

The food was exquisite, as good as anything he'd had at Hogwarts in his many years in the castle. Though there was far more of it than Harry thought was perfectly necessary. Snapper, followed by venison, followed by boar, followed by desserts. There were lemon cookies, and something closely reminiscent to sticky toffee pudding, and most delightfully for him... treacle tart.

Harry sat beside King Viserys, as was befitting his station, with Rhaenyra at his side. It was the princess who noticed the way his eyes lit up when the tart was placed in front of him, and his eagerness to cut himself a slice of the treat, "Something of favorite of yours, your Grace?"

He couldn't help but smile, "Yes, since I was a child, and I haven't had the pleasure of having it in years." Three years fighting a war here in his new world, and a year hunting horcruxes before that didn't leave him time for such luxuries as treacle tart.

Rhaenyra smiled, "I'll be sure that the kitchens are informed, so that it isn't the only time you can have it during your visit."

"That'd be very kind of you." Glancing in her direction, it was quite the feat that he'd managed to do anything other than stare at her throughout the night. She looked no less radiant than when they'd met that afternoon, though she'd changed her dress. It was still black and red, the colors of her house, but the skirts didn't go quite as far to the ground. It looked better suited to dancing if he were to guess.

His attention was pulled from the princess by the king, "With so little known about you, I can't help but be curious. Where exactly do you come from, Harry?"

He could feel the ears pricking up around him, as everyone who heard the king's question wished to hear his answer. He anticipated that someone would ask him about his origins eventually. The men who followed him were happy enough to do so because of the opportunities he presented. They didn't care if he came from the bowels of Flea Bottom or halfway across the world, or another world entirely, if it helped them advance themselves in life.

He knew the truth was far too outlandish to be told to any but those closest to him. *Which includes a grand total of no one.* Not even Barbo knew the full truth of it, though he at least knew that he wasn't truly from the Seven Kingdoms. The murmurs of the rest of the court filled the air, but all at the head table waited with bated breath for his story, "It's a rather mundane answer, I'm afraid. I come from the Riverlands, from humble beginnings in a small hamlet of no more than fifty townsfolk. I was orphaned at just a year old." Every good lie needed at least an inkling of the truth. It made it that much easier to remember.

He'd had a fair few people tell him that his accent was similar to those in the Riverlands, and decided it was the most plausible place to say he came from.

Daemon spoke from his brother's other side, "And yet you came, not only to reside in, but to rule the Stepstones. It's quite the achievement for someone of such... humble beginnings, as you put it."

"For a man of my talents, once I understood them, the only thing stopping me from building a name for myself was my own ambitions." Considering he was now a king, perhaps the Sorting Hat would've been right to put him in Slytherin after all.

"And how did a man from the Riverlands find himself in the Stepstones?" Viserys clapped his brother's shoulder, "Were you one of the men who helped my brother and Corlys break the hold of the Triarchy?"

"No, I woke up on a beach on Grey Gallow's with no memory of how I came to be there." He could feel Rhaenyra's eyes boring into the side of his head, weighing the truth of his word. Something about that intensity made him think it was wise not to look at her, "There are flashes that come to me at times, of raiders, a ship, a storm, but more than that, I can't say. When I came to, I walked the shore for hours until I found a ship anchored at a small town."

"Dangerous men, surely." Daemon would know better than most given his time there, "I can't imagine they welcomed you with open arms."

"No, they didn't." Harry smiled at the memory, "Barbo and his men approached. I'm sure they saw a man to be added to their wares. He realized his folly when he was the only one left standing."

Viserys barked out a laugh, "Quite the exceptional beginning to a tale that has many twists and turns, I'm sure. I can already imagine the songs."

Servants filled the hall, removing some of the dishes that covered the tables. There were musicians in the corner, and their tunes turned from a light tinkling that just filled the empty spaces of the room to a full chorus that was meant to get the lords and ladies of the court to their feet to begin the dancing.

Harry had faced down a basilisk, dementors, dragons, and a Dark Lord, but the idea of dancing filled him with dread. His mind couldn't help but be cast back to the disaster of the Yule Ball. And then her melodic voice reached him, soft and with a hint of teasing in it, "Your Grace, would you dance with me?"

Turning to Rhaenyra, he could see the mischief in her eye. She saw his unease and was having a good time poking at him for it. Whether it was a lie or not, he was meant to be a

commoner from the Riverlands, so he felt he had a reasonable excuse, “Apologies, princess, but I’m afraid I don’t know how.”

It didn’t deter her in the slightest, “I’ll teach you, then.” She looked right at him, her purple eyes holding an air of challenge in them.

It was compelling, and he found himself standing and taking her hand in his. It was dainty and smooth, and fit surprisingly well, “Alright, now seems as good a time to learn as any. Though I doubt your feet will thank you by the time we’re done.”

Rhaenyra batted her eyelashes up at him, but there was a hint of warning in her voice, “You’ll do your utmost to protect them.” She led him to the dance floor where all the other gentlemen and ladies of the court were already in the full swing of the dance.

Guiding his hand to her hip, she gave him a small smile, “Just follow my lead, Harry. I’m sure you’ll be a quick study.” He was just thankful that for all his nerves, his palms weren’t sweating as he let her start to guide him with the music.

As it turned out, his begrudgingly taken lessons during fourth year hadn’t completely left him. While he certainly didn’t have the grace and effortlessness of his partner, he managed to move to the song without stomping on her toes or bumping into any of the other dancers on the floor.

“Don’t look at your feet, it’ll only make you more likely to make a mistake. Just follow me and the music.” When he turned his eyes up to look at her, he found her staring at him, almost as though she were trying to work out a puzzle.

“It’s your feet at risk, Rhaenyra.” He still did as he was told and held her gaze.

She gave him a small smile, “No, I think you’re simply underestimating your own ability.”

“Your confidence in me is heartwarming, I assure you, princess.” He twirled her with a surprising ease, and pulled her back toward him, “But in this, I fear it’s misplaced.”

“You’ve yet to trip over your own feet,” she giggled, “let alone mine. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were lying.”

“And why’s that?” He lied plenty in the last hour, but as impressive as he found her, he doubted she suspected even half of it.

“A commoner, born in a hamlet without more than a hundred people, might be able to dance. There are plenty of festivals after all, but you’ve had training at some point. I’ve spent enough time learning the right way to twist and turn and glide, to know it when I see it.”

Funnily, he didn't view that as a lie. He really didn't know how to dance, at least not in his opinion. He was barely passable at the Yule Ball and years had passed since he'd had even a bit of practice. *Though it seems having the right partner makes all the difference in the world.*

"Or maybe, I'm just a gifted learner with a wonderful teacher." He expected his flattery would be enough to dissuade her.

But Rhaenyra was a woman accustomed to flattery at every turn, from nearly every man that was foisted onto her, "No, I've not taught you a thing other than to keep your eyes on your partner. You knew where your hands were meant to go, and how to move. It was just a matter of finding the right rhythm."

Harry couldn't help himself and chuckled, "Very observant of you. And what do you think the truth is then?"

That brought her up short, and he could see the wheels turning in her head. She chewed on her bottom lip even as they spun together. It was rather adorable to see her stumped. As the song came to an end, they stopped and looked at each other as she finally told him, "I have two guesses, one seems far more plausible than the other."

"Oh?"

"Since you've taken up kingship of the Stepstones, it's no secret that you've become the focus of many powerful people. You seem an intelligent man, and so no doubt you expected you would end up at court, whether here or in Essos, at some point." The music started again, and the dancers around them started moving. Taking her hip in his hand, this time he found himself leading her through the dance even as she continued.

"It'd be perfectly reasonable to think that you hired a tutor, so that you would be more comfortable with the customs at court, including dancing." She squeezed his side slightly more tightly to help him avoid one of the other gentlemen who appeared to be too deep in his cups to control himself, "You lied about your experience as a means to impress and ingratiate yourself."

"An interesting theory," he found himself fascinated with the working of her mind, "and your other guess?"

"The entire story about who you are and where you come from is a fabrication. You are clearly from the Seven Kingdoms, so perhaps you belong to some minor house. The second son of a second son, or a bastard who was tolerated by the lady for a time, who never had the hope of inheritance, but hence why you're most certainly capable of reading, and writing too, if I were to wager. And, why it is that you can dance, but don't seem to be well-

practiced at it. You wouldn't be the first child down in the line of succession to try and make a new name for themselves." She couldn't know it, but her more outlandish theory was far closer to the truth.

While he wasn't a noble, his story was a fabrication, "And yet, no one has claimed me as one of their own."

Rhaenyra didn't miss a beat, "I considered that. Surely, any family you have would want it known. But you might not have been a man grown when last you saw your family. They might not even know that you are you. Until now, there are few enough people that have even seen your face."

"You've given this a great deal of thought." It was almost flattering. They'd only met that day, but he couldn't pretend he wasn't equally as interested in her.

"You're a mystery, one that intrigues me, and one that I intend to understand better." He admired her candidness, though it didn't mean that he had any intention of telling her the truth of things so easily.

"In due course, I'm sure we'll come to understand each other better."

Knowing full well that she couldn't simply command the truth from him, she pouted, "Not even a hint as to whether I'm near the mark?"

"Afraid not, Rhaenyra." The song ended, and Harry felt eyes on him from elsewhere in the room. Criston Cole was watching him from the side, just near a pillar in the back, with an intensity that exceeded any other in the hall. Though when Harry caught his eye, he looked away.

His attention was pulled from the Kingsguard by a tug on his trousers. Looking down, he found himself looking at a round-faced young girl, no older than four. Helaena had the same silver-blond hair as her older half-sister, though her eyes were a paler shade of purple.

Harry didn't have much experience with children, but he didn't have it in him to be anything other than kind to her, "Hello, princess, was there something you needed?"

"I... I... would like to dance." Her manners, and her speech were impressive, but he supposed that was more common for the children of royalty.

Turning to Rhaenyra, she didn't seem put out by her younger sibling's intrusion. Though, since his arrival, he couldn't remember a single instance in which she'd actually addressed Queen Alicent or the children. There was clearly some tension there, but the full nature of it

was unknown to him. Still, she gestured for him to do as Helaena asked, “Careful not to step on her toes, it would hurt her a fair bit more than it would’ve hurt me.”

Taking the younger Targaryen’s hands, he stood out of the way of the other dancers, leaning down slightly and just swaying to the rhythm rather than following any dance. It was a simple, kind thing to do that left him none the worse for it.

When the song finished, he stood up straight and bowed to Halaena, “Thank you for the dance, princess.”

The little girl stared up at him with big eyes, and then crooked one finger so that he would come closer. Pushing up on her toes, she whispered conspiratorially in his ear, “Can you really do magic?”

It made him smile. It was a far cry from the approach of her brother when he arrived, “I can.”

“Would you... uhm...” she grabbed nervously at the skirts of her dress, “would you show me?”

It was hard to resist such an earnest request from a little girl who so clearly had to work up the courage to ask him, “I think I can do that.” Straightening, he ruffled the young princess’s hair, making her giggle, before approaching the head table and her father, “If I might have a moment to address your court?”

“Of course, of course,” He stood with some strain, and the music died down in an instant. Every eye in the room turned to Viserys, as he gestured to Harry standing in front of him, “Our most honored guest, the King in the Stepstones, wishes to speak.”

Their eyes followed him as he walked toward the center of the room. People cleared out of his way, pressing to the sides of the hall on some instinct they couldn’t quite place, “I didn’t know just what to expect when I accepted the King’s invitation, but the hospitality and company provided by him, and his house has been truly exemplary.” There were some faint murmurs as he paused but they silenced as he continued, “Of course, I’m aware of the rumors that surround me, and save for men like Prince Daemon, who’ve seen it for themselves, it’s a difficult thing to believe. And so, I think a demonstration is in order.”

His wand was in his hand as the last word left his mouth. No spells were uttered as brilliant light of a dozen colors leapt from the tip only for the entire room to go dark as every sconce and torch dimmed as quickly as the brightness came. There was some brief panic from some of the more jittery members of the court, but it didn’t last.

Then in the darkness, a blueish- white light radiated from his wand. It filled the room as a great stag cantered from his wand. Its very presence lifted the spirits of all those who saw it. His patronus circled around the room to the delight of the court. It stopped only four times, once that Rhaenyra might reach out and touch it, once that Helaena might do the same, once to bow its head to Viserys, and finally to bow before Harry before it was extinguished.

With a final flick of his wand, the fires of the room were set alight once more. For a moment there was stunned amazement as every single person in the room stared at him openly. Then the first peel of clapping started until it filled the room to bursting, and yet with a bit of magic his voice carried over it all, "Come, play another tune! The night is still young!"

The musicians cut over the din of the crowd, and the court was soon filled with dancers again. As he made his way back to the head table, he felt that tiny hand tugging on his leg again. Helaena looked up at him with a beaming smile, "Thank you!" She hurried away from him and toward her mother. Alicent was waiting to take her and her brothers to bed.

Making his way back to his seat, he grabbed a goblet of wine and sipped from it as Viserys addressed him, "Quite impressive, quite impressive indeed."

"It'll raise more questions than it'll answer, I'm sure." Harry knew that there would be no end to the curiosity, no matter what he showed them, "But your daughter asked so earnestly that I simply couldn't say no."

"I know all too well how hard it can be to deny them, trust me." It was clear he was talking as much about Rhaenyra when she was a child as he was about Helaena, "I'm curious though, why a stag?"

"It's always been a stag, since the first time I ever did the spell." He knew that there might come a time, with a significant enough change in his life, that it could take another form, "At a guess, it's a representation of my magic..."

"Perhaps you are some long lost descendant of a Baratheon." Daemon interjected to laughter from his brother.

"He has the hair for it, that much is true brother. But he doesn't have the look of the likes of Borros..." They fell into a pleasant conversation as the night wore on.

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Rhaenyra caught herself looking at Harry without even realizing she was doing it as she escorted him to her rooms. From the small smile on his lips, she was sure that he'd noticed her attention, but he had the curtesy not to mention it, "Thank you for returning me to my rooms, Rhaenyra."

“I wouldn’t expect you to know your way around the keep after just one day, and it’s easier to get lost at night.” She ignored the fact that he could just apparate back to the room if it pleased him.

“Of course, and the wine would make no easier.” He hadn’t been shy about imbibing but nothing about the way he moved or spoke leant her to believe that he was drunk in the slightest. *The same couldn’t be said about my uncle or father.*

“It was a fine vintage of Arbor Gold. I’d wager my father was looking to impress.” From what she could learn about him in just a day, she doubted it meant much to Harry. Yes, he enjoyed himself, that much had been obvious from their dancing, but the extravagance of the court had done little to sway him.

“I can’t imagine why. My holdings are little more than that of a minor lord, even if they are strategically significant. His wine could’ve been plied on more deserving nobles I’m sure.” It was said with good humor, but she could tell from the look in his eye that he knew the truth of it. His value to her father, her family, and all the others who sought him out went well beyond the Stepstones.

And for some reason, she simply couldn’t hold her tongue, “Come now, Harry, I’ve met many foolish men during my life, and I don’t think you’re going to be counted among them. Playing at it doesn’t suit you.”

There were some men who might take offense at her rebuke, bordering on insult, but it just made him grin. The look was enough to bring heat to her cheeks, “Even the wisest amongst us have our moments of foolishness, princess. Not that I consider myself one of them, mind you.” His hand brushed against the side of her hip as they turned the corner, and she felt a shiver that she hid effortlessly, “But you’re right, I know that I’m not here because of the Stepstones alone. I know that’s not why nearly every noble from Volantis to Braavos, and Dorne to the Vale have sent me letters in the months since I made them mine.”

“None from the North?” She quirked an eyebrow. It was no surprise to find out that the other houses were trying to jump on an opportunity when it presented itself but to hear an entire kingdom had ignored him did surprise her.

“Ah... I should have said White Harbor rather than the Vale.” Of all the Northern Houses, it was unsurprising to hear it was the Manderlys who were trying to lure him. They were the only major port in the North. *And they were once a southern family with southern ambitions.*



Her mind turned to the real reason for the interest around him, “It was quite the display you put on in the hall.” She could still feel the warmth of the stag’s light on her skin even now. Its presence had made her feel a calm that was rarely felt in the turmoil of court.

“It’s a rather complex piece of magic, meant to ward off fear and terror,” she could see his mind wander back to some memory, “and it’s always left an impression.”

“I assure you, tonight was no different.” They were nearing the door to his rooms, and again, she found herself slowing to prolong their time together, “How do you conjure it?”

“With a memory at its focal point,” it rolled off his tongue without even thinking, and she wasn’t sure if he meant to share quite so much, “A happy memory, held in the mind as I cast the spell.” It didn’t seem like the sort of thing that somebody learned by accident, more like something that you’d be taught. *Which only raises more questions.*

“All to make a little girl smile?” She saw him with Helaena. Her whispered question that preceded the display of magic.

Now he was the one that blushed, “It took all her courage to ask me. It seemed a rather simple thing to reward it.”

She couldn’t remember the last time she smiled so much in a day, “I only hope it’s worth the cost.” At his confused expression, she explained, “Every lord and lady who was there will surely send a raven home by the morrow, and with each one, you’ll be inundated with more letters of your own.”

His groan of frustration made her giggle. He ran his hand through his hair before he turned to look at her with a mischievous glint in his eye, “You won’t find it nearly as funny if I redirect every one of those letters to your quarters...”

She blinked at him owlishly, “Can you do that?”

His grin was confident, bordering on cocky, and she found herself staring at his lips, “Are you willing to risk it?”

In that moment, it felt as though he was talking about something completely different than letters. And then she felt his hands, calloused and rough, lightly cupping her jaw. Tilting her head up, she felt his lips press against her own. It wasn’t forced, but exploratory, curious at what her response would be.

Leaning into the kiss, her hand rested against the crook of his arm. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and her entire body tingled with a pleasant warmth. It lasted altogether longer than she thought, but far less than she would’ve liked.

As they pulled apart, he was close, looming over her in way that felt somehow intimidating and safe in equal measure. His voice was husky as he told her, “Goodnight, Rhaenyra. Pleasant dreams.”

As he disappeared behind the door, Rhaenyra found herself standing there on the spot where he left her just trying to compose herself. *It's only the first day...*

With that thought in mind, she made her way to her room, though it took some time for sleep to find her.