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THE halls of Winterfell were alight with warmth, food and song. Children ran amok from the ramparts to the hallways. Women laughed while the men drank till their bellies ached. Outside, the snow continued to fall unbothered and the frozen rivers remained thick.

Heavy boots plodded outside in the courtyard. A tall young man with dark hair and eyes searched the castle from wall to wall. "Has anyone seen Lyra?" he called out but the people around him merely shook their heads. Sighing in dismay, he continued on his quest to the western ramparts.

Poor Brandon, Lyra thought. Her cousin must be searching for her on her father's behalf. From the northern tower, she could see as far as three leagues out from the castle. The southern road remained bare even though the sun had already begun its descent into the west.

Lyra would always end her nameday with relief and a full belly. However, this year was different. She had just turned twenty; the age that her father had promised the King to finally give her hand away in marriage.

She had only ever seen her betrothed once in her entire life. When she was six and ten, her father had brought her to the summer tourney in King's Landing. Daemon Targaryen had won each contest in jousting, melee and archery. All the young ladies in the realm had tried to earn his favour that day.

At the same age, Daemon had already been tall and sturdy. Lyra remembered his violet eyes, bewitching yet unnerving, as he peered up at her on the grandstand. Out of respect, he had asked her to shower him in her favour. Though it was her duty to do so, he still thanked her with a smile each time she tossed him a wreath.

When King Jaehaerys knighted him and gifted him the Valyrian steel sword, Dark Sister, he also officiated their betrothal. Though her father had tried to postpone the marriage as long as he could, it was inevitable.

Lost in her thoughts, a pair of hands suddenly covered her eyes but it was in a familiar manner. It brought her back to the present and her lips curved into a welcoming smile. "I have a gift for you," Brandon's voice disclosed in her ear.

His hands fell back to his sides and Lyra turned around expectantly. From his belt, he unlatched a small leather scabbard. Lyra watched keenly as he gripped the hilt and pulled out a dagger.

The light caught upon the silver and it gleamed brilliantly underneath the high noon sun. She reached out for it and Brandon relinquished the dagger unto her palm. The blade was solid yet lightweight in her grasp.

"How does it feel?" he asked.

"Perfectly balanced," she responded.

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Brandon smiled in satisfaction before his face grew sombre. He let out a small sigh as his gaze trailed the empty horizon.

"You will need it in the days to come, I have no doubt," he told her.

"King's Landing is a miserable hole, full of politicking cunts that only care about themselves."

"Have you ever talked to him in person?" she asked.

"Once, during the tourney when he was knighted." He grimaced at the memory. "I will not lie to you, Lyra. Your soon-to-be husband is arrogant and debauched. He is a rogue prince. You would do well to be on your guard. Do not trust him."

"It is only a marriage of diplomacy," she responded sulkily, staring back into her own green eyes through the reflection of the dagger.

Lyra found herself disheartened at the thought of living her life with a licentious husband. She wondered if he already had a string of mistresses and bastards tied to his belt. It would not be a surprise.

Daemon Targaryen was as charming as he was dangerous.

"If only Rhea Royce had been born more beautiful," Brandon remarked ruefully.

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"You will join us in the capital, will you not?" She looked at him with despondence. "I fear Mother will leave Cregan in Winterfell."

"If your lord father allows it, aye," he said.

While engaged in their conversation, neither Starks had paid much attention to the King's Road. It was only when trumpets blared through the frosty air that they noticed the arriving company. Lyra gingerly stood from her perch and looked over the parapets. Immediately, her insides twisted with apprehension when she caught sight of their black and crimson banner.

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Brandon took her arm and hurriedly pulled her towards the stairs.

They stormed down the tower and the ramparts into the main courtyard. A crowd had quickly gathered around the herald who was now addressing the Lord of Winterfell.

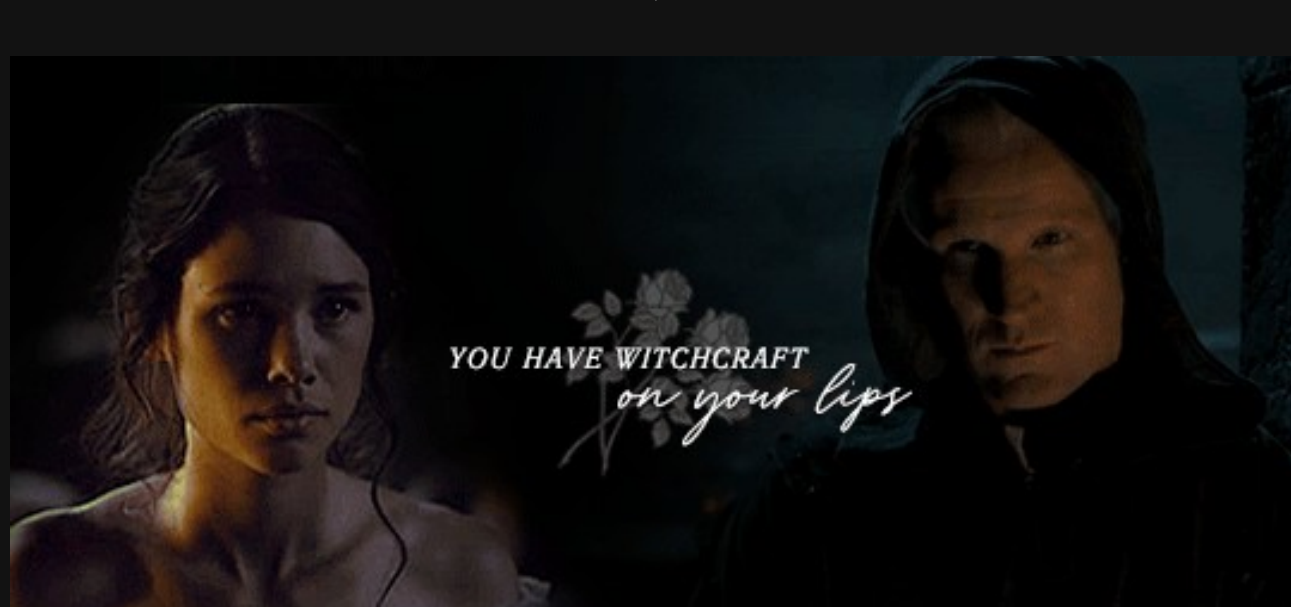
The official messenger unfurled his scroll to declare his missive, "His Grace, Jaehaerys Targaryen, first of his name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, do hereby decree with great honour,

that the Lady Lyra Stark is to be wed to Prince Daemon Targaryen within the next three moons. He also extends his invitations to the Lord and Lady of Winterfell, to attend the wedding ceremony and celebrations in King's Landing."

Rickon Stark bowed his head respectfully. "We accept His Grace's invitations and will leave for King's Landing the day after the morrow."

He accepted the scroll from the herald who then very promptly left Winterfell to relay the message back to his King. Lyra stood rooted to her spot as she gawked at her father. Rickon turned to her and placed the summons in her hand. She gripped it tightly, the crisp parchment crumpling underneath her fingertips.

There was no escaping her fate.



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