

"It's good to see you, Ned," Brandon said, his voice booming through the courtyard of Harrenhal as he embraced his brother.

"And you, Brandon," Ned said, returning the hug. "Gods, is that you, Benjen? What in the world is Father feeding you? You've grown a foot."

"Everything in sight," Lyanna replied for Benjen, poking him in the ribs with her elbow as he went to hug Ned.

"I'm glad you're here, Ned," Benjen said.

"Wouldn't miss it once I heard you'd all be coming," Ned said. "Lya."

Lyanna wrapped her arms around her brother and whispered, "I'm glad to see you too."

Ned pulled away and ruffled Benjen's hair before leading them all inside. After the herald had announced them and Lord Walter Whent had come to greet them, Ned led the three of them around the great hall.

"Looks like half the nobles in the land are here," Lyanna murmured.

"Lord Walter's offering prizes that would make the Lord Hand hesitate," Brandon snorted. "No idea how he's bloody paying for it."

"These lands look rich," Benjen said.

"Compared to the average Northern holdfast, yes," Ned said, "but though this castle is as monstrous as the dragon who melted it, none of its lords have been counted among the wealthiest in the land. Lord Walter is renowned for his generosity, though."

"He must be," Brandon said.

"Ned!" Robert said as he spotted them. "I wasn't aware the Northerners had arrived yet. Good day, Brandon, Benjen, Lyanna."

Ned saw Lyanna tense as Robert's gaze fell on her and hoped that she wasn't about to say anything regrettable.

"Good day, Robert," Brandon said, stepping forward. "I believe you owe me the spar we mentioned when you visited Winterfell."

"Right," Robert said, clasping Brandon's forearm in his hand. "You had buggered up your arm, if I remember."

Brandon chuckled, saying, "nothing a couple weeks of rest couldn't fix."

"Well, I had hoped to have a word with..." Robert went to say.

"If it's all the same to you, my lord, our journey was long, and I would like to rest," Lyanna cut him off. "Brandon here has been looking forward to your spar for some time."

"Of course," Robert said, looking only mildly disappointed.

"Ned, could you show us to the rooms that Lord Walter mentioned?" Lyanna asked.

"Yes," Ned said, feeling awkward. "I'll catch up with you two later."

"Thank the gods," Lyanna muttered as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Robert is not a bad man, Lyanna," Ned said.

"He's a lecherous boor," Lyanna snarled. "Forgive me if I'm not thrilled by the idea of wedding a man who already has at least one bastard out there and will likely father an army before he's done."

"Marriage can change a man, Lya," Ned said, ignoring her scoff.

"Ned, tell me this," Lyanna said as they reached the door of the room she'd be staying in. "Who do you think would be more likely to be a loyal husband, you or Brandon?"

"I..." Ned paused, taken aback by the question.

"I love you both, but you see my point," Lyanna said, entering the room and shutting the door behind her.

Ned just sighed and turned to the guards he had taken with him, both of whom were pretending not to notice anything.

"Make sure she's kept safe," Ned said before leaving to rejoin the others.

"You should have seen the looks on the cunts' faces!" Brandon exclaimed. "The bandit scum were so certain they'd escaped us. We had them outnumbered and were far better armed. Only one among them was fool enough to try and fight, and after I'd taken his head, the rest begged to take the black."

"An impressive hunt," Jon Arryn said, laughing.

"They were foolish for even trying to escape from you in the Wolfwood," Lyanna said. Turning to Howland Reed, she added, "Brandon here has been hunting in those woods for years. He knows them well."

"You must be an accomplished hunter, my Lord," Howland said timidly, still not entirely comfortable.

Ned smiled at seeing his sister in better spirits. Much of that had to do with her new friend, whom she had apparently beaten three squires with a tourney sword in defense of. He suspected that her mood also had much to do with Robert having drunk himself under the table in a contest with Ser Richard Lonmouth. The other Stormlander was in no better

shape himself. He hoped that Lyanna would grow to see the good man that he knew Robert was. The last time he had said as much, she'd told him to marry him in her stead, though, so that was slow going.

As the feast was coming to a close, Lord Walter stood and addressed the massive gathering, saying, "my lords and ladies, I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see so many of the Seven Kingdom's finest in my halls."

He paused, then, to wet his lips before continuing.

"I never imagined that so many would heed my invitations, and I know there are a lot of you, because greeting you all was exhausting," Lord Walter said, pausing for the few polite laughs he got. "The dance will begin in a moment, and as we wait for the room to be cleared, his grace, Prince Rhaegar has agreed to play us a song on his harp."

"Good day to you all," Rhaegar said, standing as Walter sat down. "It warms my heart to see such proof of the unity of the Seven Kingdoms here. We have here men from the sands of Dorne to the snowy hills and plains of the North all together in one hall. I look forward to speaking with more of you in the coming days and competing against many of you in the lists."

That comment earned him a few good-natured challenges, which made him smile.

"Without any further ado, I will perform one of my favorite songs," Rhaegar said, sitting down with his harp. "*High in the halls of the kings who are gone, Jenny would dance with her ghosts...*"

"Quite the voice," Brandon murmured to him.

"Shh!" Lyanna shushed him, her eyes never leaving the dragon prince as he continued singing.

Ned sat enjoying the song and noticed a few of the women were crying. As he looked around the room, his gaze passed one woman, whom his eyes immediately shot back to. He felt as though his heart skipped a beat as he took in the sight of her. Her hair was dark, nearly as dark as Robert's, and fell to her bare shoulders. Her tanned skin suggested that she was Dornish, though she wasn't nearly as swarthy as most of them. She was one of the women crying at Rhaegar's song, and Ned swore, though he couldn't be sure across the great hall, that her eyes were purple. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on, and for the first time in his life, he found himself utterly captivated by beauty.

"...and the ones who had loved her the most." Rhaegar finished.

The crowd applauded, and Ned was startled from his staring.

"She's a pretty one," Brandon said, elbowing him gently. "You've fine taste."

"I..." Ned went to reply.

"Are you crying?" Benjen asked, laughing as he realized that he was right. Lyanna wiped her eyes and glared at her little brother, quickly grabbing a goblet and dumping its contents on his head, making him exclaim, "Lya!"

Brandon laughed loudly at his squabbling siblings while Ned tried in vain to find the woman he had spotted before, only to find that he'd lost her in the crowd.

"Who in the world was she?" he wondered to himself.

As the dance began, Ned found a spot along one of the vast walls of the hall to take in the atmosphere and enjoy the music. He wasn't opposed to dancing, but he was rarely one to initiate. Spotting the girl he had noticed before, he felt his heart flutter again at the sight of her swaying in her violet dress. She was dancing with a tall, clearly Dornish man, the sight of whom made Ned instantly wary. There was something plainly dangerous about him, whoever he was.

"Ashara Dayne," Brandon said as he joined Ned.

"Hmm?" Ned asked.

"That's her name," Brandon said. "She's Ser Arthur's sister."

"Really?" Ned asked, looking over at the woman again.

"Aye," Brandon said. "Were you anyone else, I'd warn you to be careful given that, but I hardly have to fear you doing something that could draw his ire."

"Ashara," Ned said, as though testing how the name felt on his lips. "Who's the man she's dancing with?"

"Prince Oberyn Martell," Brandon replied.

"Are they..." Ned asked.

"No," Brandon said, shaking his head. "By the man's reputation, it's possible that he'll never wed. His older brother already has at least one child to secure the succession of Sunspear."

"Hmm," Ned said in contemplation.

"You should ask her to dance," Brandon said.

"What?" Ned asked. "No, no, that wouldn't...I wouldn't even know how to ask."

"Surely there are pretty girls in the Vale," Brandon said. "Are you saying that you've danced with any of them?"

"A time or two," Ned replied, "but I've never really sought any out."

"How are you friends with Robert Baratheon and so ill-versed in having fun?" Brandon scoffed.

"If Robert had a little less fun, our sister wouldn't be so put out about her betrothal," Ned pointed out.

"You have a point," Brandon said, looking away for a moment. "Look, Ned, I'm not suggesting that you bend her over; just ask her to dance."

"Brandon!" Ned exclaimed, reddening.

"If you come to like her well enough, and she you, Father would surely agree to the match," Brandon continued. "You know how he loves his southerners."

"Speaking of, do you know who among the Tullys are here?" Ned asked, eager to change the subject.

"The only Tully here is Ser Brynden," Brandon replied. "It might be for the best, in truth. Catelyn is sweet and lovely, but her sister irritates me."

"Lysa right?" Ned asked.

"Aye," Brandon said. "Bizarre creature, that one."

Ned just shook his head as Brandon left to ask a gorgeous blonde woman to dance. Though keeping away from the center of the room, Ned moved around, mingling as he went. Jon Arryn's leg was bothering him, and he was in no mood to dance. As it turned out, he was in no mood to be bothered either, and he swiftly told Ned to go enjoy himself. He spoke with one of the myriad Freys who had shown up, finding him to be a dull man whose name he forgot the moment he heard it.

As they spoke, he noticed Ashara again, dancing with a red-haired man who looked almost disinterested in her, much to his confusion. He spotted Brandon with his blonde companion, nearing the pair, and watched as his brother introduced himself. A frown marred his face when his brother and the red-haired man switched partners and continued on their way.

"...and so Father says that I'm likely to be knighted within the year," the Frey, probably named Walder, as so many of them seemed to be, said.

"That's great," Ned said. "Begging your pardon, but I need a drink."

He made his way to a servant and called for a cup of wine, which was brought to him readily. It was sour, which he found odd. He was about to question the servant when his brother called for him.

"Ned," Brandon called.

Purple. That was the only thought that crossed his mind as Ned turned around and took in the visage of Ashara Dayne up close.

“Have you met my brother, Lady Ashara?” Brandon asked.

“I haven’t had the pleasure,” Ashara said, and Ned noted that even her voice was beautiful. Holding out her hand, she said, “Ashara Dayne.”

Ned took her hand in his and barely noticed the spark as he did so. Bringing her knuckles to his lips, he kissed them softly, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Brandon called you Ned?” Ashara asked, prompting him to speak.

“Yes...I am Eddard Stark,” Ned said, making her giggle at his awkwardness. “I’m sorry, my lady; I was just taken aback by your eyes. I have never seen their like before.”

“You haven’t met any of the Targaryens?” Ashara asked, still sounding amused.

“I haven’t had the pleasure,” Ned said.

“Ned, I’m afraid that I must have bothered my leg more than I thought during my spar with Lord Robert earlier,” Brandon said. “I figured that you would be willing to take my place with the lovely lady here.”

“Of...of course,” Ned said with no choice but to act, “if the lady would like to dance.”

Ashara peered at him inquisitively, her gaze not unlike that of a man sizing up an opponent in the training yard, and Ned had to consciously stop himself from gulping.

“I would love to,” she finally said. “Would you like to finish your wine first?”

“Actually, I’m afraid it’s gone off,” Ned said, reluctantly tearing his eyes from her to look down at his cup. “It’s sour.”

“May I?” Ashara asked, holding out her hand. When Ned handed her the cup, she sipped from it and smiled at him, saying, “it’s Dornish; it’s supposed to taste like that.”

“Oh,” Ned said.

Ashara smirked and handed him back the cup, saying, “try it again.”

As he took a sip, she stepped closer and said, “hold it in your mouth for a moment. Swirl it around over your tongue, letting it coat it. It will tingle a little, pleasantly, as the sourness affects you. Try to see if you can taste the subtle cherry notes amid the stronger earthy taste. Dornish wine isn’t for everyone, but for those who can appreciate it, it can be quite stimulating.”

Ned swallowed and coughed as a little of it failed to go down smoothly. and he choked. Bringing the cup to his lips, he drank the rest down to settle his throat.

“Are you alright?” Ashara asked.

“Aye,” Ned replied as his cough subsided.

“Shall we dance then?” Ashara asked, holding out her hand.

“Happily, my lady,” Ned said, taking her hand.

He handed his cup to his stunned-looking brother and followed the most beautiful woman he had ever seen onto the dance floor. Her dress was unlike any that he had seen on a woman before, a purple gown that showed off much of her upper back. He felt a yearning like he had never known to touch that perfectly smooth, tanned skin, and as his eyes fell lower to take in how well the dress clung to her wide hips and round arse, his breath hitched, and he forced himself to look away.

Ashara led him to a relatively empty area of the room and turned around, smiling up at him. He reached around to place his hand on her back and paused when he realized that he would be touching her bare back. Every other woman he had ever danced with had worn more conservative dresses, and it gave him pause, but faced with the choice of touching her skin or reaching lower, he went with propriety and pressed his hand against her back, parting the waves of her dark hair.

“You asked if I had ever met the royal family,” Ned said as they started to dance. “I imagine you have?”

“Oh, yes,” Ashara said. “I am Princess Elia’s handmaid.”

“Oh,” Ned said in surprise. “I figured that you would have because of your brother.”

Ashara laughed. “You’re not the first man to ask about Art. It’s enough to make a girl feel self-conscious.”

“I can’t imagine you having much to feel self-conscious about,” Ned said, flushing as he realized what he’d said.

Ashara smiled widely, and Ned was, for not the first time that night, stunned by her beauty. Her eyes might have been the most unique thing about her, but they were hardly the only reason to find her captivating. Her face was heart-shaped, with prominent cheekbones and a softly pointed chin. Her nose was straight and slight, and her full lips were utterly inviting. With her smooth, unblemished skin and long, dark, wavy hair, there was no question in Ned’s mind that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on.

“You’re very sweet,” Ashara said. “So why is it that you don’t look like you’re baking in the heat like your brother?”

Ned laughed and replied, saying, “I was fostered in the Vale with Lord Jon Arryn from the time I was a boy. Brandon’s been south of the Neck only once before, and this is a first entirely for Lyanna and Benjen.”

“Do you have any other siblings?” Ashara asked.

“No, it’s just the four of us,” Ned replied. “What about you? Is it just you and Ser Arthur?”

"No, I have another brother, Vorick," Ashara said. "He's the eldest of us."

"Is he back in Starfall?" Ned asked.

"Yes," Ashara said. "Our father is old, and Vorick has been taking on more and more of his duties of late."

"I know what that's like," Ned said. "My father is still strong, but he was near to thirty when Brandon was born."

"Why did he wait so long to have children?" Ashara asked.

"His heart was set on his cousin, my mother," Ned explained, "but my grandfather opposed the union, seeking one that would bring more to the family. It was only after he died that Father wed. It was so soon after the fact that his bannermen still refer to it as the black wedding, because everyone was still in their mourning clothes."

"He got to follow his heart, at least," Ashara said. "Not everyone is so lucky."

"Aye," Ned said. "They were happy for many years. What about you?"

"Me?" Ashara asked.

"Are you betrothed to anyone?" Ned asked.

"You're subtler than your brother, at least," Ashara said teasingly.

"I'm sorry?" Ned asked.

"Getting me away from Lord Connington and then leading me straight to you and feigning an injury?" Ashara asked. "As subtle as a charging aurochs, that one."

Ned stilled and swallowed thickly, saying, "I'm sorry for the deception, my lady."

"I'm not angry," Ashara said.

"You're not?" Ned asked.

"No," Ashara laughed. "You've been good company, and you're a lovely dancer."

"Thank you, my...Ashara," Ned said, beginning to dance with her again.

"That is rather forward," Ashara teased, giggling as he reddened. "Why did you not ask me to dance yourself?"

"Lack of practice, I suppose," Ned replied honestly.

"Then I cannot imagine how much more fun you might be with practice," Ashara said, her voice suddenly husky.

Ned felt her every word in his cock, where his blood swiftly rushed. He tried to ignore it, confident that, at the distance between them, Ashara would not notice, and focused on dancing with her. The two of them danced through many more songs, talking here and there, but mostly just enjoying the music and each other's company. Lost in her purple eyes, Ned almost forgot that they weren't alone, the rest of the world retreating into nothingness as he swam in a sea of lavender. The song that the prince had sung, Jenny's Song, was one that he had heard before, but never before that moment had he truly understood the words. He didn't want to leave her arms, and given the choice, he would gladly stay in that moment forever.

"His grace, King Aerys of House Targaryen, the second of his name, King of the Andals, and the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm," the Herald announced, and Ned saw Ashara grow pale as the music came to a halt.

Turning around, it took all of his well-trained composure not to react to the sight of the man he beheld. Ned tried to recall how old the king was, as he was sure that the man was not yet forty, and yet he looked older than Jon Arryn. His silver-gold hair was long and unkept, as was his beard, and his finger nails were long and crooked, looking like misshapen talons. His suspicious purple eyes gazed around the room with barely concealed contempt.

"This is the king?" he couldn't help but think to himself.

"Ned!" Ashara hissed, pulling him back as murmurs began to sound throughout the hall. Leaning in, she whispered, "don't stare at him. You don't want to catch his gaze; trust me there."

She sounded terrified, and he was about to question her when Rhaegar's smooth, deep voice cut through the cacophony of murmurs.

"Father," he said, making his way to the entrance. "I was not aware you were coming."

"I imagine you weren't," Aerys croaked, his reed thin voice warbling with malevolence.

"Your grace," Walter Whent said, rushing over to the king and bowing low. "Welcome to my humble hall."

"There's nothing humble about this hall, Whent," Aerys said. "Our journey was long, and we would rest."

"Of course, your grace," Walter said. "I will have my chambers prepared for your use."

"See to it," Aerys said, reaching down to grab a wineskin from his belt and drinking deeply of its contents until they spilled down his long beard.

"Come," Ashara said, pulling on Ned's arm and leading him away.

"What in the world was that?" Ned asked the second they were out of the hall.

"Nothing that you want to involve yourself in," Ashara said, shivering. After a moment, she said, "I'm suddenly quite tired. Would you mind escorting me to my room?"

"Of course," Ned said, offering her his arm automatically. He felt a shiver go down his spine as she took it, and he couldn't help but smile as she led him through the halls of Harrenhal.

"Here it is," Ashara said as they stopped outside a particular door. Turning to him, she looked up into his eyes, and Ned found himself again, wishing that he could just be himself in hers forever. "I had a lovely time tonight."

"So did I," Ned said, "once I met you, anyway."

He blushed as he said the words but held her gaze without flinching.

She smiled widely at him and said, "I'm sorry it had to be cut short."

"As am I," Ned said. "Is that how things always are with..."

"Don't say it," Ashara said sharply. "Don't even think about it. If he is here, then his ears are here, and you don't want them to hear you say anything that he wouldn't like."

"Do you spend much time in the capital?" Ned asked, feeling suddenly fearful for her safety given her fear of the king.

"No," Ashara said. "The prince and princess spend most of their time on Dragonstone."

That made Ned feel better, and he brought her hand to his lips to kiss her knuckles, saying, "good night, Ashara."

Ashara pulled her hand back slowly, a hint of mischief forming in her eyes. Before Ned could react, she leaned in and kissed him softly, just pressing her lips against his.

"Pleasant dreams," she said, smirking as she stepped back.

Ashara turned around then and went inside her room, leaving a frozen Ned in her wake. In a daze, he pressed his fingers to his lips, still feeling the ghost of hers on them, and smiled. Remembering himself, he shook his head and left for his own room.

"That is one hell of a woman you've caught the eye of," Brandon said as he entered Ned's room. "Where did you two disappear to after the Mold King showed up?"

"Don't call him that!" Ned snapped. "The way Ashara paled and shivered at the sight of him, you'd think she was staring at Maegor in the flesh."

"Truly?" Brandon asked.

"There's something deeply wrong in the capital," Ned said quietly.

"It's full of southerners; what do you expect?" Brandon asked rhetorically. "Anyway, you didn't answer my question."

"I escorted her to her room," Ned said.

"Just the entryway?" Brandon asked, grinning and cocking an eyebrow.

"Yes!" Ned exclaimed. "She is a woman of noble birth."

"She's Dornish," Brandon said. "They're a wild bunch that lot. That thing she did with the wine, you do get that she was trying to put the idea of 'tasting the Dornish' in your head, right?"

"Tasting..." Ned trailed off, his face turning a bright red as he remembered the kiss and imagined what it would have been like to deepen it. He sat down on the bed, staring off into space, as a single sinking thought occurred to him. "I have no idea how to give her what she would expect of me."

"Ah," Brandon said, looking as though he had just confirmed a strong suspicion. Changing the subject a bit, he said, "she left quite an impression on you."

"She's like no one I've ever met," Ned said softly. "In one night of dancing and talking, I felt more for her than I have for any woman I've ever met. Until...the festivities ended, it honestly seemed like she and I were the only ones in the room."

"I must say it's nice to see you so smitten," Brandon said. "I was beginning to wonder if you even had the urges of a man."

"As I said when I spoke earlier, I never gave women much thought because I just assumed that I'd be married off to some woman of Father's choosing at some point and just learn as I went," Ned said. "That woman was meant to be as clueless as I am, though."

"These things aren't that complicated, Ned," Brandon said, "and as wild as the Dornish are, there's no guarantee that Ashara is any less clueless than you."

"You are, though," Ned said, his eyes lighting up as an idea occurred to him. "You could teach me...what to do."

Brandon looked uncomfortable for a moment, saying, "it's not like history, Ned; you can't really give lessons."

"Please, Brandon," Ned said.

Brandon closed his eyes for a moment and let out a long breath through his nose. Blinking a couple times after that, though, his eyes took on an odd gleam for a moment before he schooled his features again.

"I'm not really the best teacher," Brandon said, "but I might know someone who would be."

"I can't say I'm all that keen on having this talk with anyone else," Ned admitted.

"Even if it might help you with the lovely lady?" Brandon asked.

Ned sighed and rubbed his temples. He had wondered before if the reason he got on so well with Robert was that the other man reminded him so much of the older brother he missed. Never before had the likeliness of that been so apparent.

"Fine," he said after a moment.

"Excellent," Brandon said. "Don't turn in just yet. I have a couple inquiries to make. I'll be back soon."

"Farewell," Ned said dryly, wondering what in the world was going through his brother's head.

"A brothel!" Ned exclaimed, furious, the moment he realized what Brandon had in mind.

"Ned, I tried to tell you that this wasn't the sort of thing you could learn by lecturing," Brandon said. "Think of it like a form of swordplay, because in many ways it is. You could not learn how to wield a sword in the same way that you can learn how to make sense of figures. It requires practical instruction, and every woman in here is a master-at-arms for her craft."

"I have never..." Ned tried to argue.

"Yes, and that's the problem," Brandon said. "One tumble with a whore, and you'll know enough to feel confident in pursuing your lady. Trust me there."

"I don't want to father a bastard," Ned said weakly.

"That's what moon tea's for," Brandon said.

"Moon tea?" Ned asked in confusion.

"What do you and that friend of yours actually talk about?" Brandon asked as he pulled Ned inside the brothel.

It was a rather nondescript building in the small village outside Harrenhal, and the madam ushered them over the moment she spotted them.

"Milords," she said.

"Ned, this is Annara, the proprietor of this fine establishment," Brandon said. "As I said before, we were hoping to see a selection of some of your girls."

"In private," Ned added. Looking around, he saw that, of the few people sitting around the main room, none had yet taken much notice of them, but he still didn't want to be seen here.

"Of course," Annara said. "Right this way, milords."

They followed her into another sizable room, where she clapped her hands. A dozen girls and women of varying ages and looks wandered in, each wearing a dress so scandalous that it made what Ashara had been wearing earlier look like a Septa's robe.

"Please look closely at my girls and let me know which one or ones you like the look of," Annara said. "They are all very talented, I assure you."

"I have no doubt," Brandon said, his voice thick with lust as he looked over a very pretty young brunette with bright green eyes. "What's your name, then?"

"Milly, milord," the girl replied, her voice soft and light.

"How about this one, then?" Brandon asked.

"Erm," Ned replied, looking across the room and trying to keep his eyes on their faces.

Most of them were brown-haired, with a couple blondes and one redhead who couldn't have been any older than Lyanna. Were he seeking debauchery, he might well have picked her, liking the way her blue eyes seemed to shine as she peered at him. What he was looking for, however, was instruction, and that meant looking for experience. While he was sure that every girl in the room had had more men than he had ever met, he still found himself looking at the oldest of them. She was one of the blondes and looked like she might have been more than thirty. She was still pretty, he supposed, and had been fortunate enough to avoid the pox during her many years as a whore. She would suffice.

"What is your name, my lady?" Ned asked.

The woman laughed, saying, "I'm the farthest thing from a lady you'll ever meet, milord. My name's Beth."

"I suppose there are rooms for this sort of thing?" Ned asked, turning to Annara.

"Yes, milord," Annara said. "You would like Beth, then?"

"Yes," Ned said.

"As you will," Brandon said. "As for me, I'll take Milly and this fiery beauty. What's your name then?"

"Wylla, milord," the redhead replied, grinning. "You'll find Mill and me can make quite the pair."

"Now, about the matter of payment..." Annara said.

"I'll cover it all," Brandon said.

"You don't really..." Ned went to protest.

"It's a gift," Brandon said. "Now go have fun for once in your life."

"Thank you," Ned said, following Beth to one of the rooms.

It was sparsely furnished, he noticed, but he supposed one didn't need much more than a simple bed for this sort of thing. Thinking of what countless other men and women had done on that bed, he elected to sit down on the simple chair instead, placing his satchel on the table next to it.

"Now, Beth...ohh!" Ned exclaimed as the older woman climbed into his lap.

She raked her nails back through his long brown hair and cupped his cheek with her other hand. A shiver went down his spine at the intimate caress, and he was so shocked by how good that simple touch felt that he didn't say a word as she moved in to kiss him. Her kiss was a more passionate thing than what he had shared with Ashara, and Ned felt himself harden within his breeches. As her tongue slipped into his mouth, he tasted fruit and wine, sweet rather than the sour liquid he had drank earlier that evening.

"My...my lady," Ned said, pulling back from her.

Beth smiled softly down at him, saying, "I know that I'm not the youngest one here, but I am very good at what I do."

She was still cupping his face, and Ned was shocked at how pleasurable even that simple caress from a beautiful woman was.

"I know," Ned said. "It was your experience I was seeking. I am...new to all of this, and I was hoping for instruction in...this."

"You wouldn't be the first man I've **instructed**, milord," Beth said, grinning.

"Excellent," Ned said, turning to his satchel. "I have a roll of parchment, an inkwell, and a quill in here, so if you want to just get comfortable on the bed, I could take notes."

Beth just blinked owlshly at him for a moment. "Notes?"

"Yes," Ned said, helping her off of his lap.

"You are not the sort we generally get in here, milord," Beth said, looking deeply amused. "I am still being paid, right?"

"My brother said that he would handle it," Ned said as he retrieved his things from the leather bag. "If your instructions are particularly helpful to me, I would be happy to pay you as well."

"Whichever lady you have your eye on is a lucky one," Beth chuckled.

After thanking Brandon and assuring his brother that he had a great time, using a few things Beth suggested he tell his brother to make in convincing, Ned followed the older Stark back to the castle. It was getting truly late, and Ned was planning to head to bed, but he and Brandon happened to walk past a window with lit candles illuminating it.

"I think that's Ashara's room," he thought to himself, almost certain that the layout made sense. *"I wonder why she's still awake."*

As they headed inside, Brandon paused by the gates and said, "you go on ahead; I need to take a piss."

"Alright," Ned said. "Thank you again, brother. Tonight was instructional."

"That's one way to put it," Brandon laughed. "Good night."

"Good night," Ned replied, continuing on inside.

He wasn't lying about the instructional part. Beth's profession might have been about pleasuring men, but she proved herself to be no less informed about how to properly take a woman. He had filled the scroll he had brought with notes that would never see another's eyes if he had his way. He might have blushed redder than the Lannister's banner throughout the lesson, particularly when Beth made a diagram of herself, but he couldn't say that he didn't learn a great deal.

He was so lost in thought as he traveled through the castle's halls that he didn't realize until he had arrived there that he had walked to Ashara's room instead of his own. He paused, looking at the door and then at the guard at the end of the hall, who appeared to have fallen asleep on his feet. After debating with himself for a moment, he decided to knock softly enough that he wouldn't wake her if he had been wrong about which room that light was coming from.

"Ned?" Ashara asked as she opened the door. Ned spotted the many lit candles inside and realized that he had been right.

"Are you alright?" Ned asked. "I saw the lights coming from this room while I was returning to the castle and wondered if something was wrong."

Ashara looked at him for a moment, as though weighing whether she believed him, before smiling lightly.

"Come in," Ashara said. "That guard might be asleep, but there's no saying if he'll be relieved soon."

"It wouldn't be appropriate," Ned said, wincing the second the words came out of his mouth.

"Coming to my door at this hour is inappropriate," Ashara said, narrowing her eyes, "but I cannot sleep and could use the company."

He followed her inside, trying not to stare at how well her arse filled out her dark blue nightgown or just how beautiful she looked illuminated by the candles.

"Why couldn't you sleep?" Ned asked, speaking as quietly as he could.

"I suppose seeing the king arrive startled me more than I realized," Ashara said, speaking just as quietly as she sat down on the bed.

"Ashara, has he hurt you?" Ned asked, feeling a kernel of rage form in his heart.

"No," Ashara said, "but he is the most unsettling man I have ever met, and he frightens me."

"So the way that he was when he arrived, that wasn't abnormal?" Ned asked.

"When Princess Rhaenys was born, she was presented to the court," Ashara said. "The king took one look at her and said, 'she smells Dornish,' refusing to touch his own grandchild."

"That's absurd," Ned said, his brow furrowing.

"Princess Elia was so humiliated," Ashara said. "He apparently spends most of his time rooting out and executing traitors these days. The prince looks physically pained every time he gets news from the capital."

"And he wasn't expected here," Ned said.

"Not at all," Ashara said. "He hasn't left the capital in ages. After what happened at Duskendale, it became rare for him to leave the Red Keep. There's something about the look in his eyes that has always terrified me. He looks like a starving, caged animal just waiting to be unleashed so he can tear the first thing he reaches to shreds."

"You're safe here," Ned said, placing his hand on hers. "You're surrounded by Dornishmen, and you have the protection of the prince. You have me as well."

"My brave knight," Ashara said, smiling up at him.

"I'm no knight; I'm afraid," Ned said. "Few Northmen ever bother with that."

"My wolf, then," Ashara said, caressing his face softly.

"If you'll have me," Ned said, his heart aflame with desire.

Ashara reached up and pulled him down, kissing him passionately. He returned the kiss eagerly and remembered the first rule that he had learned from Beth. Teasing her lips with his tongue, he pulled back and let her follow him. As she deepened the kiss, he tried to ignore his own body's reaction to it and pay attention to what she was doing. Letting her

lead for just a moment, he copied her actions and took the lead himself, dominating the kiss as he pressed her flat against the bed. Her warm, soft body felt wonderful under his as their tongues danced within their mouths.

"You smell of perfume," Ashara said as she broke the kiss to breathe.

She didn't look unhappy about that, but nonetheless, Ned said, "I'm sorry about that. My brother tried to drag me to a brothel and didn't say where he was taking me until I was at the door. I promise you that I didn't have any of the whores."

"I know," Ashara said. "You wouldn't smell of perfume and not sex if you had bedded someone."

Wrapping her hand around his, she led him towards the space between her nightgown, where laces loosely held the two sides together, and slipped his hand inside, just under her breast.

"Would you like to?" Ashara asked.

"Yes," Ned said, too aroused to even think of saying anything else. "Gods, yes."

"Well," Ashara said, tugging at the tied lace at her bodice.

The knot came undone with ease, and the nightgown split open, revealing her full breasts. As revealing as her dress that night had been at her shoulders and back, it had covered her breasts so well that he hadn't had much of a notion of their size. Freed now, he could see that they were large, and as she sat up and let them rest normally on her chest, their perkiness became apparent. As if in a trace, he brought his hand up, cupping the full mound, which filled his large hand perfectly, and groaned at how soft and warm she felt.

"The other ones will come undone just as easily," Ashara said, smirking.

Ned undid the laces one by one, his cock growing more and more painfully hard as he revealed her body to him. She had to be the most perfect creature that had ever lived, and he wanted her more than he could recall wanting anything.

"You would think I was the first woman you had ever seen undressed," Ashara giggled at his reaction to her.

She was the second, but he knew better than to say that, instead saying, "if I had seen a thousand, your beauty would still take my breath away, for none of them could possibly compare."

Ashara kissed him again, working to get his doublet off of him as they both tried to devour each other. He pushed her open nightgown to the sides and ran his hands down the side of her body, from her ribs to her hips. He wanted to map out every inch of her with his hands and then his lips and tongue. Beth's lessons had made it very clear to him that there were many ways to taste a woman, and just then he thought that while Dornish wine might take some getting used to, this particular Dornish woman would not.

"Ahh gods!" Ashara cried out as he trailed hot kisses down her neck and cupped her breasts.

He kneaded the supple mounds gently, remembering to massage them rather than grip them like the reins of a horse. Circling one of her hardening nipples with his callous thumb, he kissed his way down her chest and captured the other one with his lips, bathing it with his tongue.

"Just like that," Ashara moaned. "That's...ah, Ned!"

That cry of his name had come as he grazed her nipple with his teeth, and he kept his eyes locked on her to make sure that she didn't dislike anything that he did. When her look of pleasure didn't change, he switched the other nipple, kissing and licking it as well. He continued at that for a while, switching back and forth between her breasts while she mewled and cried out, squirming under him.

After a while, she cried out, "take me, please! You're making me mad!"

"That's not my intention, but I intend to explore far more of you before we get to that," Ned said, taking that as his cue to move lower.

Ashara gasped as he kissed his way along her soft belly until he reached the forest of dark curls atop her sex. She looked at him with wide, unbelieving eyes as his face hovered above her cunt. He smiled at her and kissed her curls before continuing down to her right thigh, skipping over her sex entirely. Her breasts were beautiful, but her wide hips and long legs were what had drawn his eye to begin with, and he found them no less incredible. She started shaking as he reached her ankle, and he paused.

"Are you alright?" Ned asked.

"Yes," Ashara said. "Just don't stop."

Reassured, he kissed the top of her foot, making her giggle, and then switched to the other one before kissing his way up that leg. By the time he reached her cunt that time, he could see her fluids running down towards the bedding and was glad that he knew to take that as a good sign. Inhaling the intoxicating scent of her arousal, he felt his cock throb. He parted the dark curls that shielded her womanhood and pressed his lips to it.

"Oh gods!" Ashara whimpered, her thighs closing around his head. "I can't believe you're actually...ahh!"

Ned gave her cunt a few probing licks and found that he did not mind the taste at all. Sinking his fingers into her fleshy hips, he began making use of Beth's instructions about this particular act. She had made it very clear that while there was a little sensitive pearl at the top of a woman's cunt that he should pay special attention to after a while, he should start by exploring the rest of her sex and seeing what she liked best otherwise.

"So good, so good," Ashara moaned, her nails prickling around his scalp as she tried to hold him in place.

Ned felt a stab of pride at how pleased she already sounded and probed her quivering hole with his tongue, tasting her tangy, slightly salty nectar even more. His nose bumped against the top of her cunt and her arse came off the bed as she cried out. He caught her as she came back down, kneading the wonderfully round cheeks as he realized that he should probably move to push her over the edge. Moving upward, he swiped his tongue across the top of her cunt; her reaction was immediate.

“Yes!” Ashara screamed. “Right there, right there!”

Unable to miss instructions that clear, he used the tip of his tongue to explore the entire area that he just swiped over, trying to find the little nub that Beth had described. In the poor light of the candles, he couldn't see very well and had to go by touch. When he came across something that felt like what she had described and that made Ashara scream again, he knew that he had found it. Closing his lips around it, he sucked gently and licked it directly.

“Yes, yes, yes, GODS!” Ashara shrieked at the top of her lungs, her entire body going as taut as a bowstring.

Her back arched off the bed, and a keening wail escaped her lips as her climax hit her hard. Her whole body began to convulse and writhe under him, a symphony of sobbing moans escaping her lips as the pleasure consumed her completely. Ned was rewarded with a gush of her fluids, which he drank down happily, and, as he had been instructed, backed away after a couple moments before it grew too intense.

Even in the faint candlelight, Ned knew that he had done well. Ashara's entire body was covered in an alluring sheen of sweat as she laid on her back and panted for breath. The smile on her face was unmistakable, as was the look of awe in her purple eyes.

“Take off...your clothes,” she panted, gasping as her body shook again.

Ned had never undressed more quickly in his life than he did at that moment. Beth's words ran through his head as he rushed to pile his clothing in the corner of Ashara's room.

“Make her crest good and hard before you undress, and she'll be well pleased with you no matter what she finds under your clothes,” Beth had said.

Ned was young and had been raised to be a warrior as all nobleboys were, so he didn't have to fear Ashara not liking the look of his lean and well-muscled form, but he had followed her advice all the same.

“Thank the gods,” Ned groaned as he removed his breeches, letting his straining cock stand freely in the air. He was so relieved by that that he failed to notice the way that Ashara's jaw dropped at the sight of him at first. “Um, Ashara?”

“You're massive!” Ashara gasped, sitting up and staring at his cock in shock.

“Really?” Ned asked.

"You..." Ashara trailed off. "Has no woman ever told you before that your cock is positively equine?"

"I've never had any," Ned admitted.

"So, what you just did to me was just something you came up with?" Ashara asked.

"I asked a whore what women liked," Ned said, looking away.

"So when your brother brought you to a brothel tonight, rather than taking the whore, you asked her questions," Ashara asked.

"She wasn't who I wanted," Ned said.

Ashara's look of surprise shifted into a wide smile, and she said, "sit down here."

Ned sat down next to her, and she sank to her knees on the floor, taking his member in her hand.

"Oh gods!" Ned groaned as, for the first time in his life, he felt the touch of another on his cock.

"By the gods!" Ashara shuddered as she looked at him up close.

Without warning, she wrapped her lips around his bulbous head, and Ned's whole world became pleasure. He never could have fathomed how good it would feel to have his cock inside a woman's warm, wet mouth, and as she started sucking on him in earnest as she bobbed her head up and down on the top half of it, he knew he would not last long.

With a strangled cry, he let go, unleashing an entire evening's pent-up lust as he came in her mouth. Ashara's eyes widened, and she swallowed instinctively, though some of his seed did spill from her lips. Ned collapsed onto his back as his climax abated, panting for breath like he had just survived a fight to the death. Nothing had ever felt that good in his life, and for the first time, he began to understand why men like Robert and Brandon were so obsessed with women.

When Ashara started coughing, he broke him out of his blissful reverie, and he sat up quickly, saying, "are you alright?"

"Fine," Ashara croaked, and Ned scrambled to his feet, pouring her a cup of wine from the pitcher by the window and handing it to her. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry," Ned said.

"Don't be," Ashara said, her voice returning to normal as her cough went away. "Just warn me next time, okay?"

"Next?" Ned asked in shock, earning a mischievous smirk from the gorgeous brunette.

Despite how hard he just cum, he felt his cock rearden under her lustful gaze until it was standing proud again.

“So soon?” Ashara asked in wonder.

“In your presence, I’m surprised it went down at all,” Ned said, pulling her into his arms and kissing her deeply.

All he could taste was the wine, but as much as he burned for her in that moment, he wouldn’t have cared if he tasted himself. Leading her to the bed, the two of them fell into it together, with him pinning her down. She hooked her legs around him and managed to roll them over until he was looking up at her. Her wide grin and full, hanging breasts both made his cock grow even harder.

“I should be on top to start,” Ashara said, grabbing his cock and lifting it up until he was lined up with her cunt. “Just until I’ve taken this greatsword of yours.”

Laughing as he thought of comparing his cock to Ice, he groaned as he felt the thick head of his cock pop inside her sweltering cunt. It was even better than her mouth, something he couldn’t have imagined without experiencing it. Her tight, slick, velvety wall wrapped around his cock like a silk glove, and he was very glad that he had already finished because this would have been far too much for him before.

“Oh gods,” he groaned, while Ashara just went still.

“Like a fucking horse,” she muttered, her body shaking.

“Are you alright?” Ned asked.

“I am,” Ashara said, brushing her hair out of her face. “You’re just a lot to take in, and the stretch is very intense.”

Sitting up, he snaked one hand around to the back of her head and pulled her in for a kiss while kneading her breast with the other. Ashara moaned into his mouth and sank down lower onto his cock. He gently pinched her nipple and slid a hand down along her back, figuring that if the feeling of taking him inside her was overwhelming, distracting her might help. It seemed to, and though she whimpered and moaned as she went, pausing multiple times, she kept going. Ned was in paradise, buried within her, and as he felt the last inch of his cock conquer her depths, he buried his face in the crook of her neck and groaned.

“Gods above, you feel so good,” he whispered, still in shock.

“So do you,” Ashara moaned, pushing him down. “I feel so full.”

Ashara held there for a couple moments, just getting used to the feeling of having him inside her. As she slowly raised herself up, Ned groaned as he felt her tight cunt cling to his cock, as though it greedily refused to let him go. She lowered herself back down and moaned as he filled her again. Reaching up, he cupped her breasts in his hands and kneaded them as she started to work her way up to a consistent rhythm.

“So fucking good!” Ashara moaned as she started to pick up her pace, rolling her hips more forcefully.

Ned let his hand slide down to her hips, holding onto them as he started thrusting up into her. Ashara paused, letting him get used to what he was doing and just enjoying the feeling of having him fuck her.

“Ned!” Ashara moaned. “You’re so deep.”

Ned smiled up at her as he found his rhythm and then moaned as she started riding him again, matching his thrusts perfectly. The two of them moved as one, and the sounds of their moans and grunts joined the slapping of skin on skin, echoing through the room. The faster Ashara moved, the more it made her breasts jiggle and sway enticingly, and Ned shifted slightly to capture one of her hard nipples between his lips.

“Yes!” Ashara cried. “Fuck, you’re so good!”

Ned grazed his teeth over the swollen nub, making her shriek, and reached down along her abdomen until his hand was parting the dark curls of her groin. Searching for that little pearl, he quickly found it and started stroking it gently with his thumb.

“YES, DON’T STOP, DON’T STOP, DON’T...GODS!” Ashara screamed at the top of her lungs, her whole body seizing and spasming as pleasure coursed through her entire body.

The feeling of her tight tunnel clenching and quivering around his length was incredible, and Ned knew that he was going to finish again if it didn’t stop. Flipping them over, he pulled out of her quickly, taking a few deep breaths to try and relax as Ashara’s orgasm continued to rock her. He settled down on his side next to her, ghosting his fingers over her body as her climax slowly stopped.

“Amazing,” Ashara panted, smiling widely at him. She cupped his face and rolled over to face him, stopping when she brushed against his cock. “Did you not finish?”

“I didn’t want it to end so soon,” Ned said.

“My silly wolf,” Ashara cooed. “You went soft for barely a minute before.”

“I still didn’t want to risk it ending,” Ned said, brushing his fingers through her long, dark hair.

Ashara rolled onto her belly and shook her arse at him. Looking over her shoulder, she cocked an eyebrow and spread her legs. Ned groaned and took the hint, crawling over to join her. He lined his cock up with her sopping cunt, taking a couple tries to get that right, and pushed back inside in one long thrust. Ashara squeaked, and Ned paused, suddenly concerned.

Brushing a hand over the nape of her neck, he leaned in and asked, “are you alright?”

“Mmm yes,” Ashara sighed, digging her fingers into the bedding. “You just feel even bigger like this, Ned. Gods, you feel like you’re in my stomach.”

“So long as you aren’t in any pain,” Ned said softly.

Ashara looked over her shoulder and grinned, saying, “pain is the furthest thing from what I’m feeling right now. Now take me like the wolf you are and fill me with your seed!”

Ned groaned and began fucking her, spearing into her wonderful cunt again and again with long, deep thrusts. Fucking her like this was different from being under her, and it took him a couple minutes to figure it out. Once he had, he picked up his pace, making Ashara moan and whimper in pleasure as he fucked her hard. Her arse had looked incredible in her dress earlier, but that was nothing compared to how it looked bared to his eyes. The way that it jiggled every time his hips slapped against it was mesmerizing, and he changed his position slightly so that he’d be hitting it more directly.

“YES!” Ashara shrieked, clawing at the bedding. “Right there!”

“What?” Ned asked, confused.

“You just hit something that felt fucking marvelous,” Ashara said. “Whatever you did, do it again, please.”

Ned shrugged and tried to thrust inside her at the same angle that he had before. After a few tries, he apparently managed it because Ashara’s cries grew deafeningly loud.

“Oh gods!” Ashara cried, “you’re so fucking good!”

Ned dug his fingers into her hips, holding onto her for support as he continued to fuck her into the bed beneath them. Her praises turned to wordless cries and screams as the pleasure grew within her, and Ned buried his face in her sweat-dampened hair, breathing in her scent. Everything about her, from the feeling of her fluttering cunt around his cock to her breathtaking beauty to even her smell, was intoxicating to him, and it was all he could do to hold back his own pleasure as he fucked her. From the sounds she was making, he was sure that she was close to another climax and knew that he just had to hold on a little longer. Moving her neck, he licked the salt sweat from her skin and started kissing her right by her pulse point.

“NED!” Ashara squealed as she came, her whole body shaking and spasming under him as pleasure consumed her. Her cunt became like a fountain, flooding the bed under them with her fluids, and it was all too much for Ned.

“Ash!” he growled in her ear as he came, spilling what felt like a barrel full of cum inside her perfect depths.

The two of them writhed and cried out together as their shared orgasms overwhelmed them. Ned’s finished first, and he collapsed on top of her, barely remembering to catch himself on his forearms as he panted for breath. Ashara continued shaking and whimpering a little after that, sinking into the bed as though boneless once it ended. A satisfied exhaustion the like of which he had never known overtook Ned, and as he rolled onto his back, he nearly fell asleep immediately. He was still awake enough a moment later to feel Ashara drag herself over to him and rest her head on his chest. Wrapping his

arms around her, he held her tightly, hoping more than anything that she might never leave. What might come of this tomorrow, they could deal with then, but tomorrow was hours away, and they could remain in that perfect moment until then.

It was a moment that he would return to in the recesses of his mind quite often in the years to come.