisting the urge to take it between his hands. “Matters of the realm may often keep me from your side. I hope you do not expect any different.”

“Not that,” the she-wolf dismissed his concern. “I heard about father’s demand. I thought you’d grow angry with me. And I wished to explain.” He undid the second and third knot himself as he listened to her. “I do not know why he would make a fuss over the bride price, but the additional five hundred dragons were given by His Grace over a promise of silversmiths and land in the North.”

“Aye. I’ve seen the documents.” Her shoulders dropped as she relaxed visibly. “I have seen the initial contract as well, along with every other additional page. Your father made quite a few demands of the Crown.” And he was glad he’d witnessed it all. It gave him a much better understanding of what the Starks expected.

“That is well then,” Lyanna sighed, returning her attention to disrobing him. She grabbed a handful of the hem and dragged his tunic upwards until she pressed it into his hands, the silent order gliding against him. Rhaegar pulled it over his head and threw it blindly away.

His wife’s lips moved in a gasp. “You are all bruised.” She reached out and touched a finger to his side, the flimsy pain registering as she pressed the mark negligible. “Do you not pay attention during training?” Her palm came to cover the spot, the heat of her skin suffusing his own.

“I pay very much attention.” ‘Twas just that Aenar was good with a sword. Too good. “I am best with a lance though, lady wife. Swords are merely an acquired taste.” She removed her hand and brought it to his chest, placing it over his heart. The organ pounded incessantly within him. “Does that bother you?” Has she an admiration of sword-fighting skills?

But Lyanna had already moved on, sliding her plan down his chest. “I am merely bothered at the discomfort is all.” Smooth skin pressed against his stomach until it reached his belt. “Is that not right?” The tremor in her voice gave away her disquiet. He might have said a number of things to her, might have led her on whichever path he chose. But he did not.

“Tis only right if you feel it in your heart.” She glanced at his face then, her smile returning.

“I do.” Such a simple answer. Rhaegar allowed his arms to rest around her waist. “And I am glad you were not put out. I never truly considered the contract might bring about such trouble.”

“This is no fault of yours,” he assured her, bending to press a kiss to the top of her head. The hand between them loosened his belt. He refused to take her attention in that manner though. Rhaegar pushed her hand away gently and took a step back. “I am certain you’ve had a difficult day as well. If you would rather rest, then do so. There is no need to keep me company.”

A pout formed upon her lips. Rhaegar watched, transfixed, as emotions played upon her face. “I see, once you’ve had your way with me you boot me out.” There was an edge to those words, even in the flirty tone he could detect it. His stomach squeezed.

“Nay. I would never dare,” Rhaegar protested. “I simply do not wish to be in your way, my lady.”


He denied it. Fiercely. He’d only thought to do her a kindness. “You are not, nor could ever be.” She
blacked, her furrowed brow easing into smoothness. He reached out for her and caught a handful of her skirts, bringing her to nestle into his chest. “I am being boorish.”

Lyanna shrugged, then dissolved into giggles when he bent down to nip at her neck. “That tickles.” She tried to push him away, but that only encouraged a tighter grip on his part. “Your Grace, I beg you, halt.” He did not. “Rhaegar. My gods.”

She somehow managed to completely unbuckle him and drag the belt away from his hips. Rhaegar let go then, holding her at arm’s length. “Forgive me. This has been a most trying day. You are not at fault.” This time he did take her face between his hands. “I am tired, is all.”

“That I can believe.” Her hand curled around his wrist in a loose hold. “Best you make use of that bath before the water goes cold.” She took a step back and turned around to put his belt away.

Rhaegar moved to the bed and sat before he proceeded to remove one boot after the other. His eyes did not leave Lyanna though. He followed her about the bedchamber as she smoothed his garments and checked the water. The role of doting wife suited her. His doting wife. She would make a loving mother to their children, certainly a blessing for any babe.

And the thought of it had him rising, the rush of blood quite impossible to halt. His mind conjured before his eyes the blessed sight; Lyanna with babe in her arms, the child suckling happily. He could just imagine the smile on her face. The real Lyanna had come to stand before him, hands on her hips. Her lips were moving. It took a little while to understand she was speaking to him. Thus he forced his mind to snap to attention.

“Are you going to sit there until kingdom come, ser?” One eyebrow rose in question at his lack of reply. “Have the gods stolen your voice away?”

He laughed. And grabbing her by the waist, hoisted her upon his lap. She bounced lightly against him upon impact, undoubtedly arriving to a pertinent conclusion. “Nay. I am merely in awe of you. As any proud husband would be.”

“Are you?” Lyanna leaned against him, her hand brushing the arm locked around her. “And here I thought you were merely practicing your flattery. Husband, the bath will grow cold and I am not having the servants hauling up its fill once more.”

She lifted off of him and tugged on his arm. Rhaegar stood and stripped off the rest of his garments. At that his wife had turned away, as though the sight of him might knock her wits out. That he could only hope for. In lieu of turning her about and making her forget all about the bathwater, he lowered himself into the tub, the knots in his muscles appreciative of the care. A groan spilled past his lips. His eyes closed and he allowed his head to fall back.

Aught creaked. The floorboards, his mind supplied. Meaning that his wife was on the move. But he was loathe to open his eyes and search for her. And as it turned out, he needn’t either. Small hands pressed against his shoulders, their coolness allayed somewhat by the steam rising around them. “Is this good then?” Her warm breath was against his ear. She must have knelt.

“Good,” he agreed, his own hand coming to rest upon hers. “Very good indeed. A man could grow used to this.” He did open his eyes then, turning slightly to look her in the eye. “I hope we can always be like this, you and I.”

“We will be.” The certainty in her voice caused a smile to break over his face. Her lips came against his in a quick motion before she pulled back. He allowed her the retreat and watched as she rose to her feet, moving away. She retrieved a strip of cloth and a thick bar of soap, bringing them back with
Feeling more at ease with her in such a state, he reached out. Lyanna drew in closer, holding out the soap. What he did though was sure to defy her expectations. His fingers took hold of her hand and he gave her a strong tug. She fell in the tub with a shriek, splashing water everywhere.

“Indeed, we will,” he added to their earlier conversation helping her as she scrambled against him, until she straddled him, her thighs cradling his hips. The felt the rough scratch of her smallclothes against him and sighed. But his wife, having embraced her status, had already laughed into a tirade.

“Good gods, what is the matter with you? Have you any idea how this might have ended?” She attempted to get up, but he kept her there, holding her by the hips. “Rhaegar,” Lyanna whined, nails digging into his shoulders. “Let go. The colour will run into my shift and it’ll be ruined.” She seemed truly distressed at the prospect. It would be cruel to hold her back. He retained his grasp on her for a few moments longer, allowing her struggle to come to triumphant end.

She climbed out of the tub and turned towards him with fire in her eyes. “Look what you’ve done.” Her kirtle was plastered to her skin, long hair dripping copious amounts of water upon the floors. “This dress is ruined.” It was on the tip of his tongue to contradict her. In fact, he was growing fonder of it by the minute. “And how shall I explain it away?”

“Explain what?” he goaded her, unrepentant.

“The state of my clothes,” she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest. “Don’t.” Her face was tinged with confusion. “You’ve no need to explain yourself to anyone. Remove those and come here. You must be cold.”

“And whose fault is it?” Her grumble was met with a grin. “You are the worst.” She did proceed to disrobe thought. Rhaegar did not take his eyes off of her. He didn’t even blink. Lyanna, unaware or uncaring of his scrutiny, bent over to raise her skirts up to her middle, baring stockinged legs and sodden smallclothes. She dragged the cloth over her head. The chemise went along with it, leaving her skin uncovered.

She undid the garters holding the wool covering glued to her legs and removed the stockings before she shimmied her way out of her smallclothes. With a tepid glare, she made her way across the chamber’s length. “If you pull me again, I shall murder you.”

“I shan’t. Just climb in and let me warm you. Accept that as my penance.” Her palm slapped against his shoulder, but she listened to him. She was trembling by the time he had her in his arms, limbs quivering. The initial contact, of her cool flesh against his, stole a moan from him. “There. Is this better?” Even his voice refused to cooperate. But his wife was now nestled in his lap. She reclined against him with a small sound of her own.

“Almost.” His hand slid from beneath her breasts to her thigh, rubbing circles into the smooth flesh. His other hand was resting at her midriff, fingers splayed out. “You had best not keep me here long,” she warned with her next breath. “Where is the cloth?”

He had dropped that without along with the soap, but upon her command retrieved both, placing them in her hands. Lyanna moved until she sat up facing him. Lathering the cloth, her eyes fell to his shoulders, almost as though she was considering a battle strategy. Soon enough the warm, wet cloth grazed against his skin, washing away at the toil and salt. He closed his eyes and relaxed into her touch. Little need to stop her.
That was, until her hand slid under the water level. Instinctively, he took hold of her limbs and
immobilised her. “I am not going to hurt you,” she said slowly, as though speaking to a dim child.

“That is not what I’m afraid of.” Her lips quirked. “Are you well enough?” It was apparent from her
features that she did not understand his question. Rhaegar bit back a sigh. “If I were to lie with you,
would you be well? Do you want me to?”

“To lie with me?” She glanced about, then to him. “Here, you mean? In here?” He nodded. “It can
be done?” Once more he nodded. Lyanna bit her lower lip and he held his breath for what seemed
like a thousand years. Her naked hand slipped around him, forcing air out of his lungs as well as a
shudder. “Show me.”

He showed her; lifting her gently until she straddled him. Poised at her entrance, he brought her
down for a lingering kiss, before he took hold of her hips. Rhaegar lowered her gently, trying to be
mindful of the way her inner muscles rippled around him. But before long she was impaled upon
him, spine arched, breasts thrust forth.

He did not waste his opportunity.

They lied abed together in a tangle of furs. Rhaegar combed his fingers through Lyanna’s hair, the
damp strands clinging to his skin. Her head was still resting upon his shoulder, the moisture having
warmed, his body no longer bothered by the coolness. The fire roaring in the hearth helped matters,
of course. The crackling swirled listlessly throughout the bedchamber. “I still do not understand.
Why should there be any danger in my joining you?” His fingers curled at her nape.

“Wounded beasts rarely differentiate between those who would harm them and those who would
help. Denys Darklyn is known for his temper.” He felt her shrug, as though it made no matter to her.
“He has a right to his anger, and I fear he rests his hopes on that.”
“Then we shall be cautious.” Her lips moved against his shoulder, skin flaming at her touch. She rose slightly, resting her weight on her arms. “I should like to see another port town. Duskendale trades with the Free Cities, aye?”

“Mostly with the Free Cities. I’ve heard they trade further inland as well, but there is much danger in that as well.” She settled against his chest, burrowing closer into his warmth. “The old Valyrian road is good for that, but one cannot sustain trade without coming upon the Dothraki hordes.” His arm secured her against him, a quiet murmur passing his lips as the still-damp ends of her hair settled as well.

“Are they that bad then?” his wife questioned. “I’ve heard aught when I last visited White Harbor, but I confess as soon as the conversation took an interesting veer, my father packed me off, with Brandon to keep guard and make certain I did not return.”

“Interesting how?” He traced her spine, nook by nook, cranny by cranny, her shiver melting into him.

“You would be surprised how free merchants are with their words after a few drinks. I think they were speaking of a settlement that had been attacked by a group of marauding Dothraks. Needless to say I only heard as far as the body piles being stacked up to the height of small huts.”

“Tragic, lady wife. But I assure you these tales, while exciting one’s imagination, do naught for one’s appetite or for one’s of peace of mind. Best not to look to deep into the matter. Suffice to say many merchants pay hefty sums to these savages to keep them from wreaking havoc upon the caravans.”

She nodded against him. “I imagine they cause quite the loss. But why does no one deal with them? Surely they could be dealt with as outlaws are dealt with here.”

“Nay. These men are skilled warriors and the Free Cities have too many unresolved conflicts among themselves to gather enough power and crush the common enemy. Where one puts some of them actively encourage the raids so as to cause their rivals losses. It would take a great leader to unite them all.”

“Or another Valyrian Empire,” Lyanna offered. “So there is little to be done about it?”

“Better to focus on our own troubles. Let the peoples of Essos see to their own plight.” She shifted against him once more until her body slid to his side, her breasts pressing into his ribs. Rhaegar chuckled. “Duskendale suffers little from the tribulations of our brothers a sea away. The involvement of the Lannisters though causes them no small amount of hardships.”

“Wouldn’t a charter solve it? The King could offer them some privileges and be done with the matter.” If only it were that easy. Rhaegar nodded along with her words. “Which begs the question of why he does not do that.”

“Mostly because of my father and the power Lord Lannister has come into.” Lyanna started at his words, her confusion palpable. “Tywin Lannister and the Crown Prince fought together in the war, they have long since been close as brothers. And there is the small matter of my brother being set to wed Lady Cersei.”

“Thus Lord Lannister would see favouring Lord Darklyn as a slap of sorts. I do believe you are in quite a muddle. And how exactly do you plan to solve this?” By that point she had left him to slide out of bed and move around. Rhaegar watched as she picked up a ribbon from the stool wrapped it around her wrist. Lyanna slid back in bed and proceeded to braid her hair.
“If aught I plan to work out what alliances can be made with other traders, or might be trading companies. It would be much easier to shoulder any losses with greater coin-power.” He held the end of her plait as Lyanna unravelled the ribbon. “It is not a permanent solution, but if we can at the very least delay the fallout it would benefit us.”

“Time is always good to have,” she agreed easily, tying the scrap of cloth a few times around the end of the plait. “But what should happen if Lord Darklyn refuses such alliances? Or if Lord Lannister tries to stop them from coming into fruition?”

“That is thinking too hard upon the matter, lady wife. I cannot answer what should happen if Lord Lannister chooses to intervene, but I hope that Lord Darklyn is aware he has little other choice. We can only try.” If he did fail, then one could only count on the army to disentangle the matter.

“And try we shall.” Her lips quirked. “I take it no other subjects were discussed alongside the Duskendale matter.” He answered with a simple nod. “Are we the only ones to go then?”

“My brothers offered to join us, but I thought it best that they should remain here. Unless my lady is of the opinion that we do need them.” Aenar might be useful, but Rhaegar knew that even if his brother pleaded a thousand years with father, he would not be allowed to take part. Which left Baelor.

“Nay. Why bother them when the two heads are already working on the task.”

Rhaella lowered her arms from the branches weighed down by flowers in full bloom. “Is it wise to drag her into the matter? I have spoken to Lady stark and it seems she is willing to work on disabusing her husband of those notions. But your wife is yet young, she has no experience in such matters. Think only that you speak for the Crown.”

“And I trust my wife is more than capable of understanding that as well.” He tapped his foot
impatiently as his mother turned to gaze at him, her eyes narrowing slightly. “I am not leaving her here.” In truth, her heart was in the right place. The journey would be long enough, the roads more difficult with the snows coming in and the gods knew she would lack the comforts a keep provided. “One can only learn by doing. This is an opportunity, I am treating it as such.”

“You might well be, but there are those who will not. If you insist on going, do so on your own. This matter does not concern her.” Hands on her hips, his lady mother shook her head sternly. “Let her grow used to the life at court. That will give her the necessary experience. And she will be safe with us.”

“What are you implying, lady mother?” he demanded, hackles rising over the insinuation. “as my wife, her place is with me. ‘Tis a simple matter, truly, and whatever your argument, I would feel much better knowing her safe ear me. I cannot protect her if she is not within my reach.”

A deep sigh escaped the woman’s lips. “This is not about her safety, at least not principally, is it?” He did not dare answer. Her words were too close to the truth for comfort. Yet Rhaella seemed to have guessed his intent for her lips curved downwards. “I cannot rightly stop you from exercising your rights, my son, but as your mother, I am asking you to consider it carefully. What manner of message are you sending by your actions?”

“That I want my wife at my side,” he pronounced, the steely inflection of his voice reflecting his state of mind. “The one who is attempting to read more into it is not I.”

“I am only reading what you allow me to,” she countered. “One day you shall have to let your anger go. For the good of the realm. We cannot fight among ourselves. Do you think our enemies do not watch like vultures? Do you think they shan’t take advantage of us at the first sign of weakness?”

“I hold no anger.” Mistrust was another issue altogether. That he had gallons’ worth of stored away. “I do, however, hold onto what is mine. You will not dissuade me, lady mother. Nor shall you attempt to dissuade her.”

“Rhaegar, now see here–“

“I have already said my piece.” For the moment he had managed to halt her, but Rhaegar was certain she would make another attempt. In some manner, she had the right of it, but he suspected it would be a long time until he and Baelor would once more be as they once were.

Chapter End Notes

Quoting E. Burke, in case anyone was confused.
Die Lore Lay

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Die Jungfrau sprach: "Da gehet ein Schifflein auf dem Rhein; der in dem Schifflein stehet, der soll mein Liebster sein.

Mein Herz wird mir so munter, er muß mein Liebster sein!"
Da lehnte sie sich hinunter und stürzte in den Rhein.

Die Ritter mußten sterben, sie konnten nicht hinab; sie mußten all verderben, ohn Priester und ohn Grab.

Lady Mercia could have easily fooled Lyanna into believing her a lot older than the actual four years beside a decade that she was in possession of. Nevertheless the fair lady was indeed younger than her by a whole entire year. And more daring by any margin. "And Your Grave would have me join you on this journey?"

Regarding the girl with a quirked eyebrow, Lyanna held back her first reaction. “I do believe I was clear on the matter.” Rohanne had neglected to let her know exactly how difficult the woman would be. If aught, Lyanna was certain poisonous snakes were easier to negotiate with. “As matters stand I shan’t have need of your services until I am returned to court, thus you have ample time to decide this between yourself and whoever you consult with.”
She had haggled more than long enough with fathers and maidens and keepers to have anymore patience stored away. Lyanna was coming to understand that the few glittering hours one spent bathed in admiring and, honestly speaking, envying gazes of the subjects represented a paltry amount of the day. Moreover, the rest of one’s existence revolved around keeping an open ear for whatever moved about and a tightly reigned in temper for all the folly one dealt with. That was not even accounting for the special section of courtiers bent on amusing themselves at one’s expense. There was little to be done, certainly, when dealing with those creatures, except the utterly unacceptable cutting out of tongues.

Dismissing Lady Mercia, Lyanna reclined in her seat and closed her eyes against the vague feeling of annoyance slithering its way in her mind. She heard the squeaking of the door and then the soft thud indicating her guest had left. When she opened her eyes, Rohanne was standing before her, holding a cup. “Her Grace, the Princess Shaena, wishes to speak with you. She requests audience.”

“I do not suppose I could possibly keep the woman waiting without. Tell her that I will see her presently.” She held her hand forth for the cup and Rohanne gave with to her with one last look of warning.

They’d spoken some about the present political tension within the keep, for that could not be avoided, but more than that, the two of them had found a most curious bit of information. The Grand Maester had kept among a good few feet of drafts, one particular document. Lyanna had not been certain whether the provisions mentioned within were generous or not when compared to other such examples for she’d seen none. When asking Maester Pycelle, he had explained the copy kept in the Red Keep had long since been destroyed.

The curious thing was that they had not rewritten the blasted thing. Why would anyone allow a charter to go missing? It was most suspicious. Unfortunately she could not press for aught more, else the man feel himself prodded and interrogated.

Swallowing a mouthful of the brew she’d been given, Lyanna could not help pulling a face. “What have you given me here?” she questioned, clucking her tongue.

“Upon higher orders,” Rohanne assured her. “‘Tis a fertility draught,” the woman explained, with a light smile. “it seems your mother and your good-mother have decided that you must breed with utmost speed.”

She laughed. “As though I was meaning to bar my husband from the bedchamber for the foreseeable future.” Holding the cup up, she watched the liquid within swirl. “Is there any chance this might work?”

“Does Your Grace wish it would not?” The septa moved around her until she could easily touch Lyanna’s shoulder. “There are ways if that is your wish. Although one should have a care. If it were discovered, I cannot answer for the ensuing reactions.

“I’ve no wish one way or the other,” her firm reply came within moments. “As long as there is no danger to this brew, I only ask that there be a bit more honey added. It tastes like iron.”

Septa Rohanne wrapped her fingers around the base of the cup. “Iron? I imagine the North has known iron enough.”

Confusion rose to surface. Then it occurred to her the woman spoke of the Ironborn and their raids. Lyanna relaxed. “I imagine that would be the common belief, but nay. The North knows little of iron in that manner. We deal more in silver, if you were to ask us about metal.”
The other nodded her head and removed the cup completely from sight. “I shall dispose of it and bring another, Your Grace.”

That being enough for her, Lyanna let the septa be and stood, so as to move towards one of the lancets and gaze without. She heard the door and would have not turned was she not greeted by another voice altogether. Glancing over her shoulder firstly to convince herself it was indeed the Princess, Lyanna was met with the distinctly pleased mien of Shaena Targaryen. Her stomach squeezed, with lesser vitriol roiling within than she would have liked, but she was prepared to take what she could.

The Princess’ smile widened. “Greetings, Lady Lyanna; I see you are hard at work on this day.”

And on any other day, Lyanna answered in her own head. She nodded though for appearance’s sake. “There are still matters I must see to before the departure. I thought it best not to neglect them.”

“A wise decision. I’d been hoping to give you some advice. Duskendale is, after all, known to me.” That came as a bit of a surprise. Lyanna had not been kept well informed about the many visits the royal stalks involved themselves in, but she’d have thought since they were on the subject one might mention it; even in passing. “’Twas not an official visit, my lady.”

“I see. Well then, what did you wish to tell me of Duskendale?” Might be she would have to look upon the woman with kinder eyes. The trouble was, Lyanna had already decided Princess Shaena only wished to help, but her pride was more or less still on the fence about the whole ordeal.

Shaena pursed her lips as her eyes fell upon the table strewn with all manners of writings. "Begging your pardon, good-sister, but you truly have sieved through a hundred years' worth of charters. I thought our acolytes were jesting."

"Hardly. I have only looked two scores of years back or so,“ Lyanna deflected easily. She would have to look into which acolyte belonged to whom in the future, and best to see which ones she could co-opt. "I found them somewhat difficult to understand. Why is it that these records are kept in High Valyrian and not the common tongue?" It had taken her a good few days to churn her way through the stylised hand, or rather hands, as they'd often changed.

"The first Jaehaerys left it as rule that such documents should be written in this manner in order to make falsifying harder. And then lords would be given a translation of this document in keeping.” She shifted in her seat, voice returning shallower than before, "It would have been better to ask my brother's help. He would have known how to better explain the various types of provisions."

"That I do not doubt," Lyanna allowed. "Except that I managed on my own and would fain do it again should the situation call for it. I need not cling to anyone's sleeve, Your Grace.” The Princess gave a light smile at that though her eyes remained a rather flat expression of amusement. “Upon the matter of Duskendale, I do believe you were about to tell me aught.”

“About Lord Darklyn.” That was certainly trouble. Lyanna would have expected that the girl might know of the man’s Myrish wife or some such nonsense. “There are a few things you must understand before you go toe to toe with the man.”

“I'm all agog,” she declared, keeping her voice flat. No reason to give the impression of distrust this early on.

“As you should be. That man is a sly snake, all the better to learn from in this day and age. During his father’s lifetime, Duskendale got in conflict with Lannisport over the trade routs which they had previously shared in good peace. The Lannisters of Lannisport petitioned the King so as to solve the
matter, but His majesty wouldn’t, or couldn’t, who knows, do so and instead had the matter transferred into the hands of the then Lord Lannister of Casterly Rock. The Toothless Lion. I am certain you’ve heard of him. This having taken place sometime after the death of his lady wife, the Lion ignored the matter entirely and instead decided to live and let live.”

“Which greatly pleased Lord Draklyn, I suppose. But he still demanded a charter of the Crown.” The petition had been among the ones she had viewed.

“Indeed. Old Lord Darklyn was not such a fool that he trusted in the mere fickleness of the Lion; especially when his oldest son, the Lord Lannister of this day, began showing his claws. Lady Jeyne taught that one well. Needless to say, Lord Darklyn never managed to extract a charter from the King before his death and his son, Denys, was much too busy squiring and getting his knighthood to concern himself with the matter. But when he did take his father’s seat and saw the state of the port, he promptly began a search overseas for aught which might restore some of their earlier grandeur. It was clear that Tywin Lannister would not brook the same treatment as his father before him.”

“His lady wife is from a prominent Myrish family. I understand they are merchants.” It made perfect sense.

“By a manner of speaking. It is true her family found fame as merchants, but when Lord Denys took her to wife the inner turmoil was raging within Myr. They have since been deposed, as it were, and in their stead a new family has risen. The trouble with an empire built on gold is that gold changed hands too quickly. Now, Lord Darklyn has been left both without a charter for his port and without the strong external trade ensured by his wife’s kin.”

Yet he was somehow capable of enough defiance as to threaten with withholding taxes. Lyanna grunted softly. “And what am I supposed to do with the man’s history?”

“Pit him against a common enemy, Your Grace. If you choose to restore Duskendale to its former glory, have a care that the man doesn’t grab aught but a finger. Make certain you encourage the competition with someone other than the Crown.” The Princess held out something. Lyanna took it.

Without a word she inspected the intricate but of lace. Myrish work, she was certain. “I shall think over your words with great care,” she promised after a brief pause during which her eyes hadn’t sifted from the gift. “This is most unexpected, I must admit. How come you are such a well of knowledge upon the matter?”

“I know where to ask, Your Grace. There are enough mouths willing to speak. For a price.” That eased her fears somewhat. The Princess reached one hand out and touched her knee, a tap truly. “I have told you before. I am not your enemy, and if you only allowed it, I would be your friend. Your sister even.”

“You ask so much, yet make it sound as though it were so little.” Her titter rang false in her own ears. How tiresome to pretend she was not bothered by the situation.

“I ask so little, though you make it sound as so much. The truth is where one perceives it.”

“That is where you are wrong,” Lyanna contradicted without a second thought. “The truth is absolute.”

“Might be for those who know no better.” Shaena shrugged, dainty shoulders following a well-defined pattern. “Never fear, good-sister, there is yet time to learn and more than enough opportunity. I have given you this knowledge in good faith. Whether you choose to listen or nay is up to you.”
That it was. Lyanna nodded, falling silent in the process. It would be a difficult matter to find a fitting solution to. If aught, she should seek counsel from better minds than hers. It would be the smart choice. “Is it possible that we have misjudged Lord Darklyn and given the chance, he would show gratitude for our intervention?”

Shaena hesitated. Her lips curled downwards, not as a sign of dissatisfaction, but rather in patent concentration. “In this life naught but death is certain. And might be not even that, for no one had returned to tell us what awaits. Greed rules the man who has lost much. I do not know if partial satisfaction will aid.”

“Is there aught to recommend the man then? Anything we could use to hold him in our power?” A weak point even, would be. Aught to mitigate the greed. Or exponentially increase it as to make a mindless servant out of the lord.

“Might be. Lord Darklyn is not a fool. He does have a good sense of business and given a sum, time and some aid, he can increase it. Might be even double or triple it in proper context. But for that you shall need to please his lady as well. Though her family has lost some of its power, they are still capable of offering certain advantages. On the Myrish market at the very least. It would depend on what you are looking to obtain.”

“For the moment some peace would be most welcome.” Further, she did not know. But if they could somehow work the trading ports into their hands, it would undoubtedly be an important win. “Do you know aught about pleasing this Myrish lady as well?”

“I know her not well enough to say for certain. But I can share that she is said to be a great lover of the fine arts. Mind you, her family patrons a few temples in Myr and her portrait is said to adorn those walls along with those of her kindred. The trouble is, Myrish portraits are hard to come by as Myrish painters are nauseatingly high in the instep. You would have to commission aught grand for quality’s sake.”

“Something in the manner of a temple, you mean?” Now that was a thought. “But I do not serve the Faith, you know?”

“No one claimed you need believe in those gods, did they? And who would know better. A commission is a commission. Near the Dun Fort there is a small sept. When the land flourished it used to be, let us say, highly appreciated.”

“I hope never to regret this decision. Good –sister, if you will, aid me one more time.”

“With great pleasure.”

More in charity with the woman than ever before, Lyanna began making her suggestion, all the while imploring the gods to forgive her the trespass. It was for the good of the realm.
The Kingsguard inclined his head, as though he waited upon an answer. Lyanna was sorely tempted to scratch her head. Thus, she asked, “Ser Barristan, I am at a loss. Was it an order that I received, or was it with title of invitation that the suggestion came?” The man flushed and stammered out a reply. It seemed to her that she’d put him ill at ease. A titter left her lips. Finally she had some power over someone. Exhilaration aside, she hurriedly reassured the man, “I am merely confused, ser, and not upset. I am to understand that I am waited upon?” He nodded. “Very well, I shall be in the courtyard presently. A moment pray.”

Missy, who’d been waiting behind her, threw her a suspicious glance. “My lady, that is not at all proper. The King shall dine with the court and if you and His Grace are not present there will be talk. And your lady mother shall have me hanging by the rafters. Not to mention your lord father would place me upon the raft.”

“Proper or not, I cannot ignore the summon. Now, Missy, find me the simplest dress. You’ve heard the good ser. I am to be unrecognisable.” Well, as a woman wedded to a Prince that was. Lyanna doubted she could mask her good breeding, try as she might.

“But my lady—” The woman’s attempt was cut off with a stern glance. Missy offered naught else. She turned to the coffer and opened it, seeking through the belongings until she came upon aught she thought might suit. Pulling the cloth out, she held it up for inspection. “There is some filigree upon the trimmings, but I daresay they shan’t be observable beneath a cloak.” Lyanna reached to feel the material beneath her fingers. It was a riding dress. She must have forgotten all about it for she did not recognise either the cut or the colour.

“It will do splendidly. Come now, we haven’t much time.” Missy acted in haste upon her instructions, helping her remove the sideless surcoat and the cotehardie, then garbed her in the simple dark kirtle. The middle was not tied, to be in fashion with the less formal attire exemplified by the merchant class and for the last touch, Lyanna took her hair down, wearing it in maidenly fashion.

Her husband had ordered her as simple as she could think of and that was what she planned to give her.

“You certainly never do aught in half-measures,” her servant complained. “If that man should tell you to jump, will you ask him how high as well? A woman is supposed to tame her man’s wilder impulses or have him exercise them elsewhere.”

“I happen to like the wilder impulses,” she remarked brazenly. Lyanna gave herself an over the shoulder glance in the looking glass. “And indeed I insist they be carried out in my vicinity. My fate need not bring tears to your eyes, dearest companion. Tell Rohanne that I shan’t return soon and she is free to do as she pleases in absence except that she might not tell anyone where I’ve gone. They needn’t concern themselves.”
“You have gone mad, mistress.” The woman spat upon the ground as though to ward off evil. “Men are such creatures, they are. Filled with the devil’s touch.” At that Lyanna laughed heartily. The devil’s touch indeed. “Have a care, my lady.”

“Never you fear, I shall be the most careful woman to have ever walked the Seven Kingdoms. Now be sure you tell Rohanne what I’ve said and stop fussing. I will return in one piece, that I can promise.” As for those who would whisper, they were welcomed to it. After all, who was she to begrudge those who knew not what else to do to entertain themselves.

She opened the door and was greeted by the face of Ser Barristan a second time. “Ser, I thought you’d left. You need not have waited upon me.”

The man shook his head lightly. “I am required to.”

Understanding dawned upon her. “If you must.” He offered his arm and she took it without protest. Somehow though she managed the trip to the courtyard with a record of no bumps and bruises, to her everlasting relief, and without a single misstep along the way. Indeed aught to take pride in as she met her husband’s gaze.

Rhaegar greeted her with a nod and a slight smile, which to her looked more like an undecided grimace. But she was simply too glad to see him. Reining in her joy, Lyanna joined him where two horses waited. Neither happened to be a jennet. She cast a questioning glance at that. And the answer was apparent when the Prince offered his hand.

Lyanna reciprocated, allowing him to help her mount. She did nit recall having shared a saddle with anyone since she was a girl and Brandon was teaching her to hold her seat. Be that as it may, she was going to have to grow used to it. Her husband mounted after her, astride to her sideways arrangement. “If ‘tis not too much trouble, where exactly are we going?”

“I thought you would enjoy taking in some to the sights. It cannot be very entertaining to sit and share gossips all day long.” What cheek. As though she’d been sitting and doing embroidery like a hen all day long. But Lyanna would not dissuade him. Better to shock the living daylights out of him during negotiations. How pleasant that would be.

“Indeed, most numbing,” she murmured, struggling to hide a smile. She needn’t have, for Rhaegar was exchanging words with the knight whom Lyanna gathered would be accompanying them. “Do you expect us to encounter trouble?”

“Nay, but it cannot hurt to be prepared.” spoke like a philosopher. Lyanna nodded and encircled his waist deciding that she would do naught else but observe. Her husband was up to something. Once she knew what it was, she would fain join in. Or hit him over the head. Whichever looked the better option in the moment.

Their departure was not impeded by anything or anyone, even more so besides a few curious looks they attracted little attention. A rather strange reaction. “Does Your Grace do this often?”

“Often enough that it no longer requires an unholy umber of eyes looking on in wonder,” he answered, leading the steed over a hollow carter. It was a good thing it had not rained in the past few days, nor snowed. The roads presented themselves in exemplary form.

“And you mean to have me as accessory to these outings from now on, am I to understand?” she jested. In fact her lips quirked of their own volition. “Is Ser Barristan not admiring enough?” Turning slightly towards the other man, she allowed her act to continue, “For shame, ser knight, were your duties not clearly explained?”
“But of course, my lady. Only I am an old man, and quite forgetful. His Grace no doubt means this to be a lesson, as I’ve no doubt you shall prove instructive. Pray have patience with me though.” The reciprocal grin he bore clued her in to the fact that he was game, and more than that enjoyed the mummery.

“Such flattery; how could I possible refuse? Tell you what, ser knight, keep close to me and within the span of our outing you shall leave fully instructed.” They both laughed. Whatever had made him uneasy in the first place seemed to have disappeared.

“Selmy, must you flirt with my wife?” Rhaegar cut in. Fairly certain he meant naught by it, Lyanna suppressed a chuckle. “She’s not for you, old man.”

“I never claimed she was, Your Grace,” the knight returned bold as you please. “Were I a decade younger…” The suggestion caused more than a tingle to run down her spine. It was hard work pretending to be unaffected. “Your Grace is very fortunate.”

“Now, now,” she managed in a calm voice, “I find you perfectly agreeable, ser, with or without those ten years.”

And so their banter continued until they reached an establishment of sorts. The horses were left in a small stable, along with a hefty sum to the proprietor who seemed to know to whom he spoke, despite the manner of his speech. Her, naturally, did not recognise, but paid no mind to either, for which she was grateful. Afterwards, she was left in Ser Barristan’s capable hands while her husband retrieved aught from a higher level of the very same establishment.

They went their separate ways thereafter with only a brief explanation.

“I have never heard him play,” she told the Kingsguard. “I did not even know he could.”

“But he can, and does it very well. You shall see.” She understood at that point why he had sent her with the knight, but Lyanna still wished he’d had allowed that she remain closer to him. Nevertheless, Barristan Selmy proved an adequate guide, showing her all manner of curiosities as they advanced towards the agreed upon location.

When at long last they came upon the square Rhaegar had spoken of, she noticed him instantly. Not that she would not have otherwise. It was rather hard to miss a man who’d managed to attract half the eyes of the square upon him. Only half for those were the people able to keep from weeping into their handkerchiefs. And for herself, she was in awe. Might be awe was not the correct term, but Lyanna could only stare, like the rest of them, and fight the queer feeling tugging at her. It started in the centre of her chest, and spread throughout her body, touching lightly upon leaden extremities. Before long her sight was blurred, her eyes swimming in tears. “Why did you not warn me?” she hissed at the man standing by her. She would have made sure to being a handkerchief and not wipe at her tears with her hand. It was most uncomfortable.

“No use in warning,” a female voice uttered. Lyanna glanced to her other side at a thinly dressed or greatly underdressed woman. She knew without a doubt what her position was. “Ain’t nothing which will prepare you.” The woman offered a patch of cloth, the pristine white stark against the olive of her skin. “Here. I’ve heard him before and even I still get them pangs.”

“You know him?” Rhaegar, great harpist or not, was going to hear a few choice words.

The woman laughed and pressed the strip of cloth into her hand. She wiped her eyes. “I wish I did. Most of us do.” She nodded towards a larger group. “He’s come here before. The more daring ones
have propositioned him. Never took any of us up. Jenny thinks he might be a sword swallower. I think he is just sweet.”

Lyanna shrugged. In truth she had no idea what that meant. Before she could ask aught else, a hand pressed upon her shoulder. “Wife, come along now. We haven’t the time to linger.”

Startled, she looked at the knight. In his face she saw more than she needed to. With a sigh she nodded. Before she followed though, she returned the cloth. “Gratitude.”

The woman smiled and waved, retreating at the no doubt quelling look she received from her pretend-husband. Men were all the same. They thought a harsh mien stood to solve aught. “She was just being friendly, husband,” Lyanna emphasised the form of address, “no need to take on so.”

“Friendly up until a point. You never know with their sort.” His hand slipped beneath her elbow, gripping her tightly. She was steered through the crowd as the last notes of the song faded. Another tune took its place, this one seemingly even sadder. Her thoughts could not linger upon it, for she was pulled into another alleyway where all sorts of cloths hanged exposed to passersby. She looked curiously about.

They did not stop there though. Instead, they circled the previously visited area. Only this time when they stopped, Rhaegar was waiting for them.

Clucking her tongue at him as soon as they stood close enough, her eyes narrowed in a glare. “You ought to have mentioned I would be expected to defend my claim,” she let him know, imbuing her voice with a cutting sheet of iciness. Let him make what he would of it. Understanding filled his gaze. Rhaegar made to take her hand but she drew it back. “Nay, nay, this one you shan’t escape like that.”

“Now you find the desire to show pluck. Woman, if I didn’t know any better I’d say you wish to make a farce out of our marriage.” His arm circled her waist. “Look, we’re making Ser Barristan uncomfortable with our squabbling.”

Glancing at the man, who was patently looking away from them, she demanded without shame, “Ser, are we making you uncomfortable?”

The knight chanced a look, a brief one albeit, before returning his attention to some far off point. “Begging your pardon, but I shan’t answer.”

“I told you we were,” Rhaegar said, sounding triumphant. “Now, lady wife, best not to take on so. Your claim is quite secure, I assure you. Won’t you trust in me?” He caught her chin between his thumb and pointer when she attempted to avoid his gaze. “Heavens, that look would send any man with half his wits intact running.”

“Why aren’t you running then?” Lyanna snapped.

“Oh, dearling, you’ve knocked my wits firmly away from the first moment I saw you. And truth be told, I don’t want them back in the least.” He let her go and restored a decent distance between them. “I did not take any of their invitations on. That ought to tell you something.”

She mellowed. “You’d better not in the future either.” Lyanna recalled having said she would turn a blind eye towards any indiscretion, provided he did not flaunt it.

Apparently, Rhaegar remembered it as well. “And here I thought you planned to be one of those indulgent wives.”
“I lied,” she admitted. She had not, for at that time she did not know him well enough to believe she’d find his attention truly delightful. He was smiling at her. Drat him; the man was actually pleased by the agitation she was showing. “Is this amusing?” He nodded. Unbelievable. “You tread on dangerous ground, husband.”

“Danger makes the reward that much sweeter” he replied with ease. “You do know if I did not wish you here you would not be.” It was her turn to nod. “That is just as well, wife. I do not want the Faith coming after us.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you had not shown signs of perceptiveness, I would have been obliged to demonstrate my point.” She had inkling that Ser Barristan’s ears were burning. Lyanna’s sure were. “I confess the possibility makes me slightly fearful.”

It made her fearful too. Fearful enough to cover his mouth with her palm and draw a finger over her lips. “For the love of,” she trailed off, glancing to the sides. “How can you speak so shamelessly?”

He removed her hand. “You provoked me.”

“Your audacity is astounding,” she managed through a cloud of befuddlement. “I did not provoke you.”

That served for their argument for the foreseeable stretch of road. The more she denied it, the more he pushed her to acknowledge it. Of course, she could sense he was jesting, but aught within her would not accept the notion. Thereafter she held her point firmly as they made their way through the crowded lanes like a knight might hold his shield; for all the good that did her.

“You enjoy vexing me,” she said once her nerves were stretched taut. “Is there aught you would not do to bring me in this state?”

“I admit the red in cheeks is very fetching,” he teased back, helping her narrowly avoid collision. “And I would gladly dedicate a good portion of my time to bringing it about. Aye, I suppose there is little I would not do. But that, wife, is a compliment.”

“Dubious,” Lyanna grunted. “I will train myself out of it then. It would serve you right.”

He looked properly horrified at the threat. “Pray do not. That would suck the joy right out of it. If I apologise, will you reconsider?” He did not mean to do it, she thought. Lyanna seized him with an encompassing look.

“What manner of apology?” There were several she was thinking of at the moment. Suspicion boiled just beneath the surface. He would find a way to twist her words and make her go red in the face. She knew it. If the man had a constant talent, that was it. Making her blood surge. It was a wonder her heart hadn’t failed in its task yet.

“What manner of apology you wish for,” the Prince assured her. “Gems, a stable-full of horses, a keep all of your own.” She laughed at the exaggeration. Then stopped and pinned him with a stare.

“Whatever manner of apology you wish for,” she said, “Gems, a stable-full of horses, a keep all of your own.” She laughed at the exaggeration. Then stopped and pinned him with a stare.

“My gods, you are being serious.” There was a question somewhere in there but she daren’t be explicit. “I needn’t any of that.” She shook her head, a genuine smile taking bloom. “You know that, do you not? Gems and horses and keeps are all very nice. But I’ve no need of them.”

His brow furrowed. “Truly?” She nodded. “Well, do you want any of it?” One of these days her heart was going to melt. Again, she shook her head. “What is it then? What do you want?”
Dare she reach for the stars? “Mayhap I shall tell you one day.” She huffed softly at the brief
disappointment in his face. “Exactly like a child,” she muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” Rhaegar questioned.

“Naught of concern. Where are you taking me now?” She caught him by the arm. “I warn you, Ser
Barristan carries weapons, and I have brothers enough to know how to use them.”

“Promises, promises. One day I will test the truth of your words.”

“I cannot wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Gedicht Clemens Brentanos. I'm sure there's an English version out there for those
interested in the foreshadowing aspect. (Yes, most these are foreshadowing. What? Did
you think I just wanted to introduce you to useless stuff?)

Well, happy nightmares.
Very often it occurs, with the power of God, that man and woman conceive in the world a child from their union, and prepare its form, coaxing and cheering it, until the time comes, going into the count of years, so that these young limbs, these life-fast members, come to be burdened. So they carry him and go forth on foot, the father and mother, giving him much and preparing him. God alone knows what the winter will bring him in growing up!

Lyanna seized Lady Darklyn up, taking in all details in hopes of learning aught. The ostensibly low cut of her kirtle coupled with Myrish lace embellishments and golden thread swirling in intricate patterns. If Duskendale missed its former glory, the mistress of the keep showed none of it. Rhaegar had told her the Myrish were fairly similar to the Dornish. She’d never seen dark-skinned Dornish before. The sole port she’d visited had presented her with the fair-skinned variety, thus she took in the sight with a lick of awe and high expectations besides.

Serala of Myr wore a painted smile, the red strident against the olive ton of her skin. In fact she looked as though she sported a wound. Mayhap Shaena was right in her assessment that she enjoyed creating spectacles. “Your Grace, we did not expect such a speedy arrival.” Nevertheless, they were prepared.

Lyanna, however, was not about to let her guard down. She returned the smile, keeping from catching onto her husband’s arm. Lord Darklyn glanced over his shoulder at his wife and it seemed to her they exchanged a wealth of silent conversation with that one look.
“There is rarely need for delay,” Rhaegar answered, clearly at ease with the situation. He did turn and reach for her, offering his arm as indication of his desire. Lyanna wasted no time in complying. “The weather held good thankfully and that made all the difference.”

Lord and Lady Draklyn invited them within and then forced them apart, a subtle enough attempt surrounded by inane speech. Seeing as she could not rightly refuse, Lyanna accepted her fate and followed Serala away into a long hallway, concentrating on her words.

“You must be tired. So many hours in the wheelhouse. I would not have accepted such a journey this early in my marriage.” Laughter passed the woman’s lips. “We were much surprised His Majesty would send us answer after so long a wait.”

“His Majesty has a realm to run,” she found herself pointing out, the tone of her voice a slight display of censure, “and many a trouble to solve. We were, needless to say, most appalled by the treatment Duskendale has faced and hope to rectify the situation as soon as humanly possible.”

“Your Grace, forgive my impudence, this tongue of mine never thought to be addressing such high personage. I confess to being overwhelmed by the situation.” Lady Serala took her by the arm, fingers gripping her elbow in a gentle clasp. “Though this is not my home by birth, I belong to these lands, in here,” she said, pointing to Lyanna’s heart, her finger very nearly touching the spot. “I know not how to put this into words. They fail me upon every occasion.” The remorseful note struck a cord within Lyanna. Her heart quivered. Might be she’d been too quick to judge.

Serala of Myr was a lady as well, from a family of means, no doubt used to finery and gilt. Just because her lord husband had been unsuccessful in his attempts to secure the trade routs did not mean she ought to repudiate all earlier manner of her upbringing. More kindly disposed, she grabbed the woman’s hand in response. “I understand very well the feeling you speak of. It is commendable, my lady, that you would feel so deeply for this land despite the many hardships it brings.”

“They are many,” the Myrwoman admitted, relief flickering in her gaze. She’d brought Lyanna before a chamber and motioned her within, following close behind. “My husband allowed me to design this chamber for my own personal use. No one is allowed entrance without my say-so.”

The décor certainly stood out from aught Lyanna had seen before. She glanced at the painted tiles. “And what is the purpose of it?” Fine as it looked, she remained at a loss as to why she’d been brought along. The sound of footsteps did not make her turn. She perceived Serala standing at her side.

“Through that door is what I wish to show you.” Her hostess was pointing to a wooden door carved with strange shaped. “It was a wedding gift, if you will, and I have never shared it before. I would be much obliged if Your Grace allowed me to do so now though.”

Lyanna acquiesced. There was little point in telling the woman the method was suspicious when all Lady Serala seemed to wish for was to play the perfect companion. She did wish Rohanne might have joined them. Alas, septas were not considered necessary company to a married woman. She allowed Serala to see her to the other side and opened the door herself.

There was little time to get anything other than a dull sound past her lips before pain struck. Nerve-shattering ache thundered in her head. It felt as though her skull had been split open like a ripe blood orange falling from its perch.

But it was much too late. The trap had been sprung and she’d fallen in. Damn her ears for falling for pretty words and damn her head for not insisting on proper treatment. She ought to have asked for wine and bread. She had not and now she paid the price.
Disoriented and unbalanced, she found herself upon the ground, hand reaching for aught. There was no purchase though. Try as she might, her nails scratched against cool tiles and naught else. Someone touched her shoulder. She heard murmuring. It sounded as though whoever had hit her was being reproached. Her mind feebly held on to the notion it might have all been a mistake. Better that she hadn’t. A second blow came. Eyes rolling into the back of her head, Lyanna felt her senses slipping away.

The last thing she registered before falling under the spell of blessed unconsciousness was her heart thudding madly in her chest, worry flowering for Rhaegar. If she’d been assaulted thusly, no doubt he’d been accosted in similar manner. Why had she not paid better attention to the warning sighs?

However long passed between that moment of utter impotency and her coming to, Lyanna was not certain. She did know, however, that her head burst with pain, skin feeling as though it had been stretched too thin. Instinctively her fingers rose to massage the painful point, returning back down with aught sticky and slimy upon them. Uncontrollable nausea hit her.

Scrambling off the bed with speed she did not now she could achieve, she fell upon her knees, vomiting violently, gasping for breath as the emptiness in her stomach had its say. A lugubrious moan speed past her lips along with whatever she’d managed to heave, the pitiful sound more than enough to bring tears to her eyes.

The door crashed open and she was pulled off the ground, heavy hands holding her up. Soon she was staring into the face of a woman she’d never seen before. “’Twould be better not to make trouble,” her gruff voice warned, shoving her backwards. “Your head’s not right yet and that wound will open again and bleed.”

Blood drained from her face. With the adrenaline gone from her system, the lead-like heaviness of her limbs left her powerless. She fell back upon the bed, trying her best not to mind the acrid taste in her mouth as her brain managed to cobble together an explanation for her current situation. She had to learn what had become of her husband.

The servant woman strutted about, arranging her limbs upon the bed. The door opened once more. The maester had come, it would seem to see to her head wound. “Good. She is awake. Marsha, bring me some of that tea and let the lord know.” He walked towards her, hand reaching out. Despite her best attempts to move out of the way, he easily saw to his task. “We thought you gone for a time. I daresay ’tis good you woke when you did for my lord was ready to throw your body in the pit.”

“Where is my husband?” Lyanna questioned, hating that her voice sounded so faint. “What have you done to him?”

“In the keep, lady. For the moment naught. We shall see when the King answers.” She must have lied there for quite some time if they’d managed to carry their plan that further out. The maester helped her against the headboard once Marsha returned and held a cup to her lips which the servant had brought. “Wine and milk of the poppy.”

“Were it poison I’d know no better,” she spat back, wrinkling her nose. “Take it away from me.” Her stomach churned at the thought of aught passing her lips. Her throat burned though. She would have downed the concoction could she have been certain of its quality.

“Regrettable as the circumstances are,” the man cut through her train of thoughts, “you were still saved from the Stranger’s embrace by my hands. Drink. There is no poison here.”

“Except in your hearts.” But drink she did, thankful for anything which might dull the pain at that point. He allowed her to drain the contents of the cup.
“No doubt you shall sleep more in the coming hours.” As though that was suppose to hearten her. “Best you bring her aught to eat now, before her mind is gone.” That he addressed to the servant woman. Not that there had been need for it.

Marsh pulled from her apron a few oatcakes. “She’ll have these.”

She had all the oatcakes which were given to her, in spite of her rebelling stomach. With the milk of the poppy taking effect, it was not long before her stiff limbs relaxed and the pain ebbed away. She could not move still though for the servant woman remained within the chamber even when the maester departed.

It occurred to her there were guards without the door as well. There was truly no chance of her weaselling her way out. She closed her eyes. Once her mind was free of the bonds of ache and draught, she would see what she could do about her current position.

With that in mind she fell asleep.

A second time she woke, but an empty chamber greeted her. Lyanna shifted to the side, testing her limbs. It was much easier to move, so much so that she managed to get upon her feet. There was only a vague sense of unease joining her movement.

Lyanna gingerly combed her fingers through her hair, trying to find the wound. A hiss left her lips. The thin crust the pad of her finger touched upon was not disturbed though. She allowed her fingers further slide, eyes widened as they raked through air.

Her other hand came up as well. Nay, she’d not imagined it, or even missed the right direction. Her lips thinned in a straight line, anger welling up within her. Unfortunately, she could do little other than sit back down and inspect the rest of the chamber.

It was small, and sported naught which she might use in her pursuit. Nay, it would be best to hold herself back, assess the situation, then strike. There would come a time, after all. She rose once more and stretched her legs, walking back and forth the length of the chamber. At the very least she still had the use of her limbs.

Her head snapped to the side when the door gave way and allowed in a visitor. It was no servant woman, nor any maester come to see her, but a child. She eyed him with suspicion, but said not a thing. He held a finger to his lips and walked towards her. “I cannot stay long.”

Nor did she wish him to. But he approached. “His Grace wanted me to let you know he is well. My uncle would not allow it, but I cannot see the harm. I can tell him aught if you wish me to.” She fixated him, not quite able to believe what she was hearing.
“It is nothing personal,” The Myrwoman assured her, her stern mien so at odds with the initial benign mask she had adopted. “But when one wants their voice heard, at time ‘tis best to yell loudest. I am most sorry for the injury you’ve been dealt.”

Bugger her injury. Lyanna did not even care all that much that she would be growing out her hair for the next few years or so. “My lady, there is naught I wish to discuss with you pertaining to your actions. All I want is to see my husband and make certain he is as he should be.” She just hoped she would not be sick again. Blasted ague had struck on top of all the other troubles.

Serala shrugged. “That is your choice. As for His Grace, we cannot allow for it yet. You must be patient.”

“For how much longer? Surely, there is no danger. Look at me you, you witch! What could I possibly do?” Her outburst was met with a titter. Lyanna reined in her impulse to add physical injury to her verbal blow. Justice would come, she was certain it would. But the matter of when concerned her. It would be the same to avenge her pride or her broken corpse and she feared much longer in their hold she would swallow her own tongue.

The uncertainty was killing her.

But the woman was not about to fall in her trap. She shook her head and took a step back. “You are overset, lady. Best you lie down and rest.” Her hand was already on the door, knocking for the guards to open it.

No one would be willing to aid her. To risk running past her rival would mean to risk more than just her life. Even with her marriage to Rhaegar, she was still Lyanna of House Stark, which house would likely pay a hefty sum to have her free.

Her trials were not over though. After the mistress of the keep had left, the master strode in. Lord Darklyn inspected her with an odd mixture of curiosity and something she could not define. Whatever it was, it made her queasy. “I trust you find your accommodations pleasing,” he rumbled softly. “My wife tells me you’ve a wish to see your husband.”

“Then for once she had spoken no lie. I am astonished.” The insult exacted a shake of the head from the host. His brow furrowed. Would it be too much of a mistake to push him further? “If you believe your actions have won you any privileges, you are wrong.”

“It had won me an audience with the King, it has,” he told her. “For some odd reason. It might have to do with my having his grandson in bond. Your family offered a small fortune for you.”

“And you are here to tell me I am free to go?” The sharp crack of her voice held a brief flicker of
hope. Without she could do so much more.

“Nay. I would be a fool, would I not? Of course, I could ask for a little more and still set you free. One of your brothers has come to negotiate. He is even now without my gates. But I shan’t.” A grin crept upon his face, the shape of a slug in her eyes.

“Then why have you come? Can you not simply enjoy my pain from far away?” He stepped closer to her, pulling a short strand of hair between his fingers. Lyanna shuddered. He tugged. “Laugh while you can,” she warned, “but the North has a long memory. And I’ve more than one brother.”

“Who would never risk your pretty little neck. As long as you are within my power, your brothers can only sit atop their horses and stare. Which suits me very well indeed. I do not plan to give you up for some time yet. If you wish though, I’ll allow a message to your kin.” The man let go of her hair. “Think about the words you’d have conveyed to them, aye? I shall send someone later; might be you will even be allowed to see their answer.”

He was toying with her and enjoying her helplessness. Lyanna was not quite certain why he did not give her up for a monetary prize, nor could she assess what might make him change his mind. She just waited for little Dontos to scurry his way into the chamber so she might hear from Rhaegar once more.

If it was true that the King would come, he’d be bringing an army and would likely not set foot within the Dun Fort.

Rubbing a hand to her still upset stomach, she sat down upon the narrow bench. Her mind sifted through the clues she had thus far. The King was likely coming for Rhaegar and her own family would join them in negotiations eventually, which begged the question of whom exactly was doing those. Lord Draklyn claimed it was one of her siblings, but two of them were far away in the North. That left Ned, Ned whom knew little about such matters and was still a squire, thus not supposed to leave the protection of Lord Arryn. Might be father had written him, in a bid to assure himself she was yet alive. Her death would mean the loss of the so very generous bride price still to be acquired.

There was an aspect which made little sense though. Had Rhaegar been the ruler, or even the single heir to the realm, the muss being made would have merit. But he had many brothers beside, one of which was to wed Cersei Lannister, daughter to a very powerful man. Where one counted the fact that Princess Shaena might well birth a male herself, Lyanna was left at a loss. From a purely sentimental viewpoint she could grasp the decisive factors. Yet in so political a situation, they would not hold.

Unless there was aught she did not know. Aught she was not accounting for. But what could that be?

Her mind conjured little enough up. Mayhap it was simply sheer luck which merited her gratitude. Though not plausible, it could be that Lord Darkyn was such a muttonheaded individual that he truly thought his plan might work and no one had bothered correcting him; or, the royal family was equally determined to prove themselves lacking wit that they’d accepted the terms. Unfortunately, neither of the two explanations could be remotely plausible in any other world that one made up in her own mind.

That still left her with a wide gap in her knowledge. But it did not mean she could not use it to her advantage. She just needed a little aid in figuring out how much she should risk. It certainly seemed to be the case that the Darklyns were less interested in bringing physical harm than they were in achieving their goals. This offered her some measure of protection yet.
Her musing were interrupted by Marsha ploughing her way in, a large tray balanced preciously in one hand. She placed it upon the table and turned to give her a dark look. “You had best not puke this one out as well. I’ve had enough of cleaning after you.”

The insolent creature had the audacity to further the insult by slapping a cloth across her lap. Lyanna did not respond to the outward provocation. She took heart in the knowledge that her kith and kin were not far off and that, one way or another, revenge would be within sight.

The servant left her with a disgruntled huff, no doubt to scurry back to menial tasks. Her stomach tightened impossibly at the sight of food. She did not want to take a single bit, knowing all too well her weakened body would reject it. Nevertheless, not eating would result in the food being shoved down her throat. That she’d found when first trying to convince Lady Serala that she must be allowed to see Rhaegar. It turned out that threatening to starve herself and leave them in a messier situation than they’d anticipated, did not work when one’s captors were in possession of strapping servants. It was a narrow thing that she’d not died choking upon whatever they’d given her.

In truth, she forgot what she ate as soon as she was done. It all tasted like ash and cinder to her. The best she could do was count the days by the meals she was brought. Maddening as that task was, the pattern was useful enough that she hoped to have been identifying broadly the turn they were in.

Rising, she held the rag in one hand and stepped towards the table. A bow of thin soup filled the chamber with its scent, soothing in some manner. A pity the taste would not agree with her. Stirring the liquid with a wooden spoon, she watched it swirl, a small sigh escaping her lips.
Pace non trovo, et non ò da far guerra;  
e temo, et spero; et ardo, et son un ghiaccio;  
et volo sopra 'l cielo, et giaccio in terra;  
et nulla stringo, et tutto 'l mondo abbraccio.

Tal m'à in pregion, che non m'apre né serra,  
né per suo mi riten né scioglie il laccio;  
et non m'ancide Amore, et non mi sferra,  
né mi vuol vivo, né mi trae d'impaccio.

Veggio senza occhi, et non ò lingua et grido;  
et bramo di perir, et cheggio aita;  
et è in odio me stesso, et amo altrui.

Pascomi di dolor, piangendo rido;  
equalmente mi spiace morte et vita:  
in questo stato son, donna, per voi.

Pain knifed along her temple as she struggled to open her eyes. Lyanna gave a soft whine, bringing her hand over her eyes as though that might aid. Someone grabbed at her wrist then and gently pried the limb back. She heard a voice, but the words, too gentle for her to catch, took a lot more concentration to focus on.

Lyanna forced herself to greet the sight of whoever lingered at her side, steely determination having
her eyes opened despite the lack of desire. “Rohanne?” she croaked, confusion seeping its way past the barrier of sleep-softened caution. Fragmentary scenes wormed their way into consciousness, uncertainty strengthening her pain. When she tried to sit up though the pulsing ache dropped from head to middle.

“Your Grace, you mustn’t,” Rohanne spoke quickly, pressing gently against Lyanna’s shoulder to indicate she should maintain her earlier position. “Your ribs are not yet able to withstand it.”

“What—“ She stopped herself before she could pose the question. Ever so slowly, her mind dragged the memory of panic spearing though her to the forefront of her mind. She saw tiles, the hooves, then blackness. She’d little idea where to begin. Helplessly, she stared at her companion.

Rohanne had moved to sit down upon a stool, picking up what looked to be a hoop. “Glad I am to see you awake, Your Grace. You do recall how this came about, do you not?” To that her head moved in a shaking motion. “What do you recall?”

“Only that we’d arrived and Lord and Lady Darklyn were greeting us. My gods, I do believe someone started screaming.” The piercing sound played itself in her mind. “And then,” Lyanna trailed off. There was aught there. “That child. He’d lost control over his horse, hadn’t he?”

She did recall, after all. The septa nodded encouragingly. And the memories emerged from the thick veil of mist. “Is he well?”

“In a better state than you are, Your Grace,” the woman assured her. “A bit scraped, but our greatest scare was you. Thankfully naught was broken. The maester assured us that a bit of rest and some milk of the poppy shall aid.”

Milk of the poppy. That explained it. “Rohanne, tell me, where is His Grace?” That ought to clear up any remaining confusion. Feeling more confident already, she squirmed about until her elbows were firmly planted into the mattress and she heaved herself up, ignoring the disapproving look upon the septa’s face. Aught told her she’d done little but lie still for long enough.

“With Lord Draklyn, my lady; there was naught to do but wait, but the maester would not allow the bedchamber to be crowded. In the end, he applied himself to negotiations.” Relief washed over Lyanna to those words along with a sense of calm. What she’d feared had not come to pass. “He did order t he be told as soon as you came to.”

He would; what sane man did not concern himself given the circumstances. Lyanna bit back a chuckle. “Allow me a few moments more. Better yet, tell me how long I’ve been useless to the world.”

“A full day, my lady.” Rohanne did not move to aid her, for which Lyanna was grateful. She might struggle a little but in the end she managed it all on her own.

“That long?” She sighed heavily and shook her head. “I feel as though my head is going to split apart.” The pain did not stab, but it spread through her skull, like water imbibing into a rich rug. A full day. So much time lost.

Since negotiations were already underway, she would have missed some of it by that point. Might be a lot more than she would have wished for. What mattered was that she find out exactly what had been spoken point by point. A feat which would be hard to attain in short time like she wished it. “I need you to find out for me what has been discussed. Do you think you would be able to do so?”

“Given a few hours I could come up with aught. But, my lady, would it not be better to ask His
Grace?” The septa gave her a long look and continued on with her task. “It is not my place to overlap with him on this matter. It would be a pity to cause trouble.”

“I shall tell him, septa, that I have ordered it. There is no need for arguments. If you would be so kind.” Understanding without further explanation, Rohanne gave a nod and rose slowly. “If possible, pray have the news of my improvement broken slowly to His Grace. It would not do to disturb him too much.”

“You do him a disservice by assuming he would be disturbed rather than pleased with the progress.” A light smile touched upon her lips. “Have I not told you the maester had to force him out under threat of danger to your health even, my lady?”

“So you have. But I prefer to think upon it as me doing him a service in this. He needs to keep his focus on Lord Darklyn and the issues at hand.” Her own lips pinched in response to the thought. In truth she would have been gladder had she found him at her bedside. Nevertheless, she had no true cause for complaint. “One thing more, that child, is it possible that I may see him?”

“I shall look into it, my lady,” her companion promised, depositing her hoop upon the seat. “His mother, I am certain will be glad enough to allow it. And he should be happy as well from what I’d gathered. Pray do not move when I am gone.”

“Why, Rohanne, I appreciate your concern, but I’ve no need for coddling, just expediency.” And a way to take advantage to the fullest of the situation. First things first, she had need of finding out what importance the boy held. If only she’d known before diving in front of a frightened horse.

Chapter End Notes

Oy vey, this is a really short chapter. My excuse is that weekend classes have ruined my brain, along with the week classes and back-breaking amount of projects. You’ll have to make do.

I will probably be very happy or very sad over the course of the next few days, which might show in my coming posts. If you know me, you’ll know why and you’ll know which. Ergo, if I’m being a cunt, it’s not (necessarily) because I hate you, it’s just that I don’t have enough bleach on hand.

Petrarch 134
Men Who March Away

Hence the faith and fire within us

Men who march away

Ere the barn-cocks say

Night is growing gray,

Leaving all that here can win us;

Hence the faith and fire within us

Men who march away.

Aenar flicked his wrist gently back and firth, trying to alleviate some of the pain. “There are times when I understand you not at all,” he confessed, slapping his other hand to Baelor’s back. “When you came to me with this, I told you it would be best to confess everything to both Lyanna and our brother. You chose not to.”

“You think he would have accepted? That she might have?” Baelor scoffed, pushing his hand away. “What would you know, at any rate? You are so deeply in love with Cersei Lannister that naught would shake that out of you.”

“But Rhaegar was not in love with our sister. And Lyanna was not in love with you.” His point was ignored by the younger sibling. “Or was she? Are you trying to tell me she’s formed a tendre for you?” A frightening thought, but highly unlikely. Baelor had never indicated that the she-wolf might hold him in any higher regard than that of a brother. “Or might be ‘tis you who is unhappy with the outcome.” A snarl reached his ears. Aenar pinned his brother with a hard stare. “Did you expect they
might nod their head and smile and thank you for your actions? Are you that naïve?"

“Merely that hopeful,” the sibling muttered, words perfectly intelligible even spoken in that low voice. “You may not agree with the way I went about it, but you must admit I was right. I am right.”

To that Aenar was not quite certain how to answer. Baelor had certainly not meant to cause an explosive conflict; but then Duncan Targaryen hadn’t either and there was still more than bloodshed over his decision to do as he would. “What you do may not necessarily lead to what you desire. If you tell me it never crossed your mind this might end up badly, I do not believe you. There is no place for such folly here.”

Baelor flinched. Aenar could not help but wonder, “Would it have been that difficult for you to just accept the choice father made? You like Lyanna. You gave every impression of it when she wedded our brother as well. People are talking.”

“Aye. It would have. You do not know her as I do.” And neither of them knew her as their brother did, Aenar suspected. He held back the punch though. Best to just allow the matter to be resolved here, between them.

“If it makes you feel any better, I believe that she and Rhaegar are better suited one to the other than our sister ever was to him. Might be we should have just suggested that brother visit Winterfell. I expect the results would have been the same.” He laughed quietly. “What a lark that would have been. Enjoy it or nay, you have given our brother the upper hand in this. As the slighted party, he shall never quite trust you again.”

“I know that already, Aenar. Mayhap you would like to tell me aught I am unaware of.”

He did not feel ill at ease in his wife’s absence. That implied a level of dependency on her that no man would be comfortable admitting to or even acknowledging the existence of to begin with. Nay, it was not unease per se, but rather a looming darkness which threatened to spoil his generally articulate vision. Privately, he would allow that the incident shook him to his core, if only for the fact
that he’d been for that moment completely powerless.

Rhaegar shook his head, leaning over slightly as a cool breeze swept past the lancet. The maester had sworn her ribs were merely bruised and that collision of her head with the ground was not cause for concern. He’d considered breaking one of the man’s legs and asking if that was not cause for concern either. After all, broken legs were not responsible for many a death.

“Your Grace need not worry so,” Lady Darklyn interrupted his train of thought, forcing his attention upon her. The Myrwoman blinked her kohl lined eyes, her expression very near one of compassion. “In my experience brave women like your lady wife pull through.” The slight accent in her voice was less noticeable in calm environments. How peculiar

“Brave women,” he repeated her words, considering the implications. Rhaegar knew a number of brave women. Curiously enough, their courage ran towards preserving their young. “Might be most do. But as ever there are exceptions. I shall postpone judgement until my wife is proven to follow the rule.” And when she did wake, the two of them would have a serious talk.

“Why should she not be? Have you angered the gods somehow, mayhap?” The edge he felt in those words should have not affected him. But Rhaegar found he could not answer as fast as he would have wished to.

It was debatable whether he’d angered them himself or had some much needed aid in that. He’d not considered it as such; him having angered the gods was an entirely foreign idea. But might be ‘twas just that. “Who knows, my lady; the gods will rain blessings upon one in the morn and curses come sundown.” Summerhall came to mind along with tales of all consuming flames; that had been a disaster of great proportions. And if one accepted that all ills were the will of the gods along with all that was good, then an obvious question arose: why had they chosen to burden his house with it?

“Better to have even the slightest hint of blessings,” she opined, “you never know when you might have need of it, Your Grace.” He agreed without much thinking. The woman smiled, as though she could read him. A trick he’d learned long ago her kind enjoyed using. Nay, she may understand his worry, but she did not know his thoughts. He allowed her the illusion though. There would be time enough to disabuse her of it later.

Aught crashed behind him. Rhaegar turned to look but could make up naught of import beside a few servants tripping all over themselves to bring in more wine and the like. Rhaegar turned away, meeting the Myrwoman’s eyes yet again. She reached out to touch his arm. “It seems to me Your Grace finds optimism a challenge.”

“Expecting and desiring are two different things.” He pulled back and glanced over his shoulder at Lord Darklyn and the circle of merchants. She acknowledged the truth of it with a light inclination of the head and a slight sigh.

“There was much speculation over the matter of this marriage. Everyone talked.” He blinked uncertainly at that. “You know how people are,” the woman carried on nonetheless, “rumours were rife before long. Seeing the way the situation has evolved though gives rise to a good many questions.”

“Such arrangements generally do. My marriage is like any other marriage before it.” He’d heard some of those rumours as well. Not in full, for who would dare repeat them to his face, but there was always a whisper of scandal and seduction. A smile crossed his lips at the look in the woman’s eyes. “I have disappointed you, I see.”

“I have not said anything of the sort. And it would be an uncommonly bizarre complaint to have
regarding a situation I am not part of.” She tittered in the wake of her own answer. “So Your Grace
does not wish to have rumours repeated to him, nor will he answer as to the nature of this contract
which has amazed us all. Is there anything you would be willing to say?”

“Not in the least. Is it a common thing in Myr for men to be freely discussing their marriages?”
Perplexed, his companion raised one eyebrow. Rhaegar did not retract his question, or his stare. She
had challenged him, thus she should have been expecting a response.

“It is not a subject any person shies from,” Lady Darklyn answered in the end. “I have been
indiscreet?”

“Less than subtle, might be,” he offered. “I commend your courage nonetheless, my lady.”

Lord Darklyn had just broken away from his small group and walked towards him. All things
considered, the man was a lot more patient than Rhaegar would have thought. The man stopped at
his wife’s side and easily wound an arm around her middle. “Your Grace, I have instructed the
merchants to gather as per your request. It shall take some time, but the Seven willing we shall
commence.”

“Good. It would be better to then to continue upon their arrival.” The lord agreed, his own eyes
moving to his wife’s. Rhaegar supposed it was a manner of communication reserved for those
couples which understood one another very well indeed.

The last to enter was the maester. Since had no word with any of the merchants, Rhaegar supposed
he’d come to have words upon his own lady wife. As expected, the man made towards them. “Your
Grace, my lord and my lady, I have good news. Lady Lyanna has woken.”

“Is she well, maester?” Lord Denys questioned before anyone else could.

The newcomer allowed that given the sustained injuries she was doing as was to be expected. “I
have spoken with the lady as soon as she awoke. She did refuse to drink more milk of the poppy,
despite my best attempts to convince her of the necessity.”

“Is she in pain?” Rhaegar questioned. Likely as not she must have felt dizzy and disoriented, aught
which he knew was not entirely to her liking. That girl enjoyed knowing everything to the last detail.
No wonder she was acting thusly.

“Her Grace claims it is tolerable,” the maester replied after a brief pause. “But head injuries have a
way of complicating matters. Even if she is not in pain at the moment, it would be much better for
her if she did have some.”

Nay, too much of it could just as well harm. “If there is need for it, I am certain she will say so. I
shall see my wife now.” With that, he walked past the lord and lady, reaching the doors. It had not
taken him very long to map the keep. It was not large enough to pose much trouble compared with
other keeps he’d seen.

He turned around a corner and made his way through the narrow hallway, ignoring the other people
for the most part, despite the insistent stares. Servants enjoyed gossiping. He did not expect any
different from these ones and why stop them when aught good might come out of it. Rhaegar
sidestepped a maid carrying a pail, recognising the swiftly the woman at the end of the corridor.

Septa Rohanne’s eyes landed upon him. She curtsied in greeting. “My lady is doing well,” she let
him know, as was her custom.

“So I have been told. Make certain we are not disturbed.” He passed by her without another words.
Knowing her to be the efficient and practical creature that she was, he had no need to worry over outcomes.

The unguarded door of his wife’s chamber was only slightly ajar, as though Lyanna had known to expect herself on the receiving end of a visit. Not that she had been wrong in her predictions. Rhaegar pushed it fully open and entered, eyes following the path to the bed. His wife was sitting with her back resting against the headboard, fingers busying themselves with plaiting.

She looked up from her work and greeted him with a light smile as the door shut behind him with a thud. All the words he’d prepared vanished from his mind, leaving only blankness behind. Not knowing what to do with himself in the absence of a well-deserved tirade, he simply walked to the bed and sat on the edge, reaching out to touch his wife’s cheek.

She dropped the tail and cocked her head to the side, pushing against his palm. Lyanna offered naught by way of words. Her hand cupped his and the smile dimmed, just enough to let him know that somehow she was aware of the turmoil surrounding them.

“What you did is one of the most foolish displays of recklessness that I have ever seen,” he let her know, painstakingly forming each word. “You could have died. Did that cross your mind?”

The she-wolf gasped. “Those are harsh words; undeserved as well, for I am yet alive and breathing.” Her calm manner of speech rattled him. “Death is a certainty for each of us, husband. The timing is what we do not know.”

“Precisely. People die all the time from doing stupid things.” The curl of her lips returned. He sighed. Women, how was one to understand them when they acted as they did. “You are not here to steal years off of my life.”

“Gave you a fright did I? Apologies; in truth I was frightened as well.” And yet she treated it as though it was no one important than any other ordinary event. “But I am alive and all is well. There is no need to dwell on worse outcomes.” Her fingers clutched at his hand, the grip reassuring. He wanted to give in.

“You gave me more of a fright than I ever wished to have,” he grunted in response, disgruntled at the nonchalance with which she treated the concern. Might be it was her youth? But nay. Were they that far apart? Rhaegar could hardly conceive of it. “A head wound is not a light matter. You might never have woken.”

Her lips pursed slightly. Instead of doing as she had done before and trying to wave off his concern, the woman brought both arms around his shoulders. “I agree, but we should live in the here and now, in this moment. Have you a good reason for seeking out such sad thoughts, husband?”

He hesitated. His hand moved against her and a hiss of pain left her lips. It was then that Rhaegar realised he’d unknowingly brushed against her bruised ribs. An apology fell from his lips. “Help me understand that what I should be thinking of, lady wife, for I confess that from where I’m standing, I can see little else other than you risking your life needlessly.”

“It was not needless at all,” she contradicted. “I admit it was a reaction I simply gave in to, but it needn’t be needless. Even had I suffered more severe injuries, I expected you would see the opportunity in it. Was I wrong?”

Blood running cold, Rhaegar brushed back a rebel strand of hair from her face. “An opportunity,” he repeated, holding back the desire to shake her. “Nay, I still cannot see it. How if my wife lying on the Stranger’s doorstep an opportunity exactly?”
“Rhaegar, I pray you, do not pretend ignorance. You know very well what I am saying.” He nodded. He did understand the point she was trying to make. It was simply not a good point. “Tell me you have not wasted it by worrying needlessly over me.”

“Nay, that I have not. I was most at ease seeing to the matters of the realm.” She frowned up at him, a twinge of discomfort apparent in her gaze. Good, she should feel uncomfortable.

“You are not—“ Lyanna stopped abruptly. “I did not mean to cause trouble. The child would have fallen and he would have been injured. I simply did what I thought was best. I was being kind.”

“Don’t be,” he said after a heartbeat’s worth of silence. “You have no need to be. That’s a weakness.”

Shaking her head, his wife pushed against his shoulder. “It is not.” She punctured that splendid counterargument with a steely glance. “Lord Darklyn owes us a debt of gratitude. One kindness begets another.”

“Does he?” If she was not going to drive him mad in a few short moon turns, the she was surely going to make him impervious to any horrifying threats that might come his way. With the way she was no one could do her more harm then herself.

“His sister does, which sister is very close to him,” Lyanna let him know with a satisfied smile. “This argument shall drag on forever, shan’t it?”

Rhaella gave her husband a long look, eyes meeting his in the mirror, and brushed the lint from her skirts. “Why would I do that?” she questioned, turning around just slightly. “I am perfectly pleased to be spending my time here, with you.” A thoughtful look crossed her features, “Unless what you are trying to tell me is that you do not wish me here.”

Her husband released a long-suffering sigh. “I never said aught like that. Quit twisting my words around. What I am saying is that this whole matter would be much easier forgotten if those two spent
some time away from court. As for your presence, I simply thought our daughter might need you.”

“Dragonstone,” she muttered. “I do not know, Aerys. It is not as thought anyone will just forget what has happened because Baelor and Shaera have been packed off to your seat. Moreover some might wonder at the choice. Need I remind you that Dragonstone is the seat of the Crown Prince?”

“I am not unaware,” her husband assured her. “Believe you me, had I another option I would send them off there instead. But we have no other option and if we are to ever get these blasted rumours to quieten down, they must leave. Every day it keeps getting worse. It is an insult not only to our firstborn but to us as well.” He sat down on the long stool next to her. “When mother and father forced the issue of our marriage, do you remember what your septa said?”

“They judge this marriage from the only position they know; it is no wonder they condemn their children to repeating their sins.” Even if she’d tried to forget the words, they’d been seared into her brain. Rhaella leaned slightly against her brother. “Is that what they are saying now as well?”

“Has Shaena chosen to fornicate with any other man but one of her own brothers, the backlash would have been a lot less harsh. But she chose Baelor. And there is only Dragonstone to send them to. If any of our subjects should wonder we need but simply say that mother lacks company there and has requested that her daughter and granddaughter accompany her. Besides, the little ones are sure to miss you by now.”

It was her turn to sigh. “I shan’t stay any longer than until my grandchild is born.” Her brother nodded in acknowledgement. “And I expect you to write often and keep me apprised of all the goings-on.” He laughed and agreed.

“Any other requests, sister? Shall I have officials sent to Dragonstone as well with copies of all the documents and letters?” Rhaella slapped his arm, peals of laughter leaving her lips.

“You are the worst. Better not go too far with it. I’ve been told my temper is that of a dragon.”

Faux resignation moulded Aerys’ features. “Good gods, then I had best not anger you, else I’ll wake the dragon.”

She flashed him a smile and returned her attention to combing.
Lyke-Wake Dirge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**THIS ae nighte, this ae nighte,**
  Every nighte and alle,
**Fire and fleet and candle-lighte,**
  And Christe receive thy saule.

When thou from hence away art past
To Whinny-muir thou com'st at last

If ever thou gavest hosen and shoon,
  Sit thee down and put them on;

If hosen and shoon thou ne'er gav'st nane
The whinnes sall prick thee to the bare bane.

From Whinny-muir when thou may'st pass,
  To Brig o’ Dread thou com'st at last;

From Brig o’ Dread when thou may'st pass,
  To Purgatory fire thou com'st at last;

If ever thou gavest meat or drink,
  The fire sall never make thee shrink;

If meat or drink thou ne'er gav'st nane,
The fire will burn thee to the bare bane;

“Truly, I am not made of glass,” his wife complained, holding onto his arm, her breathing laboured. “It is just a few stairs.” And yet even the walk down the hallway stole away her strength. Lyanna, apparently exuberant even in less than ideal conditions, took each stair slowly, keeping herself pressed against him, as though his mere presence made the ordeal easier.

He did not even know if she was aware she was doing it. That she’d been doing it since she insisted upon going down for the evening meal, on the excuse that it would be poor manners to do otherwise. He accepted her dedication with just a hint of worry. She was Lyanna, after all, who managed to surprise him more than anyone had before.

Her foot slipped, causing her to falter. On instinct his arm wound around her waist, holding her up.
“We’ve more than enough time, lady wife.” His fingers moved softly along the curve of her waist. “What is your hurry?”

She chuckled, the sound a soft hint of embarrassment. “It would be best if we did not spend half the day climbing down the steps only to spend the other climbing back up.” Her hand pressed over his and she looked up with a smile. “I have put in quite the spot, I fear.”

“‘Tis not all bad,” he allowed as reward for her effort. “Now I have a credible excuse to keep at your side.” He was only half jesting with the remark. Rhaegar’s mouth pinched slightly at the realisation. Naturally, he cared about his wife’s state. Her comfort assured her wellbeing just as much as any other element contributed to it. But even knowing her in capable hands, he still wanted to be close by.

“Is that how it is?” Lyanna questioned nudging him with her shoulder. “You should grow weary sooner rather than later of me, Your Grace, and that shall wound me. I do not wish to have you bored to tears. Which you are likely to be if you insist upon this path.” They’d made it to the middle stair.

“You bore me?” His hand moved to cradle the side of her face, thumb rubbing against her skin softly. “You know me not, lady wife, if you would speak to me thusly.” Yet her observation was not untrue. It was good and well for him to show such interest at that point, but what was to happen in some distant future? Would be grow tired of her? Rhaegar leaned in slightly. “Shall I tell you the truth?” She stared back at him, eyes swirling with unknown emotions. He felt her hand move against his own waist. From somewhere down below the laughter of children rang out. Someone, a woman, was yelling. A pot crashed to the ground with deafening sound and a dog barked incessantly.

“Tell me.” So quiet was her invitation that he nearly missed it. Tell her he should. Fingers dug into his garb, stretching the cloth taut. The distance between them shrank. He’d not moved. Lyanna still gazed up at him, all wonder and trust. He could say whatever he wanted. It took him back to a shy bride and burgeoning curiosity.

Closing the gap between them until their lips were only a hairsbreadth apart, he answered. “I find you endlessly fascinating. There is always something to learn.” He removed his hand to brush her hair in long strokes. “I could spend a lifetime watching you and not grow tired of it. I do not know whether I will survive the constant bewilderment, but believe you me, lady wife, boredom is far from my mind in your presence.” He kissed her. Not with the intent of persuading her into some illicit display of amorous vigour. Not even because he himself felt that urge, always pushed to the back of his mind since her fall. But because he wanted her to feel the truth of his words, if aught of the manner could be achieved. Thus, he neither beckoned her into playful flirtation, nor demanded an ounce of passion, but simply offered a moment of peace. Rhaegar drew away just as soon, eyes moving towards the foot of the stairs. “What I will not do, though, is spend a lifetime on these steps.”

Without even as much as a by your leave, he lifted her up in his arms and lurched forth, a smile freaking free at the sound she made. “You beast,” the woman complained yet again. “I was making progress.”

“Make progress without, where the paths are smooth,” he replied, careful not to jostle her. But then she’d not complained once to him of any pains. Even while refusing to drink more milk of the poppy. “Where I can make conversation with you and not have to look at the ground every few moments.”

“Demanding wretch.” She slapped his arm with her free hand, the other having moved to secure her position. “What manner of speech is this? I might grow used to being carried around like this and then you will regret it, for I won’t stop demanding it of you.”
“You mean, you would be always in my arms?” She nodded, a sullen expression crossing her features. “So I would have to hold you like this at all times? And you would not try to get away?”

Suspicion followed sullenness. “Careful, Your Grace, it sounds as though you wish it were true.” Her warm breath fanned against his cheek, the rest of her warmth pressed against his chest.

A servant in the hallway crossed their path, interrupting whatever else she’d wished to say. Rhaegar noted with some satisfaction that the woman’s mouth was agape. No doubt she wondered at the sight of them. He walked past without bothering to acknowledge that his wife had hidden her face against his shoulder.

“How mortifying. Now the servants will say I have corrupted you.” The light whine drew a chuckle from him. “’Tis no laughing matter. I’ve been trying so very hard to be on my best behaviour.”

“I know, you did not even throw our greeneries at some unsuspecting poor soul at supper.” Stunned silence met his words. “I was most disappointed that you did not. Do you know, there is still time to rectify the matter. I could persuade Lord Denys to play a hand with you, if you want.”

“Rhaegar,” she groused unhappily, shifting in his grasp. “Where do you even hear about that? At any rate, I was just a child. As for cards, I shan’t play. At all. With a lord of all people.” Pity ought to have been at the forefront of his mind. But gods forgive him, she was losing her mind over such insignificant matters.

“I would not mind it even if you did still battle with cabbage and spinach. Truth be told, I might even be persuaded to do my knightly duty and protect you.” The noise she made was positively hilarious. He truly should ease up on her. Thus Rhaegar beat a hasty retreat. “Aenar mentioned it sometime before we wedded. Trouble yourself not over it, lady wife.”

“I should have known. Is there aught that keeps his mouth shut?” They’d reached the courtyard. Rhaegar placed her on her feet and watched as she shook her skirts out, removing invisible lint from the folds. “And you would tease me with it. I thought you at least were better.” She pouted. Then she sobered. “I suppose I should have known better. Do you like wearing that mask?”

“What mask?” he returned in the same tone she used, just that side of playful. But he could well sense she was prodding deeper.

“Acting as though naught in the world might make the slightest impression upon you.” She looped her arm through his and he took great care to match his pace with hers. “I was half afraid to speak to you the first I saw you.” Once more she leaned against him.

“But you do not fear me now.” There was a question somewhere in there he was not capable of asking. Or rather not willing. How well did she know him that she might answer in a truthful manner? “You need not fear me.” He took hold of her hand, raising it to his lips for a quick peck. Was he trying to convince her or himself?

Lyanna cocked her head to the side. “You are pleased with me for now, husband, and I am more than pleased with that. But we’ve a life ahead of us. You cannot promise to always be pleased and I could not hold you to such a promise even if you did swear.”

He pinned her with his stare. “Of course. I would not make you such a promise. I am a man of my word.” He considered his following words carefully, “What do you want to hear from me?”

A sparse sigh reached his ears. “I want to know you. I want to know the man behind this mask of yours. Could I do that?” She had a way of making crushing demands. Rhaegar had all intentions of
living in companionship with her, but what she asked for was different. After all, her demand pertained to something other than the safe surface of their marriage. “It need not be on this very day. Just at some point. I would like it if you did.” Her hand was still in his, having turned in his grasp to wrap her fingers around his own. She seemed to be grappling with the words for her speech was forced. “Nevermind that, I’d been growing maudlin lately. Naught a little fresh air won’t cure.” Her lips pulled. “You needn’t look at me thusly.”

Rhaegar glanced away, to one of the trees lining the path. “I wasn’t.” He might have been though. The trouble was that she had once again turned it all on its head. “Have you considered that might be I would like to learn you instead?”

“I am not wearing a mask,” she laughed, squeezed his hand as though she meant to encourage him. “Indeed, I am one of those easy to read.” Her pace quickened. “You should not be making me keep up with you,” Lyanna gasped softly.

He drew to a halt. “Apologies.” She paused as well, but did not stop completely, bringing herself a step ahead of him. “I’ve learned it is best to keep one’s secrets close and one’s thoughts even closer. ‘Tis not aught I’ve ever given more thought to than necessary.”

“It is enough for me that you try,” she offered after a brief silence. If that was her way of soothing his fears, Rhaegar had to admit it was working. “Say, is it possible that Lord Darklyn is having some difficulties controlling those merchants? You mentioned he did not seem at ease in their presence.”

“It could well be. I cannot explain it as aught more than a tension.” There, that was infinitely more comfortable than speaking about himself. “Any speculations on my part would be just that.”

“Would that I were a fly on the wall.” She stopped before a raised bank of snow. “Might be it would be worth looking further into. Alas, you shall have to do so on your own, husband. I have already promised the lady of the house all of my attention for the morrow.”

“Have you?” He helped her over the hurdle and placed his hand over the bruised ribs. She shuddered and hissed. “It is a bit early to be considering exerting yourself.” She gave him a pointed look.

“Excellent argument, but not nearly compelling enough for me to reconsider.” The words slithered past clenched teeth, a testament to her stubbornness. Eventually, he would have to mellow her down some. If he managed to get her to listen.

“I was not making an argument, lady wife, merely testing the waters.” He slid his hand lower. “Have a care, if you will. I would hate to hear you’ve found yourself tangled in some other adventure. Without me, that is.”

Chapter End Notes
Fara chef
[..]Nici încline a ei limbă
Recea cumpă-n-a gândirii
Înșpre clipa ce se schimbă
Pentru masca fericirii,
Ce din moartea ei se naște
Și o clipă ține poate;
Pentru cine o cunoaște
Toate-s vechi și nouă toate.

Privitor ca la teatru
Tu în lume să te-nchipui:
Joace unul și pe patru,
Totuși tu ghici-vei chipu-i,
Și de plângete, de se ceartă,
Tu în colț petreci în tine
Și-nțelegi din a lor artă
Ce e rău și ce e bine.

Viitorul și trecutul
Sunt a filei două fețe,
Vede-n capăt începutul
Cine știe să le-nvețe;
Tot ce-a fost ori o să fie
În prezent le-avem pe toate,
Dar de-a lor zâdărnicie
Te întreabă și scoate [..]
Lyanna fought back the urge to lean against her husband for what seemed like the hundredth time in the short span she’d lingered in the great hall. The thin shawl still wrapped tightly around her did little enough to keep the chill at bay. It was an unnatural reaction as far as she was concerned. Yet her body refused to understand it could not possibly be cold in a chamber more or less sealed off and warmed by a roaring fire.

Since she could not make her grievance known, settling for the steaming honeyed porridge was the next best thing. Lyanna blew against the steam, forcing it towards the edge of the long table. With half an ear she listened to the conversation her husband was entertaining, trying to figure out whether she trusted Lord Darklyn or not. It was worrisome that her mind had decided way ahead of a proper introduction that the man deserved to be branded an enemy. And yet her instincts were trustworthy as far as she could tell. Thus she was forced to conclude it was the vision she’d had while incapacitated that prompted the stirring of suspicion and not anything their host had done.

The low murmurs stopped, prompting her gaze to lift from the bowl. The two men were looking at one another with one could only term to be understanding. “That would be appropriate,” Rhaegar finally allowed. “But what will your merchants say to this? I understand they each claim the profit as their work and thus due. Coercing them might be a dangerous path.”

She blinked, searching her mind for aught to angle upon. Aye, the merchants were displeased with recent losses, caused by, among many other reasons, a Lannister intervention. She placed the spoon between her lips, tasting the slightly stinging burn of her meal. Too quick to act. Lyanna swallowed. Rhaegar had suggested they band together themselves, but was still unconvinced the wisdom of such a move would reach his prospective subjects. For herself, Lyanna wondered how they could not. But then she happened to be much in awe of her mate, which must mean her opinion carried a strong colouring as consequence.

“Let us worry over that when we reach the point,” Denys Darklyn suggested, something shifting in his eyes as his stare fell upon her. “Lady Lyanna, is aught amiss?” The genuine concern took her by surprise. As dis the question.

“Nay. My lord is kind to worry, but there is nothing amiss.” She did not release his gaze though. Why she held on, well, her mind whispered that the eyes were the windows to the soul. She was curious as to what his soul held. The affable expression on his face was not at all daunted by the strength of her scrutiny. In fact, he seemed rather pleased to hold her attention.

“‘Tis good then. It would be a pity for it to be otherwise. My wife should be very disappointed.” Then he did break their contact to turn an appreciative eye to his spouse. The woman smiled in return, deep-red lips curling gently upwards.

Her eyes did not smile though. Startled, she dropped her gaze to her lap, noting the silver thread of one of the flowers had pulled. A soft touch pulled her attention to Rhaegar’s face. He’d not visited her the other night. As soon as the thought entered her mind the worry she’d attempted to quell bubbled up once more. But the look in his eyes was undeniably warm.

“You are still a little pale. It is not necessary to go through with it.” He was allowing her to postpone. And the lord and lady would not argue with that. “You’ve had a restless night.” Heat suffused her cheeks. Rohanne had been in her bedchamber. “Just say the words.”

Suddenly irked, she shook her head. “I am well, Your Grace. Little need to worry.” Coaxing as dismissive a tone as she could, Lyanna continued, “There are other matters to attend to.” It was his fault she’d spent the night tossing and turning. He could have at least wished her a good night’s rest.
It would have been enough. The Prince offered a nod, apparently not catching the less than cordial note. She clenched her teeth to keep the disappointment at bay and shifted in her seat.

Returning her attention to the porridge, Lyanna vowed she would concentrate on only that through the meal. Nevertheless, breaking her fast lost most of its appeal once Lady Darklyn entered the conversation between the men. The food she’d managed to swallow churned unpleasingly in her stomach, the pangs enough to make swallowing difficult.

“I reckon Your Grace has dealt with enough situation to come to a pleasing conclusion,” the woman added to whatever she’d said before. “It is always an asset to have, this knowledge.” Beside the many, many skills he possessed. Lyanna pursed her lips, blinking at the uncomfortable pressure in her chest. Who was Lady Serala to assess her husband’s skills. Impressive or otherwise. And how did she know anything about his experience?

Had Rhaegar spend time with the Myrwoman? Was that why he’d been absent from her side? Lyanna did not expect that he would wish to live in her pocket or any such notion, but this was different. Unable to keep her word to herself, she chanced a glance towards the three. Serala kept her smile, dangerously beautiful, her husband was still jovial and Rhaegar smiled back, in not quite out of politeness but enjoyment.

Something thick and black slithered its way through her ribs, reaching towards her heart. It wrapped smooth tendril around its prey and squeezed tauntingly. Struggling to keep her composure Lyanna analysed her hostess in even greater detail. Was she trying to capture Rhaegar’s attention or was it simply that she read too much into an innocent gesture? And if the woman was trying, what would she do about it?

Plagued by her worries, Lyanna kept her interventions minimal for fear of giving herself away. Somehow she made it through the entire affair without embarrassing herself or anyone else. A good thing she could be discreet when the situation called for it.

Once released from the presence of the hosts, she saw herself to her own chamber, barely waiting for Rhaegar to catch up. He did though, for he’d legs a mile long and entirely too much stamina to be outrun by her and her still sore ribs.

“Won’t you tell me what is wrong?” he asked after managing to halt her progress midclimb.

“There is nothing wrong,” she replied without much thought. Their gazes met and held. Surely he would not demand an answer in such public a place.

Her instincts proved accurate. Rhaegar walked alongside her in silence. He did not aid her though, yet kept no actual distance between them. If she leaned eve a smidgeon towards him their clothes would brush together. If she were able to she’d grip his hand, but her mind warned against such a move. He would know she was in turmoil and insist she reveal to him the reason behind it.

Septa Rohanne greeted the both of them but was quick to find an excuse to leave their presence soon enough, Much too soon. Leaving Lyanna with only one last glance the woman carefully closed the door in her wake. A few muffled words from without signalled that the guards had arrived as well. They’d been closer than Lyanna thought.

Taking his seat upon one of the stools, Rhaegar pinned her with a hard stare. Not cold, but inquisitive. “Is there nothing wrong?” he attempted to wheedle an answer out of her once more. “Is there nothing, truly, lady wife?”

Arrested, she avoided his stare as best she could, turning towards the looking glass set in silver. She
could see him beyond her shoulder. “Why would there be anything wrong?” Her trembling hands latched onto the first object she could find. A comb. The dainty thing was missing one of its legs. She lifted it towards her hair and began brushing, going through the motions with accuracy and speed. “I must prepare for my outing with Lady Serala. And you have your own preparations to make.”

In the looking glass a grin replied to her words. “I’m afraid that if you want me gone you shall have to ask it of me.” He stood. Lyanna counted the footfalls until she could see little else but the fine cut of his garment and feel twin hands upon her shoulders. “What did I say about honesty?”

Displeasure reared its head. “I am not a child to be talked down to,” she said pointedly, placing the comb upon the lacquered top. It made a small noise as it settled. “Nor do I enjoy being treated like one.” She punctuated her speech with a small shake. It did not dislodge his hold.

“I do not see you as a child,” her husband answered flatly. “Were I to regard you in such a fashion, I’d force the answer out of you by other means. Tell me what bothers you.” Pulled into his front, Lyanna felt the heat radiating off of him. Rhaegar crossed his arms over her chest, locking his embrace tightly. She could not escape.

Weighing her options, she allowed herself to lean into the affectionate gesture. It would be folly to admit her thoughts. “I am still tired.” She felt him freeze for a moment before soft lips pressed to her left temple. “I did not mean to be moody.” He made no protest. It must mean he believed her.

The kisses trailed downwards. “Poor dearling,” he murmured. A faint trace of something lingered, not entirely pleasant. “Was it your ribs that wouldn’t let you sleep?” His arms released her only for one of his hands to cradle the tender spot.

Her loneliness was the culprit. “Aye. I wish they would just heal.” Though she too was certain naught had broken, the pain lingered overlong. The sooner it was gone, the better. “I hope all goes as planned for you,” she continued in a desperate bid to distract him when his lips reached her neck.

Rhaegar retreated. His intense stare bore into the back of her head. “You are determined to accompany Lady Serala?”

Her jaw quivered. “Indeed.” Jealousy was such an ugly emotion. Agonising as well. If only she could brush her worries away. Yet once surfaced, suspicion clung tightly to its position. Lyanna anticipated she would be worn out by the end of the day. But at least Serala of Myr would be alongside her, which meant she would not be anywhere near Rhaegar. In fact, Lyanna planned to be very interested in the art she was presented with. It sounded desperate, even to herself.

Deciding to nurse her bruised ego some other time, she finally turned around, having composed herself long enough. Her husband stood still as a stone, arms crossed over his chest. She could read tension in his lines but was, sadly, unable to name the cause. Might be once they had a few years of marriage under their belt.

“I would prefer it if you did not push yourself overly much.” He cared. She was certain he cared in some capacity. That was good; he would be reluctant to cause her pain. Lyanna nodded her head tersely. Rhaegar’s stare lost some of its hardness. “If you feel unwell, halt all of her plans. There is time aplenty.”

“You are too kind.” A spark momentarily lit his eyes. It disappeared just as soon. “There will be no need to do so though.” Trying for a smile, she hoped it was enough to dispel any lingering doubts. “Should I find aught of interest, you will be the first to know.”
The Prince seemed to accept that. He allowed his shield to fall and gently cupped her face between his hands, delving in. She’d expected something soft, but he thoroughly disabused her of the notion, coaxing her mouth open. Desire ignited within her. Rhaegar pulled away. She licked her lower lip, watching him eye the motion.

“I shall eagerly await nightfall,” he said, before leaving her to her preparations.

Lyanna sighed and lowered herself upon the stool. Whatever had made her believe a flimsy set of rules could make for an easy married life. Clearly, she ought to have thought it through and invent a set of them for every possible situation under the sun. Alas, it was too late for such regrets.

By the time Rohanne returned, she was more or less prepared to honour her promise though she had very little desire to do so. Ever observant, her companion was quick to act. “My lady, whatever it is that darkens your mood so, put it away for now. There are matters we should see to.”

“I am trying,” she hissed through gritted teeth. It was not as easy as all that though. She was not about to tell Rohanne any of it. Yet there had to be a way. Closing her eyes, Lyanna took a few deep breaths. It helped. “There. That’s a lot better.”

After all for the coming period she was certain of her husband’s location. And she could assess his behaviour at a later time. With those thoughts in mind, some of her tranquillity returned. Enough to muster a pleasant expression in spite of all else.

“A lot better,” Rohanne echoed, handing her a cloak. “The lady had invited you without, Your Grace. She would like to begin with the westmost tower. One more thing, Your Grace.”

“Go on,” Lyanna urged, searching the silver-set looking glass for the last time.

“It seems one of the lord’s brothers has returned unexpectedly. The lady hopes you would not mind his presence should he accompany you.” What a peculiar moment he’d chosen to return. Lyanna did not comment upon that however.

“The more, the merrier, I always say. You wouldn’t happen to know which brother it is?” If she recalled correctly there were three or four brothers in all, Lord Denys included. But she could not remember which ones were supposed to be close by. Then again who was to say one hadn’t travelled from far off. She would see which one he was when she reached him. Rohanne had no answer either. “Just as well then. Come along.”

Her companion shot her a brief searching look which Lyanna ignored in favour of smoothing invisible creases from the front of her skirts. Avoidance was a godsend. Without the guards greeted her and one began following as well, falling into step with the septa. They exchanged words in familiar tones, leading her to believe the two knew one another well. It was nice to know Rohanne had found company to occupy herself with.

This time, the journey downstairs did not steal the breath from her lungs, to Lyanna’s eternal relief. Though her ribs did throb some. It seemed she was on the right path to healing. The last stair disappeared from beneath her foot in the descent, leaving her standing before the opened doors.

Without she could see a few forms gathered together, apparently in conversation. Among them it was easy to discern which was Lady Serala. Lyanna trained her eyes on the woman, very nearly forgetting there were others there as well. Not that she was allowed such a state for long.

“Your Grace,” Serala of Myr greeted her warmly, stepping outside the circle to link their arms together. “May I present my good-brother, Ser Rolland.” She nodded towards one of the men, her
Dutifully turning her eyes towards the knight, Lyanna was surprised for a brief moment at the difference in looks. Rolland Darklyn was naught if not youthful in his appearance, as opposed to the sombre visage of his brother. He bowed and held one hand out. Lyanna reciprocated. “Ser Rolland, like the famous member of the Kingsguard?”

The man chuckled, bringing her knuckles to his lips. “I hope to have better luck than my predecessor. “Does Your Grace happen to know he was the youngest knight to be named Kingsguard?”

“Was he indeed?” He released her hand. “I should think it an honour.”

“He died within the hour, on the battlefield.” Straightening himself, he offered a warm grin. “I could think of better ways to go, Your Grace. Good-sister dearest, allow me to be of aid.” Reaching for Lyanna’s other hand, he placed it in the crook of his arm. “I hope Your Grace does not mind. Mayhap we shall even manage to convince me of the great honour of being named in the Kingsguard.”

It was her turn to laugh. “I advise looking for encouragement elsewhere, ser. Might be one of the Whitecloaks themselves.”

“But Your Grace, you shall one day be Queen. What better person to plead for such a noble cause?” For some reason, he wanted her attention. Lyanna searched his face. There was little other than friendliness to be found there.

“I do not believe your good-sister would be pleased to be left out of the discussion.” Meeting Serala’s eyes, Lyanna gave a nod. “Would you encourage your good-brother to vie for a place among the Kingsguard?”

A thoughtful look crossed the woman’s face. “I know not, Rolland. What shall all the pretty maidens of the Dun Fort do? You will break their hearts.”

“I have other brothers,” Rolland brushed the concern away.

“None as gallant as you, or without a bride. Your Grace, do not let my good-brother fool you. His desires are as changeable as the weather.” She relaxed at that. At the very least she would not have to worry about a ploy yet.

“This is no decision to be taken lightly, ser,” she continued in much the same vein. “If you do not wish it, it would be best not to reach for it.”

Holding one hand up in mock surrender, Rolland spoke, “You have bested me, Your Grace. I bow to your superior knowledge.”
Glossă - Mihai Eminescu

English translation by Adrian G. Sahlean & Andrei Bantas [link]

Probably my favourite poem ever. What can I say, I just love the sheer tragedy of it.

Hope the chapter was fun for you folks, see you next time.
Lights Out

Chapter Summary

Relationships further deteriorate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_I have come to the borders of sleep,_
_The unfathomable deep_
_Forest where all must lose_
_Their way, however straight,_
_Or winding, soon or late;_
_They cannot choose._

_Many a road and track_
_That, since the dawn's first crack,_
_Up to the forest brink,_
_Deceived the travellers,_
_Suddenly now blurs,_
_And in they sink._

_Here love ends,_
_Despair, ambition ends;_
_All pleasure and all trouble,_
_Although most sweet or bitter,_
_Here ends in sleep that is sweeter_
_Than tasks most noble._

"I will not hear another word," Rhaella spoke decisively, eyeing her daughter with censure; after what nonsense she had said to Lyanna Stark, she ought to be glad her punishment was not more severe. Shaena's considerable girth occupied the wooden bench facing her, much of the space being taken up by the folds of her skirts. "You will sit there and endure the journey with poise and grace. Or else."

What could she have possibly done to deserve such a daughter? Rhaella was not at all pleased to have been packed off to Dragonstone in order to watch over the girl anymore than Shaena was
pleased to have her along. They stared at one another for a long moment, with her daughter lowering her gaze after, fingers plucking at the embroidered edge of her collar. Whether the motion was meant to distract her or not, she could not say. What she did know was that Shaena was deliberately trying to rile her up in an attempt to have her turn them all around. She did not want to go to Dragonstone. Neither did Rhaella. But Aerys ordered it. The King approved.

"Why should my child be born in a place other than his home? Baelor and I would be only too pleased to have a small set of chambers of our own. It would be more than enough, mother." She shifted in her seat, her fingers gripping the laced edge and tugging upon it. "I simply do not understand why it is that should not please you."

"This is not about a set of chambers, Shaena. Do not be difficult." One should think all the time the girl had been made to spend reflecting upon her conduct might have given her an inkling as to why it was that her presence within the Red Keep ought to be a scarce nature. The girl's mouth curled in distaste. Rhaella's glare turned warning. Not that it seemed to have much effect. As it turned out, petulance was a chief concern among her children and a reasonable category of competition, if what she was witnessing was a reflection of her daughter's thought process.

"You are punishing me for a matter that has already been settled," Shaena accused, crossing her arms over her chest, eyes filling with tears. "And you are punishing my child. I could fain endure the slings and arrows of your ire if it were thrust only upon myself. But you are condemning your grandchild to it as well."

Hardened to these sorts of recriminations, Rhaella shrugged. "I would advise that you not seek to put my nose out of joint. 'Twill not bring you much joy; that I can promise." Her daughter paused, long enough to wipe some of her tears away, but she did not give up the mummery. "Your father wishes us to reside on Dragonstone from the time being and we shall do as pleases him. You had best put out of your mind any desire to deny him this."

"I cannot understand you, mother." Shaena's head rose high, tipped slightly back. "Is there no desire in you to have a mind of your own? Thoughts of your own? Do you wish to be in father's shadow at all times?" A mocking brow shot up towards her daughter's hairline. "I expect 'twas not what Queen Alysanne had in mind when she suggested husband and wife need but reach agreement."

Unable to help herself, Rhaella brought her palm against Shaena's cheek with a satisfying sound. A stunned silence followed, propagated by both sides. Skin burned red under the effect of the hit and a pristine, pale hand came to cover the heated flesh. Wonderstruck, her daughter stared, her apparent lack of comprehension made all the clearer by the way her lips quivered.

"You are never to speak to me again in such a manner," she finally managed, sliding back into her seat. Rhaella pinned her daughter to her own seat. "You know little about being a wife. And you know nothing about bearing any sort of responsibility. If it is my wish to be in complete accord with your father than that is my prerogative and no business of yours, young lady. Furthermore, who are you to comment upon the decisions of your betters? What have you done that we ought to be so in awe of you?"

"You cannot treat me thusly," Shaena spoke softly. "I am with child."

"And I am out of patience," she retorted to that. "Have you considered how your actions might affect anyone other that yourself? What of me? Of your father, and your brothers? Of course not, because you are pregnant and that is somehow justification enough for you to run your mouth." She was not done though. Not by half. "And you have the gall to question me in such a manner; you, you who have spat upon any advantage your station and upbringing has provided. You who thought not a thing of advancing yourself as the most determinate traitor in the path of your kin. I will not be talked
at by an inconsiderate child incapable of right thought, let alone of right action."

Words, Rhaella had long learned, hurt; the words uttered by one's close companions and trusted carers. Their disappointment cut. She hoped her daughter bled, at any rate; she hoped her words had a profound impact upon the silly girl and that she woke up to the undeniable facts which walled her from all sides. "Do not think for a moment your folly will not gain you your just deserts. In due time, daughter; in due time."

The foreboding prediction saw Shaena crumbling in a heap of silks and tears; her weeping genuine this time. Rhaella abstained from offering comfort. She had done her best to encourage a laxer atmosphere before Rhaegar's departure, to at least close the distance in part if not completely. But on her own she could not do much. And it was becoming clearer that Baelor and Shaena were on altogether different pages. No matter how set against comfort her mind was, though, her heart went out to the tearful child. She had to steel herself.

While her daughter busied herself with decrying the foul treatment she'd been subjected to, though not by means of word, Rhaella saw to the intricacies of the situation they found themselves in and the possible reaction her mother would have to it. Shaena had never been known as one of the more understanding souls bent on bettering the state of the world she lived in.

As though to remind her, Shaena brought up the subject with alacrity. "Great-grandfather wedded for love. Grand-father wedded for love. Why should your own son and daughter not wed for love?"

"Because you haven't the faintest what love means," she replied harshly, fully intended on bringing the sting of truth upon her. "

"I think you are jealous. Jealous that Baelor and I have what you will never have." As soon as those words left her mouth Shaena looked contrite. She stammered out a retraction. "That was not at all what I meant," she managed in a clearer voice. "Mother, 'tis not at all what I meant."

"is it not?" Rhaella questioned harshly. Women who carried were given some leeway; daughters were afforded some protection. She had even been willing to overlook the earlier outbursts, keeping in mind that Shaena's delicate state could be blamed for her moodiness and exasperation. But there were some lines she was not willing to cross. "Well, no matter; I shall make certain you are given proper instructions in how a lady comports herself just as soon as we've reached the keep."

Which as indeed what she set out to do just as soon as the two of them were without the wheelhouse. Servants had gathered in the courtyard, regarding the arrival of their mistress with the appropriate amount of awe and respect that she should fell well-received. Her mother was nowhere in sight, which was as she had expected. Shaera lived for herself, and that much was not likely to change. Thusly, her greetings were perfunctory, delivered only to the maester before a rather hasty demand for peace.

"My poor daughter is tired. Her condition, you know." She did not doubt Shaena's shame had reached these parts as well. Nevertheless, she dragged the girl after her, thankful for once that Baelor had been delayed. Much as she loved the boy, he was a man as all men were, likely to take the side of his wife over that of truth. It might, as well, have to do with his part in the debacle. Such reflections would have to be pursued at a later date; for the moment she had a lesson or two to teach and not at all enough patience to suffer scrutiny.

Bringing Shaena to her master bedchamber, she pushed her resistant form within. "You had best mind me, for I am not in a forgiving mood. Now sit down." Her daughter did as she was told with no small amount of scowling to be had.
Rhaella was not about to accept that, however. "Your first lesson, I daresay, ought to be upon filial piety. Shall I assume you know what that is?" Her daughter's face exploded in a strong blush. She raised one eyebrow at that. "Well, are you going to answer me?" Predictably, Shaena refused to give any manner of reply. "I see I have no recourse but to start at the very beginning. Pray excuse me but a moment, daughter, while I have the Seven-Pointed Stark brought up."

Chapter End Notes

Poem 'Lights Out' by Edward Thomas.
Hi everyone,

Sol here. So, I’m sure you’ve heard about the new link-tax and copyright reform the EU is looking to introduce into the member states of the union. To those of you who haven’t or are not from the EU, basically this new piece of legislation is looking into regulating all activities dependent on content (be it videos, songs, news articles, books etc). They would do that by monitoring what the users of a platform post and if copyrighted content is determined to be used, it would be considered criminal activity.

The only way it wouldn’t be deemed criminal activity is if the users paid a tax (hence why we call it a link-tax).

The vote will be held on the 20th of June and in case the law gets passed, I think it’s obvious I won’t be able to post anymore on any platform (be it this or FF.net or some other site). So what happens is this: I am starting to archive all of my fics. Those of you who want to request a certain fic can find me here.

Further updates information is: here.

Questions are welcome, but for discretion’s sake, sensitive ones are better posted on discord, or if you must on my e-mail address.

Thank you for your time and sorry to bring you somewhat unpleasant news.

P.S. Every story with more than 20 subs will get a post like this. If you’ve read one, you’ve read them all. I’ll take them down after the 20th.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!