The Reluctant Bride

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/1036146.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: F/M
Fandom: A Song of Ice and Fire - George R. R. Martin, Game of Thrones (TV)
Relationship: Arya Stark/Gendry Waters, Jon Snow/Daenerys Targaryen, Arya Stark/Sansa Stark/Daenerys Targaryen
Character: Arya Stark, Sansa Stark, Daenerys Targaryen, Jon Snow, Gendry Waters, Samwell Tarly, Aegon Targaryen, Brienne of Tarth, Sandor Clegane, Ghost (ASoIaF), Nymeria (ASoIaF), Shireen Baratheon, Davos Seaworth, Anguy (ASoIaF), Lem Lemoncloak
Additional Tags: Romance, Family, Friendship, Falling In Love, Revenge, Explicit Sexual Content
Stats: Published: 2013-11-08 Updated: 2016-08-21 Chapters: 56/? Words: 352632

The Reluctant Bride

by Lady3jane

Summary

'The Reluctant Bride’ is a romance set after the war for Westeros has been won. Seven years have passed and, along with everyone else, Arya, Daenerys and Sansa must build a new future. Marriage will be part of that, whether they want it or not. This is a story about how they each find love and sisterhood after the war. Arya is first as ‘The Reluctant Bride’, Daenerys will be ‘The Stolen Bride’ and Sansa the ‘Trophy Bride’. All of their tales are intertwined. I aim to post a chapter every second friday and, above all, I want to entertain and maybe even make you squeal!

Notes

There are many things the characters don’t know about each other’s lives during the war. Some things will be revealed to them and to us, but I’m not going to try and finish GRRM’s story, so you’ll just have to accept that all things will never be known until he finishes the books. There is not intended to be any divergence from the books as so far written, but this is a 'future fic', so who knows? As always, he owns everything and I’m playing with his world for my own entertainment and hopefully yours too.
Chapter 1

The war is won. Now we fight for peace.

It was coming, as sure as winter would come again.
She smelled it the air and felt in her bones.

Something was coming, something that would change everything.
It was just out of reach, just out of knowing, but it would happen soon and nothing would be the same again.

Arya woke with a start. The same dream again, the same dream every night since she had returned to Westeros. She rolled over and, closing her mind to it, fell back asleep.

-o-

Queen Daenerys and the Ladies Arya and Sansa sat in the King’s solar, awaiting his arrival, or at least The Queen and Sansa, sat, while Arya lounged, with one leg draped over the arm of a chair.

Daenerys worked at the King’s desk, busy with correspondence and instructions to be sent to Meereen. She looked up from her papers as Arya blew out a long, loud, disgruntled sigh.

As she regarded them both, Daenerys thought that two sisters could not be more different. Arya was restless and bored, filled with an angry energy. She gave the impression of being a wild animal, corralled against her will. Everything about the youngest Stark girl strained against the constraints of convention; from her short hair and men’s attire to her skill with a sword and her refusal to accept her brother’s bidding. Just as the Direwolves came and went as they pleased, Daenerys expected Arya to simply disappear one night, as suddenly as she had arrived.

It was Daenerys’ turn to sigh. She wished with all her heart to have family surround her and, to her mind, these siblings had been apart too long already. It seemed inevitable that Arya would leave again if she could not reach an accord with Jon and soon.

In complete contrast to her sister’s relentless fidgeting, Lady Sansa sat serenely with her embroidery in her lap, poised, still and calm. The deft movements of her fingers as she worked were the only proof that she was not an exquisitely painted doll, designed to make men weak with desire and women green with jealousy. Daenerys suspected Sansa hid much and her good-sister certainly shared nothing. Sansa had hinted at dark events in her past during a few, rare moments when she had inadvertently dropped her guard, but Sansa steadfastly refused to be drawn or elaborate on her trials during the seven years war.

In her own way, Sansa was even more of a mystery than Arya. Although the embellishment of the man’s tunic in her hands appeared to be a labour of love, Sansa kept the design carefully hidden and, despite Daenerys’ gentle prodding, would not admit to whom the garment belonged. Worse, Sansa had caught Aegon’s eye and Daenerys doubted anyone had ever said ‘no’ to her nephew in his entire life, especially not the ladies. ‘Twould be awkward for them all if Aegon was to hear if for the first time from Sansa.

Daenerys was determined to aid these two, very different ladies in any way she could and, most
importantly to guide them through the perils of matrimony. As she knew to her cost, a poor marriage brought untold misery. She was determined that would not happen to her Good-sisters.

As if to highlight the differences in their character, Arya muttered “bored, bored, bored” under her breath. Without looking up from her needlework, Sansa chided mildly, “It would do you no harm to learn a useful skill sister.”

Arya huffed and replied sarcastically, “I have plenty of skills sister, just none that you would appreciate.” To prove her point, she drew Needle from her tall boot and sent the small sword flying across the room, with sunlight glinting off the steel. In an instant, the point was embedded in the wood around the door with a powerful ‘Thwack’. Needle was not designed to be a throwing blade, but it was so familiar to Arya’s hand, she could judge its weight and balance perfectly and land it exactly where she wanted – at a tall man’s eye level.

Unfortunately that was the precise moment Jon entered his solar. The sword was still quivering in the wood as he took his first step into the room. He immediately stopped dead in his tracks, startled by the vibrating blade beside his head. Grinding his teeth, he pulled it angrily from the wall.

“When I gave you this, I never intended it to be the instrument of my death Arya!”

“Pah! You exaggerate like an old woman. At worst, you would have lost an eye.” Arya quipped.

Jon was obviously in no mood for japes as he stomped over and presented Needle to her, pommel first, accompanied by a deathly stare.

“Daenerys, Sansa, would you care to take leave of us. Lady Arya and I have some pressing business to discuss.”

Arya groaned loudly as Sansa stood up and gave King Jon a deep curtsey, which he acknowledged with a curt nod. Lady Sansa, with her perfect manners, carefully gathered up her needle work before retreating towards the door.

Daenerys was in less of a hurry to leave, closing her ledger and re-arranging the inks on Jon’s desk. He strolled over and began helping her tidy away her papers. Arya did not miss the way Jon’s hand lingered as it brushed against his Queen’s, or the beguiling smile on Daenerys’ lips as she looked up at him through her eyelashes.

Arya steeled herself for what was to come. ‘Twould be the same lecture she had already had to endure twice since she had arrived in King’s Landing.

Jon watched Daenerys leave, his eyes never straying from her petite, perfect form until she was gone from his solar and the door was closed firmly behind her. Only then did he fold his arms across his chest, purse his lips and fix Arya with his most determined stare.

“Will you at least consent to meet him?”

His sister remained impassive, turning her head away and settling her gaze on the far horizon.

Exasperated by her lack of response, Jon strode over and placed his hands gently, but firmly, on her slim shoulders. His youngest sister stiffened under his touch but she did not speak and he did not remove his hands.

Ghost stretched and rose gracefully from the patch of sunlight on the floor of the solar where he and his sister had been lying. Ghost padded silently to Jon’s side. Nymeria followed her brother; humans and Direwolves reunited after seven years of war.
The four of them looked out across the broken land. On a clear day you could see as far as Harrenhal, but this was not such a day. Smoke still rose from too many places; dulling the sky and making the spring sunshine seem weaker than it already was.

Scorched fields assaulted their eyes whichever way they looked. Far below Jon’s solar the assembled armies of men looked insignificant, but they were not. The realm depended upon these men to win the peace as surely as it had depended upon them to win the war. But these men needed to go home. They had been soldiers too long and they must become farmers, husbands and fathers again if the peace was going to last and the realm survive.

Too many years of war and a hard winter had left half of Westeros starving while the other half drowned in blood. The seven years war had set brother against brother, father against son and now it must end. Jon would see it ended.

The war was won. The price paid by them all had been far too high, yet Jon feared that the cost of keeping the peace might be higher still. Battles of another kind had still to be fought and won. Jon knew the greatest challenge that lay ahead was feeding his people and ensuring the fragile peace held. Below him were too many warriors with no wars to fight; too many men, bearing too many grudges, too keen to settle old scores.

If the rule of Three Headed Dragon was to last there must be strong lords to hold these lands in the Dragon’s name. Lords like Weyland the Smith, whom Jon had so recently raised from bastard knight to Lord Baratheon.

Of all Jon’s Captains, none had fraught as tirelessly by his side or commanded as much respect as The Smith. It was he who had brought the Bad Company to his cause. To his surprise, Jon found himself smiling at the memory, for that had been a turning point in his war. The ‘Brothers Without Banners’ as they had been then, could hardly continue with that name once they had rallied to Jon’s own banner. Comradely rivals to Aegon’s own Golden Company, the name that had been first used in jest, had stuck. The brave men of Bad Company had fought with him, some had died for him and their leader had become his closest friend.

And whom could a King trust if not his friends? Already Jon was wary of the politics of rule and he needed friends around him more than ever. He needed advisers he could trust, who would not offer platitudes and lies when the truth was necessary and unwelcome.

How many could he truly count as ‘friend?’ Rob. Jon had not thought on him and what might have been for many years now, but having Arya returned, with Sansa and Bran close, he allowed his thoughts to drift back to the brother who might have been King now in his stead. What would Lady Catelyn have said if she could see the bastard sat on the Iron Throne instead of her first born son? The thought might once have amused Jon, but too many were lost for it to hold any satisfaction now. Rob had been his boyhood friend, but would they have remained so as men? His brother had always been first to Jon’s poor second, but Rob was long gone and Jon still endured; not only King of The North, but a King of all Westeros.

At The Wall he had found friendship with Sam; so shrewd and steadfast, but in truth they were too different in temperament and nature to be always at ease in each other’s company.

And then there was Aegon. Thinking of him caused another, deeper, sigh to escape Jon’s lips. Aegon was his brother, his King, as Jon was also to him, but they were rivals too. Their rivalry was unspoken, but it existed none the less and made for a wary friendship.

With Weyland, there was an affinity he could not define, something they both shared, that Jon found lacking in the others. Perhaps it was the fact that they both carried the stain of being born bastards;...
raised to expect little, but driven by something to achieve so much. It was Weyland’s company he would seek around campfires or to pass the time in easy conversation or companionable silence on many long marches.

Now his friend and greatest Captain asked but one thing as reward for his toils - the hand of Lady Arya Stark in marriage.

Jon groaned as he looked down at his sister, still little more than a girl, but on whose slender shoulders so much depended.

“Look at what surrounds us” Jon pleaded. “We need this peace Arya; I need it, you need it, the realm needs it. We’re exhausted – all of us and I need you to bind this lord to me. We must have no more rebellions.”

Although Jon counted the new Lord Baratheon as his closest friend, he could not allow the possibility of another Baratheon challenge to Targaryen rule. The tried and tested way to prevent such threats was by arranging marriages between the great Houses of Westeros. Jon would wed his sister to a Baratheon and bind that House to his. The sons of Weyland and, if she would have him, Arya would squire in his halls and their daughters would marry Targaryen sons. Their Houses would be at peace and war would come no more to Westeros.

But Arya truly frustrated him. The Gods only knew what she had been through – what they had all been through, but they had to let go of this war, pick up the threads of their lives and believe in the promise of a peaceful future. Marriage and heirs had to be in all of their futures.

“I need this Arya and you’re not making it easy for me.” Jon said gently. “If your favour lies elsewhere, then he may be persuaded to step aside, but you need to tell me if there is another.”

“You know there is no other” his sister replied tightly.

“If there is truly no other then at least meet with him.” Jon cajoled, his patience beginning to wear thin “As your brother, I will not force you into marriage with him…”


Jon chose to ignore them all and continue

“…but as your King, I will have you wed one of my Lords.”

Jon had no doubt his sister was scornful of the entire proposition. He would tread carefully, but he would not relent. This was not a request. It was an order and they both knew it.

Arya finally looked up at him with the same steely grey eyes he saw every time he looked in the mirror. Jon knew that was the heart of his problem – they were too alike, both too damn stubborn for their own good. But stubborn had sustained him when all else had failed. Stubborn had won him the war and stubborn would win him the peace and this argument with his damn sister.

“I want no husband.”

“I didn’t ask what you wanted Arya!” Jon snapped, instantly regretting raising his voice, but she was being so bloody uncooperative. He hadn’t had half, nay, not even a tenth as much trouble with Sansa. He resolved to stay calm, took a deep breath and continued, “Do you think I wanted to wed Daenerys? A widow thrice times over and a stranger to me until the day of our marriage!”

Arya shrugged in that irritating, disinterested way she had with her. “A King needed a Queen and a
Queen needed a King.” She muttered.

“As a Lady needs a Lord and a woman needs a man” Jon shot back quickly, warming to his theme, “…as a brother needs a sister who will assist him in whatever ways she can, as a King requires fealty from his subjects and as the Stormlands demand protection.”

“I care nothing for marriage and I care less for the Stormlands.” She countered dismissively.

Jon tightened his grip on her shoulders. His hands itched to shake some sense into her, yet he did not. Instead he gritted his teeth and tried again,

“Then perhaps it will not trouble you to sit with me when the small folk from those lands come to me to tell me of their pillaged farms, their raped women and their stolen children. Sit by my side and listen to these people beg for my help, then tell me you care nothing for the Stormlands.”

“You have named The Bastard Knight Lord Protector of the Stormlands. So I must assume he will care for his lands and protect your people. What use can I be to you or to a Bastard Knight in this?”

Arya regarded him coolly as she repeated the name given to her would-be-husband by his enemies. Jon had to remove himself from her for fear his anger would overwhelm him. His tenuous grip on his self control was obvious in the way he stalked to the window, the way he leaned heavily against the stone wall and the way the muscles in his neck tightened as he ground his teeth.

He was well aware of the whispers; Bastard Knight, Bastard Lord, Bastard King.

Jon took a deep breath, held it and exhaled slowly. As he did so he called to mind Tyrion’s words of advice from all those years ago, “Never forget who you are, for surely the world won’t. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armour yourself in it and it will never be used to hurt you.”

And he had learned the lesson well. Let others call him and Weyland what they would, but Arya…

Was she insulted that her brother, her King, was suggesting marriage to a bastard? Did she consider this marriage beneath her?

The Arya that Jon had known as a child had made no difference between him and her full blood brothers and he had loved her for it. But the Arya who sat beside him now was no innocent girl. She had been lost to him for seven years and had spoken so little since her return that he had scant idea what she was thinking or of the woman she had become.

“War raises good men above their expected station in life and he is a good man. His men love him and I believe you will too – given time. If you find him very much against your liking, then I will attempt to dissuade him, although he assures me he wants only you.”

Jon thought again on the similarities of situation he shared with Weyland – two bastards, trying to make their way as great lords. As a boy he had been Jon Snow, the bastard of Winterfell, destined for what? The Wall had raised him to Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch; Stannis had supposedly removed the stain of bastardy to raise him higher still. War had raised him to King and brought him his Queen. War had also elevated Weyland far beyond his natural expectations. Now honoured with the title of Lord Baratheon, marriage to a King’s sister would raise him higher again, yet Jon doubted that was why his friend sought Arya’s hand.

“I will not wed. If you think to make me, you will find that neither you nor these walls can hold me.” Her voice was flat, emotionless. She wasn’t threatening him, she was simply stating facts – she had skills acquired in Braavos he knew little of, but which he had no doubt would enable her to
disappear again. Next time even Brienne of Tarth might not find her. He could not allow there to be a next time.

“So you’ll run?” He snapped. Despite his best intentions to remain calm during this ‘negotiation’ with his sister, Jon’s patience had worn through. “And to where would you run Arya? Where would a Braavosi sell-sword find employment in times of peace? With Lords who still seek to defy me? With those who have lost the war, but still seek revenge for some slight? You would do that to me?” He was yelling now and that made him angrier still - at himself more than her.

She remained silent, contemplating the scene of devastation from the window.

Harsh words and threats would not have worked with the Arya of his childhood. Nay, they would only pusher her further away from him and it would be the same now. He hoped he still knew his sister well enough to appeal to something else; something he suspected was long buried by whatever terrible things had happened to her, but something he had to believe still burned deep within – a flickering flame he hoped to ignite, to see blaze again the way it had in the girl he had known. He needed her love and her loyalty, but how to get it?

“Would you flee across the narrow sea and run from the brother who asks for your help? Would you hide from your King? I never thought you a coward Arya! I still fight a war. The war for peace! I need your allegiance to win this war. If I cannot win it, then everything - all our loss, all our struggle, all our suffering, will have been for naught!”

She finally turned to him and fixed him with those piercing grey eyes. Calling her a coward was a low blow, but would it provoke the response he wanted…needed?

Her eyes narrowed and her hands were balled into fists of rage, but at last she spoke, slowly and deliberately, grinding every word out reluctantly.

“Why does this lord want me brother?”

Jon had asked himself this very question. Was it possible Robert Baratheon’s bastard wished to strengthen his position for a future claim on the Iron Throne? Marriage to a Princess of the North would certainly strengthen that claim, but Jon did not and would not, believe that was his friend’s intention. No, Jon had come to believe the blame for Weyland’s desire to wed his sister lay squarely at his own feet.

Around campfires, on long marches, during the interminable waiting that is the inevitable companion to the urgency of battle, Weyland had liked nothing more than for Jon to tell him stories of his childhood in Winterfell and in particular of his wild, younger sister.

Jon had not though anything of it at first, assuming that his friend, an orphan from an early age and with no siblings of his own, found Jon’s stories of life in a large and vigorous family merely an entertaining diversion from the mind numbing waiting they frequently had to endure. But years passed and his friend would ask him time and again to recount the same stories about Arya. As Jon watched the way his friend’s battle hardened face would light up at the mere mention of her name and her wild antics, Jon had come to realise he had made Weyland fall in love with a memory of a girl who no longer existed.

Jon had to accept it was his own fault for initiating this, otherwise unexplained, interest in his sister.

Weyland had never met Arya, nor shown any need to do so before declaring his determination to wed her. Jon groaned. The Arya who sat before him was brittle and cold and not at all the fiery girl of his stories. Weyland had fallen in love with an idealised memory. She was no longer wild, spirited
Arya underfoot whom Jon had loved so much in his youth; who Weyland now thought he also loved.

His sister and his friend had to meet and soon. If Jon forced the marriage before they were properly acquainted, as was not unusual in marriages of convenience, then he feared for the consequences. If…nay when, Weyland found his new bride to be lacking in all the wonderful attributes Jon had bestowed upon her, then none of them would be happy. It could not end well. If Jon’s loyalties were to be torn between his strongest Captain and his youngest sister; he was truly not sure where those loyalties would lie. Best to end this infatuation of Weyland’s now, before a hasty marriage destroyed their friendship and possibly more. Perhaps he could find another way to deal with House Baratheon and another, less demanding lord for Arya to marry.

“I will have you meet him soon Arya.” Jon said finally, turning on his heel and leaving her before he was provoked into doing or saying something he might come to regret. He would ask Daenerys to talk to her and persuade her of the need to wed. Perhaps his Queen would succeed where he had so obviously failed.

Ghost left at Jon’s heels. To Arya’s disgust, Nymeria followed Ghost.

“Traitor!” Arya hissed under her breath as the she-wolf padded past.

Nymeria turned to stare at Arya with enigmatic amber eyes, but the Direwolf didn’t come back. She followed her brother out of the door and Arya was left alone. Again.
Bad Company broke camp before dawn and rode for King’s Landing at first light, their Commander’s impatience driving them to set a fast pace. Not a man grumbled, for they all knew, and understood, the reason for his haste.

The men of Bad Company rode hard and light; their supplies limited to what each man and his mount could carry. Carts and comforts made for slow progress. With no ravens, they had no news from King’s Landing since setting out ten days past. Provisions and their Commander’s patience were now in short supply.

When they should have stopped for rest, Weyland urged them on towards the towers of the Red Keep, standing proud like a beacon on the horizon. When they finally rode into the bailey yard, men and animals were spent. The men dismounted with stiff legs, while horses hung their weary heads. Every man, including Lord Baratheon, still had his mount to attend to before seeking their own rest. They began unfastening saddles and removing halters, with long practiced economy of effort and the minimum of conversation. There would be time enough for banter tonight, when they would, at last, eat and drink their fill.

The tour had been hard and the news was not good. Bad Company’s mood was sombre and would remain so until rest and sustenance could renew their cheer. Each man’s personal belongings had to be removed from their mounts and safely stowed. If a horse was the most valuable thing a man owned, then his sword and his saddle were next. The stable boys knew to keep well out of their way until the men were finished with their own work, all except one; a boy of about ten and two who approached the Commander and, setting a bold hand on the magnificent destrier’s sweating neck, brazenly declared “Ser, you should not trouble yourself with this, while am here.”

Weyland shifted his focus from the cinch in his hands, to the boy who addressed him so boldly. He saw a dirty youth, tall and far too skinny for his height with sharp features and bright green eyes.

“He’s no ‘Ser’” Lem, who was attending to his own horse nearby, gruffly pointed out, “That’s Lord Baratheon you’re addressing boy and you would be well advised to remove your hand from Thunder’s neck, or you might get more than you bargained for.”

The boy immediately dropped to one knee on the straw floor, bowing his head to the Commander. “My…My Lord…I did not realise” he stuttered.

Weyland shot Lem a surprised glance.

“Better get used to that.” His second-in-command muttered, trying not to smile.

Lord Baratheon gripped the boy’s arm, to pull him up, only to find his hand grasping a shockingly thin limb hidden under the dirty sleeve. Other lads would have been shaking by now, but as soon as this one was set again on his feet, his hand was back on Thunder’s neck, in defiance of Lem’s advice. And, more surprising still, Thunder didn’t seem to mind.

The boy regarded Weyland with sharp green eyes “‘Tis not right that my Lord should have to see to his own horse.” Damn if the boy wasn’t brazen. And persistent.

“The lad’s got a point” Lem chuckled to Weyland as both men cast their eyes over the bold boy.
standing before them, who met their eyes and returned their stares with just as much interest. He looked like he could do with a good feed and a bath, but there was an earnest quality to the boy that both cheered and amused Weyland.

“What’s your name lad and what is it to you if I attend to my own horse?” Lord Baratheon demanded, but with a twinkle in his eye.

“It’s Ty Ser…I mean My Lord…and I am a stable hand employed by the Three Headed Dragon this past week” he declared self-importantly, his thin chest puffing out with pride.

“A whole week?” Lem gasped in mock surprise, “And did Queen Daenerys hand pick you for the job herself?”

For all his swagger, the boy turned a shocking shade of scarlet at Lem’s teasing.

“So you fancy yourself as my squire Ty?” Weyland asked, having taken an immediate like to the boy and his boldness. If Thunder allowed him close, then the boy was halfway to being accepted into Bad Company already.

Before Ty had a chance to answer, Anguy butted in with another question, “You got a family name boy?”

Weyland drew his archer a disapproving look as the boy shook his head.

“It’s a fair question!” Anguy replied defensively, “the boy might look quite the young lord once he’s clean. He’s tall and with decent food; some rack of lamb, roast chicken perhaps, maybe a few haunches of peppered boar, he could be broad too. Might even make a Knight when you’re older, eh Ty?” Anguy winked at the lad. Ty was now so red and flustered; he looked like his head might pop off with embarrassment and excitement. Weyland wasn’t sure if it was the prospect of becoming his squire that excited the boy so, or if it was Anguy’s description of all the food he might eat.

“Don’t tease the lad.” Weyland growled, feeling uncomfortable that the lad was getting his hopes up, perhaps for naught.

“Ach, I’m not teasing him. You need a squire. Ty’s right, Lord Baratheon can’t be seeing to his own horse. Have ever seen Aegon with a bucket of oats and a shovel of shit? And who else are you going to get? One of your new lordly friend’s sons? How would it look if your squire had better manners and more airs and graces than you?!”

Several of his men stifled chuckles behind him. He should be irritated but, Gods help him, he liked the boy and Anguy had a point.

“Aye, sounds about right to me - a bastard squire for a Bastard Knight.” Lem chimed in approvingly. “We’ll all help train you Ty. We all helped train him a few years back…” Lem nodded to the new Lord Baratheon “…and he didn’t turn out so bad. Stick with us and we’ll make a Knight of you some day. ‘Bought time we had some new blood in Bad Company.’ There were mutters of approval from several of the other men.

It looked to Weyland as if the deed was already done. He held out his hand. The boy just stared at it, bewildered until Anguy gestured wildly behind Lord Baratheon for the boy to take it. Man and boy shook on the deal.

“You shall be my squire Ty. Welcome to Bad Company!”

Cheers of “Bad Company!” and “Ty the squire!” echoed around the stables, causing some of the
horses in the stalls to skitter nervously and the other stable boys to look enviously at Ty.

Weyland handed Thunder’s reigns to his squire. He recognised that look of wonder on the boy’s face. His own face must have surely worn the same expression the first time Tobho Mott put a hammer in his hand. It made Weyland’s heart glad to see it and, seven hells, there had been little enough to cheer him recently. Lord Baratheon made to depart with a smile on his face.

“Tell cook that you are to receive double portions at every meal! Tell him Lord Baratheon commands it!” he shouted over his shoulder as he strode towards the door.

He would reach Jon’s solar sooner than he had expected and hopefully obtain news from Brienne of Tarth while he was there. He had much to report to Jon and Aegon. The tales of raiders in the Kingswood and their defiance of the law grew more numerous everyday and, from the witnesses he had spoken to, the outlaws became ever bolder. Even if the Storm Lands had not now been his, he would have felt obligated to remove this scourge, but he was now Lord of the Storm Lands and the smallfolk of those lands were his responsibility. He would not stand by and let them suffer any more at the hands of this scum. He would seek leave from The Kings to ride with his men as soon as they could be ready again. He intended to wipe these buggers from the face of the earth and lay down his marker for any other shit who fancied his chances against the Lord of Storm’s End – defy me and face my wrath. Ours is the fury indeed.

He was still removing his chain mail hauberk and gloves as he strode through the covered walkways that led from the stables to the heart of The Red Keep. Once he reached Jon’s solar he had no doubt he would find his friends still deep in their strategic planning.

The route was familiar enough, but he never paid much attention to what went on in the castle that did not directly affect him. Let Sam, Jon and Aegon worry about running this place, he had his own castle to run and the longer he lingered here, the more anxious he became to ride to the Stormlands and claim what was his. But he could not leave yet. There were still matters to be settled before he could turn his back on King’s Landing; duties to be performed and a wife to be won. Once he had fulfilled his obligations and had his wife by his side, he did not intend to return here unless he was forcibly dragged behind a team of wild horses. Let them come to Storm’s End.

As he strode along a high walkway, he heard familiar noises below. The grunts of effort he recognised from years of training, but there was not the usual accompanying clang of steel when swords met, or even the hard clap of wood against wood if practice swords were used. He stopped to listen.

There were swords at play all right; he would recognise the noise of steel slicing through air anywhere, but this ‘whoosh’ and sharp, high ring of metal against metal was new. Intrigued, he decided he needed to see what was afoot below. Let the strategic council wait. If he dallied a few minutes, indulged his interest in all things martial, it would hardly matter. He walked to the edge of the balcony intent on discovering the source of the noise.

He looked down on an open square, flooded with morning sunlight, where two combatants were engaged in a fast game of thrust and parry. The blades they used were mere toys; slim, tapered and so thin that they bent upon contact rather than inflicting a hard lesson as they should. He had never seen such swords and was immediately keen to know of their history, the secrets of their construction and why, by The Gods, anyone had a use for such a…such a… useless blade.

The man he could see was dark skinned, sweating and vaguely familiar; one of Aegon’s Golden Company perhaps? He tended to avoid mixing with those pirates as much as he could, but their paths had probably crossed at some point. He had no idea of the man’s name, but was fairly certain he hailed from Braavos or one of the other free cities. Whatever his name, he was clearly no match for
his more skilled opponent.

They fought side on, not face to face and toe to toe in the way he was used to. He had never seen such a style before - or had he? Had she not told him once to face his opponent side on to present a smaller target? He snorted with derision. His size had intimidated many an opponent in the field. Better to let them see the full size and strength of him, for then he would see the fear in their eyes. When he saw that fear, even if it was before he’d swung his sword, he knew he had already won.

As he watched, the sweating man was pushed farther and farther back across the yard, drawing the certain victor out into the open. There was ample opportunity to study the superior swordsman and his technique as he advanced on and on into the centre of the square. He was tall and slim and although each man was dressed similarly in boiled leather, the man he could only now see cut a much more athletic figure. His every movement was sharp, precise, powerful and relentless, but this was no sword play Weyland had witnessed before. The aim did not seem to be to disarm and defeat your opponent, but rather to score points and to showcase your skill and technique. The swordsman coming into view was undoubtedly a Master.

It was obvious with every lunge and thrust that he was witnessing years and years of training. The sword flowed with this warrior and every movement was perfectly controlled, balanced and full of lethal grace.

Weyland imagined he was watching a performance or a dance, rather than training which had the sole aim of saving your life on the battlefield. In his own training he had only ever been concerned with disarming and defeating his opponent as quickly and as ruthlessly as possible. The difference between living and dying lay in your speed and strength and Weyland had both in abundance.

He turned his attention from the style of fighting to the fighters themselves. The sweating man was a decent enough sword, but clearly outmatched as he was forced to retreat further and further back. The morning was still cool and yet he was drenched in sweat and almost on the verge of yielding. The grunting Weyland had heard earlier was coming solely from this sweating man, while The Master made barely a sound. The hair at the base of the almost-victor’s neck was damp and his skin glistened in the morning light, but beyond that, there were no signs of exertion or strain. His movements remained calm, unforced and each target was claimed with pin-point accuracy.

As he watched with increasing fascination, Weyland’s attention was caught by the suppleness of an exposed wrist and the grace of a gently curved thigh. His heart missed a beat. There was a perfection of form and sensuality about this warrior no man could match. After all those years, he had almost failed to recognise her.

He had not expected her to be as tall, but the hair was the same; dark and unruly like Jon’s. The sudden realisation that he watched Arya Stark made him jerk back into the shadows, his heart hammering in his chest. It was her, returned from the dead.

Brienne of Tarth had made good her promise, but what if Arya realised he watched? What if she looked up and their eyes met? Would she smile and welcome him as an old friend? Or would she see him and curse him for abandoning her to The Hound? He cursed himself now for a coward, but he needed to speak to Jon, needed to see how it was with her before he made his approach.

Without risking another look, he strode towards Jon’s solar, only this time with a far greater sense of urgency.

Jon maintained guards outside his rooms. Overcautious Aegon said, but there were still forces that opposed the rule of The Three Headed Dragon; scattered and weak, but still a threat nonetheless and Jon was no fool. One lone assassin might achieve what several armies could not. Jon had handpicked
his oldest companions, men of The Night’s Watch for his personal guard; men who had known him and fought alongside him longer than even Weyland himself. Today it was the turn of Grenn and Pyp.

Weyland nodded a greeting to the two men. They looked bored and eager for the chance of some news.

“How goes life outside The Red Keep?” Grenn asked. Weyland imagined he could hear childish excitement in the big man’s voice. “I swear I would rather sleep out there with the army than under this buggering roof. A featherbed here is of no comfort to a man more used to open spaces and the stars over his head.”

“Find a soft woman with child bearing hips to warm your feather bed and I’ll wager you’ll soon change your mind” Weyland observed dryly as he strode past, leaving a suddenly thoughtful Grenn and a smirking Pyp behind him. Bloody Crows. The wall was no longer, their Lord Commander himself had taken a wife and still they held to that bloody vow. He shook his head in disbelief.

Jon, Aegon and Sam all looked up from a map spread out on the desk as he entered. He was pleased to see a warm welcome on all three faces, but his eyes were immediately drawn to the floor. He was surprised to see another Direwolf lying beside Ghost. One Direwolf basking in the sun was a sizeable obstacle to negotiate, but two of them covered almost all of the free floor space in the solar.

“Nymeria” Sam explained, following Weyland’s gaze. “Arrived out of nowhere with Ghost – the day before Lady Arya. It’s all been happening while you were away you know.”

As if she understood every word, the great tawny Direwolf lifted her regal head from Ghost’s shoulder and regarded him with knowing amber eyes. Weyland would have sworn that those eyes held more intelligence than half the men he knew.

He took a tentative step nearer, half expecting the she-wolf to bare her teeth. No such warning came, so he extended his hand and crouched down beside the wolves. As usual, Ghost paid him no mind at all, his white flanks slowly rising and falling in a contented slumber. The she-wolf’s enigmatic eyes never left his as he slowly, slowly reached further towards her, meaning to scratch her behind the ears in the way that Ghost, if he was in the mood, seemed to like.

When Weyland’s fingers were within touching distance of those silky ears, Nymeria languidly turned her head and, to his surprise, licked his hand from wrist to fingertips. He had to fight the urge to jerk his hand back. Ghost had never done that to him and it was entirely unexpected. But there was something else…something shockingly sensual about the rasp of that strong, wet tongue against his palm.

“I see the bitch likes you” Aegon snorted.

Weyland bristled at the King’s tone and Nymeria seemed to share his sentiment, as she gave a low, warning growl. Weyland had no doubt the Direwolf’s animosity was aimed at Aegon rather than himself. He tentatively scratched Nymeria behind her ear as he had originally intended and he could have sworn the she-wolf relaxed into his touch. She even favoured him with what sounded suspiciously like a contented purr.

“See what I mean?” Aegon huffed. “Won’t let me near her; not that I’d want to get too close anyway. I don’t want to end up like Jaime Lannister.”

“A Kingslayer?” muttered Weyland, deliberately misunderstanding the reference.
“Of course I didn’t mean that!” Aegon shot back defensively. “I meant one handed of course” he added rather sullenly as the other three gave him various degrees of disapproving looks.

“We didn’t expect you back until tomorrow. Did you encounter trouble?” Jon asked, wisely changing the subject.

Weyland reluctantly stopped scratching Nymeria and straightened up, walking over to pour himself a cup of water as he gathered his thoughts. She was back and her Direwolf with her. It was only a matter of time before he would meet her again.

Then he noticed, to his shame that his hand was shaking. He placed the water jug back down in haste, hoping none of the others noticed.

Had he known Lady Arya Stark was returned, he would have cut his mission even shorter, but there was truth in what Grenn said. Weyland would rather be outside the walls of The Red Keep than behind them. After years in the field, it was strange to sleep in a soft bed in the same place for night after night. He needed a woman of his own to warm his featherbed he thought ruefully and the only one he had ever wanted was finally, finally within his grasp.

“No trouble until we hit the King’s Road. Then there was nought but bad news from The Storm Lands. I spoke to several refugees, fleeing for their lives. They’ll be at the gates in a few days, seeking sanctuary and justice. By your leave, I’ll take my men and rid us of this plague of vermin. I intend to ride out again as soon as we can be ready.”

He turned back to the table and downed his water, making sure his body shielded the cup as he lifted it unsteadily to his lips. His hand shook less, but he did not want the matter commented upon, at least not with Aegon here.

This time it was Jon who spoke. “Of course you must go, but can you not tarry a few days? You and I have some…personal matters…to resolve before you take your leave.”

Aegon laughed out loud. “You’ll have your hands full with Lady Arya. She’s as much of a she-wolf as that one lying in the sun over there. Good luck my friend. Let us hope that if the Direwolf likes to tongue you, her mistress will too!”

“Too far Aegon!” Jon snapped, catching Weyland’s arm in a vice like grip as his friend suddenly headed for Aegon, intent upon make the Targaryen take back that insult.

Sam hurriedly stepped in front of Aegon as Jon tightened his hold further on Weyland. To everyone’s surprise, Nymeria was suddenly at Weyland’s heel, teeth bared and snarling at Aegon. Ghost, silent as always, stood ready at her shoulder.

Aegon immediately took a large step backwards and held his hands up in an act of submission. “I forgot myself and I apologize most profusely. I would never intentionally besmirch your sister’s reputation Jon, or your intended’s character Weyland. Please accept my humble and sincere apology.”

Both Jon and Weyland muttered a grudging acceptance, Weyland’s through gritted teeth as Sam physically manhandled Aegon towards the door.

“We’ll leave you two in peace then.” Sam panted as he pushed Aegon from the room and swiftly closed the door behind them.

“That fucker goes too far! All the time. The sooner I get to Storm’s End the better, and safer, for both of us.” Weyland snarled.
Jon sat down heavily in his chair and let out a long, slow sigh. The two Direwolves slowly resumed their place in the sun.

“Yes he does, but he is as perceptive as ever.” Jon conceded. “She is indeed a she-wolf. I fear that the Arya who has returned to me is not the Arya I knew and have held close to my heart all these years.”

“Aye, she is a woman full grown now.” Weyland agreed wistfully. Her figure was a combination of grace and strength that he could watch forever. When he closed his eyes, he could still see her. With each remembered lunge and thrust his heart beat faster and his throat tightened. All his hopes to wed and bed her came flooding back in a sudden rush of blood, which seemed to flow straight to his cock.

Opening his eyes and catching Jon’s puzzled look, he quickly added “I mean - she is no longer the child of your memories. I saw her at her sword practice while making my way here.”

“She trains for hours; every day since she arrived, without fail.” Jon said wearily. “She refuses to attend dinner, will barely speak – even to me. All I know is that she has been mostly in Braavos since the war began and has the skills and dubious loyalty of a sellsword.”

Jon calling his sister’s loyalty into question was shocking, but Weyland had other, more pressing matters, on his mind than Arya’s loyalties; matters that were so pressing upon his mind and his britches, that he couldn’t stop himself from blurting out “And my proposal? What does m’lady say to that?”

“Do you want to know what she really said, or shall I sweeten the blow for you my friend?”

Weyland groaned and raked his hand through his hair. So there would be no longed for, joyous reunion. “Tell me the truth and be done with it.”

Then I shall quote her exactly. “You and your Lord Baratheon can both stick this marriage proposal up your arse” Jon repeated reluctantly.

Despite his abject disappointment, Weyland had to laugh. “Perhaps she has not changed as much as you think old friend. Perhaps she has just grown up and learned a few more choice phrases.”

Jon shook his head. “Be assured that I sung your praises to the high heavens and impressed upon her the suitability and the necessity of the match. I even tried to order her to marry you.”

Weyland snorted. They both knew an order like that would never work on Arya.

“And…?” Weyland asked, hopefully. Surely even Arya wouldn’t be as pig headed as to refuse her brother’s request for a simple meeting?

“I’ve to stick that up my arse as well.” Jon sighed wearily.

Weyland would not give up hope. After all these years, he would make it happen, or at least he would give it his damndest attempt. He hadn’t won a war and risen to Lord Baratheon because of his easy-going nature. He could be cussed and determined when he set his mind to something and he had decided long ago that he would make himself a suitable match for Lady Arya Stark. He was a Lord now as she was a Lady. No-one could deny he was worthy of her. And they had been friends. What more could she want in a husband?
She could want a husband in the first place, which, according to Jon she did not. Weyland was confident that, between them, they would make her see sense. What woman didn’t want a strong man to warm her bed? What man didn’t want a wife to warm his and bear him strapping sons and feisty daughters? Even a she-wolf needs a he-wolf he thought smugly. Arya would come around to the idea soon enough; hopefully sooner rather than later, as he was itching to claim his castle and lands with her by his side.

If she thought she would escape him by telling him to stick all the hopes and dreams he had carried with him for these long years in a very dark, very private place, then she didn’t know him at all. Perhaps that was the problem.

His revere was interrupted by a commotion outside the door. He heard yelled curses, but they were good natured, rather than threatening. He was not surprised when Brienne of Tarth burst into the solar with her too long limbs, ridiculous hair and determined expression.

He and Jon immediately stood as she entered. She might be a Knight, but she was still a woman and deserved womanly courtesies. At least, Jon and Weyland thought so.

She was at him in two long strides and, to his uncomfortable surprise, immediately dropped to one knee before him.

“My Lord.” She murmured, dipping her head, grabbing his hand and bringing it to her lips. Surprisingly soft lips brushed against his knuckles. They hadn’t seen each other since Jon had raised him to Lord Baratheon, before the battle, in front of the closed gates of King’s Landing. Jon had insisted it be done then, in case either of them did not survive the assault on the Red Keep. But survive they had and Lem was right, he was going to have to get used to this kneeling business, but not from her.

Reaching down, he placed his hands on her arms and drew her up to him. She was the only woman who could look him in the eye and, to his shock, he saw hers shine with unshed tears. Brienne never cried. He had seen her at her lowest, close to death and in every imaginable horrific situation, but never had he seen her vulnerable like this.

“Lord Baratheon of Storm’s End.” Her voice was soft and low, wavering with emotion. “I never thought to speak those words again.”

“Aye, I am Lord of Storm’s End, by King Jon’s good grace.” He smiled and was relieved to see she managed a weak smile back. She also sniffed and rubbed the back of her hand across her freckled nose. Still the same Brienne and, please the God’s, she would never change. “When the time comes, will you ride with me to Storm’s End? You know there is no other I would rather have at my back.”

“While you know I feel the same, I cannot come.”

He frowned. Not only had this been his dream, it had been hers too. Avenge Renly and retake what was rightfully his.

“I cannot. I have sworn to perform a task for Lady Arya.”

He blew out a long sigh. Brienne and her bloody oaths. This would be her off on another quest. Would she never learn? He supposed he ought not to complain, as without her he would have no Arya and it was also Brienne who had found and rescued Sansa. But when would the Maid of Tarth find her own peace?

“I can only hope this is your last quest. And what happens after? Will you come to Storm’s End once
“I still cannot.” Seeing the frustration written on his face, she dropped her eyes and muttered, “I would go to my Jaime.”

Her use of the word ‘my’ was not lost on Lord Baratheon. He placed a finger under her chin and gently raised her eyes to meet his again. “Your Jaime?” he asked softly.

He face flushed the most appealing shade of pink and for a moment he could see her as the young girl who had danced with Renly Baratheon all those years ago and lost her heart for the first time. That bugger Jaime Lannister had better appreciate what a wondrous woman he was getting.

“Does the Kingslayer know yet that he is yours?” Weyland couldn’t keep a smile from his lips as he thought of Brienne charging in to Casterly Rock to claim her prize.

“No. But I intend to leave him in no doubt about it this time.” She said with a wicked grin and that determined glint in her eye.

He could only hope Jaime Lannister was well prepared; for that was an assault Jaime had no hope of repelling.

“Enough of me.” Brienne shook her head and freed her chin from his hand. “I must speak with you of Lady Arya before she arrives.”

“When is she arriving?” he asked, puzzled. Had he not just seen her, engrossed in her swordplay?

“Shortly. On my way here I met Sam who was off to find her and bring her to you.”

“What?!” He could not keep the shock, nae panic, from his voice. He was not prepared. He had not determined what to say to her, although part of him doubted he would ever find the right words, even if he had more time. Seven hells, he had five years to prepare for this and still he was at a loss.

“Stop, squawking like a babe. She is a woman, you are a man. You will either find an understanding between you or you won’t. Now listen to what I have to tell you...” Her eyes darted to Jon who stood with his back to them, steadfastly gazing out of the window. She dropped her voice to a low whisper.

“Lady Arya is troubled. She has difficulty sleeping and when she does; her mind is plagued by restless dreams. There is something amiss, but I cannot prise from her what it is that vexes her so. However, I can tell you she has a list of names. Some I recognise, some I do not. Ghosts from the past.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because she talks in her sleep, obviously.” Brienne hissed. Sometimes men could be so unimaginative. “Mayhap you will be able to hear more, once you reach your understanding with her eh?” She wagged her finger at him and winked.

He chose to ignore the implication Brienne was making, for fear of getting his hopes, and another part of him that currently rested in his britches, up. “What names?”

“The ones I know and can make out from her restless mutterings are; Ser Ilyn Payne, Ser Gregor, Ser Meryn Trant, King Joffrey, Queen Cersi.”

“All dead” he muttered.
“Aye and every one deserved it. But some died in mysterious circumstances. You should ask
yourself by whose hand.” Brienne tapped the side of her misshapen, freckly nose.

He looked at her blankly. Brienne furrowed her brow with frustration.

“She is no mere sellsword, believe me. The place where I found her in Braavos is one of legend.”
Brienne leaned even closer to him, so their heads were almost touching. “Are you familiar with The
House of Black and White?” She whispered softly, with something akin to awe in her voice.

“You know I have never been to Braavos.”

“But you do not need to have visited there to have heard of the occupants of that house.”

She put her hand firmly on his armoured shoulder and turned them both away from Jon, leaning to
his ear and whispering “’Tis the home of The Faceless Men.”

“Brienne, you jest.” He almost laughed. Almost, but not quite. Hadn’t he seen the evidence for
himself this morning? Years and years of training. In Braavos. In the House of Black and White.

Brienne met his eyes and raised one eyebrow. She was far from jesting.

“If she is as you say, then she would hardly need you to carry out any task for her.” He countered
fiercely. Brienne narrowed her eyes at him, obviously displeased he was not immediately accepting
of her word.

Why was he fighting his friend on this? Brienne had never lied to him or to anyone else in all the
years he had known her. In truth he suspected she was incapable of lying. Her oh-so-honest bright
blue eyes and her maidenly blushing would give her away in an instant. He needed to deny it
because he didn’t want to believe what Brienne was suggesting could be true.

“I am to find the last name on her list – The Hound, if he still lives. Only find him for her. Nothing
more.”

The damned Hound who had stolen her from him. Arya would want no other to take her revenge.
She wanted Clegane found so she could swing the sword herself, as her father had taught all his
children. And Jon. It was all falling into place too well to be untrue.

A heartfelt groan escaped his lips as he rolled his eyes skyward. Why could things never be easy for
him, as they were for other men? Why must he always have to fight for everything he wanted? His
lady was one of the most feared assassins on the face of the earth. May the Gods help him.

Chapter End Notes

And may they forgive me for leaving you on this cliff-hanger! So Arya is on her way.
How will their reunion go? You’ll need to wait until next Friday to find out…
Chapter Notes

First – the bad news…this chapter turned out to be longer than I expected, so I’ve had to split it. The second half still needs some work and, while I want to stick to my “Every Friday” promise, I don’t want to post something I’m not happy with. So you’ll have to wait a bit longer for you-know-what.

Next – the good news. I’m not going to make you wait until next Friday. I’m not that cruel! It’s almost done, so I’ll post the second half later this weekend.

“Before you leave Brienne, tell me - does she know of this?” Weyland raised his hand and followed the curving scar under his left eye with his fingertip.

“No. She knows her mother is dead and I thought it best to leave it at that.” Brienne whispered, casting another wary glance towards Jon. The King was still engrossed in the view from the window. “She asked no more and I did not offer.”

Weyland was relieved he did not need to deal with an Arya who knew the circumstances of his mark now, but he would have to tell her soon, before she heard it from another.

“I intend to leave at first light to hunt The Hound. I have few clues and they are all years old.” Brienne declared thoughtfully, her mind already shifting focus to her next task.

Lord Baratheon nodded. There was no point in trying to talk Brienne out of it, he had never succeeded before and knew he would be wasting his breath to even try now.

“Godspeed” he sighed as he clasped her shoulders tightly - the only form of affection she was comfortable with. “It is my intention to ride for Storm’s End as soon as I have my wife. I hope not to be here when you return.”

Brienne grinned. “In which case I shall wish you Godspeed too. And good luck.” She winked at him again. “I hope I shall find you and Lady Arya together wherever you are.”

He watched her stride towards the door. She stopped at the threshold and turned back to him, “I suggest you wait until you are secure in her affections before you tell her.”

He sighed and nodded. He had come to the same conclusion. If he told Arya too soon, he suspected she would never see past it.

“And do not tell her when she has a blade within easy reach.”

“I wish I thought you were joking.” He groaned.

“Have faith my lord. All will be well…I am sure of it.” Brienne smiled and then she was gone. He wished he shared her confidence.

Weyland raked his fingers through his hair as he looked down at the white Direwolf lying at his feet. Ghost was no longer sleeping, but watching him intently, eyes and ears ready and alert.
addressed the wolf directly “I take it you heard all of that?”

“Every word” Jon answered wearily from across the room. Few people knew Jon was a warg and fewer still new how quickly and easily he could slip into Ghost’s consciousness.

“So? Do you think it true? Your sister is a Faceless Man?” Weyland asked, directing his question to Jon this time.

King Jon turned away from the window, his face solemn and his eyes dark. “If it is true, then I must know why she is here. I cannot have an assassin living under my roof when there is so much at stake.”

“But she is your sister! Surely you do not think she would…”

Jon cut him short. “I do not know what to think!” Jon snapped. “Sam fetches her now. You must learn it all Weyland; why she has come and what her intentions are. Until I can be sure of her, I will double the guard and I will have her watched.”

Weyland opened his mouth to protest, but thought again and said nothing. Over the past months they had agreed the greatest threats they faced now did not come from armies and war, but from famine and a lone assassin’s blade.

“I will do what I can.” Weyland sighed. As if this wasn’t going to be difficult enough already, now he had to cross-examine Arya too.

-o-

It had only been a fair practice Arya thought as she placed her rapier back in the rack. At no point had she felt at a disadvantage. To her mind, her opponent had been only middling at best, yet she had been assured he was renowned in Golden Company for his sword skills. If that was really the case, Golden Company’s fearsome reputation was ill deserved.

She was wiping the sweat from the back of her neck, contemplating what to do with another empty afternoon, when her attention was drawn to heavy panting just outside the yard. She set off to investigate, only to find Sam, doubled over, his hands on his knees, sounding as if he was about to breath his last.

Arya folded her arms and leant against the nearest pillar. With no demands on her time, she could afford to wait.

Still bent over, Sam looked up at her with piggy eyes, his round face slick with sweat. He opened his mouth in an attempt to speak, took a few more rasping breaths, and then held one hand up towards her, the message clear – I still can’t speak, give me a moment.

‘Twas a good job he was uncommonly clever, as he was a sorry excuse for a crow otherwise.

Eventually Sam straightened up, hands moving to his hips this time – or the rolls of fat where his hips ought to be.

“I have…decided to take…some exercise Lady Arya.” He managed to choke out between gulped breaths.

“So I see.” She smirked. Seven hells, he was a pathetic excuse for a crow.

“King Jon requests your presence…” Such a long statement was obviously still an effort and he had
to hold up his hand again while he caught his breath, “…in his solar immediately.”

Arya was finding the demands of King Jon increasingly wearisome. “Tell him I’m too busy.” She drawled.

Sam seemed surprised. “Too busy doing what?”

“Just make something up.” She pushed herself slowly off the wall, deciding on a whim that she might go for a walk. She hadn’t been beyond the walls of the Red Keep yet. Perhaps she would go to Flea Bottom and catch a few cats for old time’s sake. She wondered idly if that one-eared black devil of a tomcat still haunted the Red Keep. Perhaps she would go and seek him out instead; see if she was any faster – or if he was any slower.

“I can’t do that!” Sam yelped, his voice high and indignant, then, dropping his voice, he added seriously, “I won’t lie to Jon.”

“Pah! ‘Tis hardly much of a lie. Tell him the truth then! See if I care! Tell him I cannot endure another of his bloody lectures about marriage to the bloody Bastard Knight!”

Sam’s eyes widened suddenly with alarm, staring at something, or someone, over Arya’s shoulder.

A cool, rich voice from behind her declared “Never is a very long time for one so young.”

Arya whirled around to find Queen Daenerys standing with her hands on her hips, a disdainful expression on her face and anger flashing in her eyes. One of her Unsullied stood like a statute at her side.

Seven buggering hells. How much had The Queen heard?

“I believe your brother has requested the pleasure of your company in his solar Arya.”

Arya stifled a groan. Bugger. Ignoring fat Sam was one thing, opposing the will of the Queen when she stood right in front of her was another thing entirely.

“I was just going” Arya muttered reluctantly. She felt as if she was a child again, being scolded by Septa Mordane.

“What a coincidence! Seeing as I am going that way too, we can walk together.” Daenerys gave Arya a beatific smile. Arya returned it with a tight, angry, little smile of her own.

“Sam – you too!” The Queen commanded and Sam dutifully fell in line, behind the eunuch slave soldier.

Daenerys did not have long and she did not wish to waste what little time she had in idol chatter, so she began immediately,

“Lord Baratheon has returned and it is he who awaits you in Jon’s solar.”

“Fuuuuuck.” Arya hissed, not caring what Daenerys thought of that. She looked across at The Queen, hoping to catch her eye; daring Daenerys to attempt to reprimand her for her language or her attitude, but Daenerys looked only straight ahead, her back straight as a spear and a calm, dignified, queenly expression on her face.

“Jon tells me you have no wish to wed. Anyone.” Daenerys continued smoothly, ignoring Arya’s cursing.
“Correct.” Arya confirmed with a smirk. Just let them try and marry her off to some worthy old soldier. She would enjoy making sure they all regretted the attempt.

“So, pray tell me what you intend to do with the rest of your life good sister?”

Arya hadn’t expected that. She had her plan – to remove the last name from her list, but as to what happened after...if there even was an ‘after’, she had never considered. With every name, there was the risk that she might fail and become another victim of those she sought to destroy. She was single-minded in her pursuit of those who had wronged her and so far her luck had held, but she could make no plans until her revenge was absolute. And she wasn’t about to tell anyone that.

“I hadn’t given it much thought.” Arya answered truthfully.

“Have you not longed for a babe in your arms and a good man who will love and care for you both?”

“No!” Arya yelled, wrinkling her nose in disgust. She could think of nothing worse! Babes were for ordinary women and Arya was most certainly not one of them, she thought proudly. Nor was she one of those soft ladies like Sansa who, since childhood, had imagined her whole life revolving around a pretty Knight who would come and sweep her off her feet and into his castle where she would spend the rest of her life birthing squalling babes and doing exactly as her lord commanded. No, Arya was made for more. She had always known it.

A life of unquestioning obedience to some weak, empty-headed lord was certainly not for her; some idiot son of one of the Great Houses of Westeros, whose family name alone gave him status and power and whose fealty Jon hoped to buy with her hand in marriage. Never! She would slit her own throat first! Actually, she would not do that. She would slit his, or better still, arrange an unfortunate accident in the eve of the wedding so no-one need know. His family might suspect, but they would never be able to prove anything. Let Jon try and marry her off again after that!

If Daenerys was shocked by Arya’s declaration that she longed for neither children nor a good man, she did not show it, however The Queen did not believe it.

“You know not what you say Arya. You are a woman long since grown and you must accept your responsibilities to your House, your family, your brother and your King.”

“And if I choose to deny these responsibilities?”

Queen Daenerys stopped walking and turned to Arya for the first time, her lips pursed, frost in her lilac eyes, “then you must leave, for there is no place here for you.”

They stood silently, taking the measure of each other for a while. Sam shifted nervously from one foot to the other, the Unsullied betrayed no emotion, nor interest.

Arya was trapped and Daenerys knew it. Jon had made his position clear already, so there was no point appealing to him. Jon wanted her married to one of his lords. Perhaps he would not insist on this one, but there would be others.

Jon expected her to accept her fate as a high born lady. Arya found it almost laughably ironic that Lady Catelyn’s mantra of “Family, Duty, Honour” was being enforced by the bastard her mother despised.

While Arya would have liked to imagine her fate would have been different had her father and mother lived, in her heart, she knew it would not have been so where marriage was concerned. Had her father not arranged for Sansa to wed that Baratheon pretender Joffrey? Seven years later, Arya
was expected to be wed to another Baratheon. At least, being a bastard, this one might actually be the product of King Robert’s loins, and not birthed from Lannister perversion like Joffrey. Seven years later and it was Jon, rather than Eddard who brokered the deal. Unlike Sansa, Arya had no intention of accepting her fate willingly.

“Is that what you want Arya? To leave your family again?” Daenerys asked eventually, breaking the oppressive silence.

What did she want? All Arya could think of was revenge. All Arya had been able to think of for years, was revenge. Part of her was afraid she couldn’t feel any deeper than that any more.

Maybe she had been abandoned too many times since her family had been torn apart and scattered to the winds. Or perhaps it was even worse. Maybe she was just cold and hard as ice. Maybe she had always been that way. Killing had come easily and now she was able to discard faces they way she had always discarded places and people and memories. Maybe she was only a shell, unable to trust or love anyone. But she hoped she still loved her family. She would stay for them. For a while at least.

“It seems I have no choice but to meet this Lord Baratheon.” Arya admitted grudgingly. The added fiercely, “But I shall never marry him!”

“There you go, saying “never” again and you haven’t even met him yet.” Daenerys chided gently.

“Never! Never! Never!”

Arya even kicked the nearest wall for extra effect. Not hard of course - she wasn’t stupid and it wasn’t worth risking a broken bone for this.

To Arya’s intense annoyance, Daenerys completely ignored her display of spite, instead calmly replying, “Come then good sister. As we walk, I shall tell you what I know of this lord.”

Daenerys thought for a moment, pondering on how best to describe the new Lord Baratheon to Arya. The match between these two people was a cause her husband held dear and so Daenerys wanted to encourage the match. Daenerys was unsure what qualities her strange, solitary good sister would admire in a man, so she proceeded warily.

“He is the tallest man in the Great Hall by a considerable way I think…” she began.

Arya snorted her disagreement, “Tallest man perhaps. I would wager Brienne of Tarth is taller still!”

“No…” Daenerys replied thoughtfully, “I think he is taller than Brienne although not by much.”

Arya raised her eyebrows sceptically. Brienne’s size was legendary. It was a common subject of speculation who, in the seven Kingdoms was, or had ever been, taller than the Maid of Tarth. The short list always included The Mountain of course, who was widely acknowledged to be the tallest man who had ever lived (if you excluded the giants), The damned Hound (the mention of whose name inexplicably still bought a tear to Sansa’s eye), Hodor (not so widely known, but honourably mentioned by all those who had ever visited Winterfell), The Greatjon and the late King Robert. Some names were often mention and always dismissed – such as The Kingslayer and Stannis Baratheon. Arya had never heard mention of The Bastard Knight in any such discussions, but then, she had to admit, she had only been infrequently to Westeros during the war.

“’Tis true!” Daenerys declared vehemently, rather annoyed that Arya doubted her word. Then, realising arguing would end this conversation before it had even properly begun, The Queen
changed her approach, adding sweetly, “As you are to meet him, you will be able to judge for yourself.”

“You must proceed with your description then, so I will recognise him when I see him.” Arya replied sarcastically,

“So he is taller even than Brienne…” Daenerys paused, looking pointedly at Arya, who had to nod in reluctant acceptance before Daenerys would continue “…he is very broad and I suspect he is very well muscled under his clothes as soldiers tend to be.” Daenerys paused again, smiling to herself as she thought on her own new husband’s muscular form and how very much it pleased her.

Arya rolled her eyes. It was common knowledge that, despite the marriage between Jon and Daenerys having been of necessity to bring an end to the war, the two of them had found a great match in each other. It was obvious to all that they could not keep their eyes, or their hands, off one another, much to the delight and amusement of their friends.

Recovering herself and flushing slightly, Daenerys started again, “He is dark with the bluest of eyes and has a curving scar under one eye, which prevents him from being truly handsome. He seems thoughtful and does not speak unless he has something of relevance to say; he is hesitant if engaged in conversation by ladies at the dinner table, but has an easy way with him when he speaks to the men. I think you will not be disappointed Arya.”

Again Arya rolled her eyes, but made no comment. To even discuss the possibility of this man being half way tolerable would only add fuel to Daenerys’ hopes. So he was very tall and dark and Daenerys obviously thought him not to be repulsive, but nothing The Queen could say or do would ever convince Arya to look on him with anything other than distain.

“So he is not hideously gruesome to look at.” Arya muttered, remembering King Robert with a haunch of venison in one hand and a goblet of wine in the other, gorged and bloated. No doubt this Lord Baratheon would be a younger version of the old one. Daenerys was no doubt trying to conjure a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. Given it was King Robert’s bastard they discussed, a boar’s ear might be a more appropriate comparison, Arya thought wickedly.

“What of his character?” Arya only asked because she wanted to be able to find fault with this supposed paragon of lordly virtue.

“My own knowledge of the man is limited. Most of what I know comes from Jon…”

“Please tell me of your own thoughts” Arya sighed. She was already well aware of Jon’s opinion of the man – the Gods knew he had tried to impress the suitability of the match on her often enough.

Daenerys continued softly, “He has that look about him that they all have. He is weary. He has seen too much and although he would fight to the ends of the earth for our cause, he desires nothing more than peace. He needs a wife Arya, someone to share his burden and his future. He will want sons and he will love the woman who can give him them with as much passion as he fought.”

Arya watched in uncomfortable surprise as Daenerys’ eyes suddenly pooled with tears. Why was she so upset and why now? It had to be this talk of sons.

Arya had heard whispers that The Queen was barren, but Arya had no time for malicious gossip and nowhere was the gossip more vicious than in The Red Keep. In that respect, at least, nothing had changed. When it came to a Queen’s ability to provide an heir, Arya knew the speculation would never end until a son was birthed.
Daenerys turned quickly away. Her voice was thick with emotion as she asked Sam to escort Arya the rest of the way. Without looking at either of them, Daenerys hurried off. The Unsullied guard drew Arya a venomous look, as if it was all her fault. Arya crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out at the eunuch, knowing he would never touch her without a direct order and that he would need to get a move on if he was going to catch up with The Queen. The Unsullied narrowed his eyes and curled his lip at her, before turning on his heel and marching after Daenerys.

“Arya! What do you think you are playing at? You shouldn’t goad the Unsullied!” Sam yelped. “They kill babies and puppies! Think what he might do to you …or…or…to us!”

“He hasn’t got the balls” Arya sneered, before laughing at her own joke.

As the slave soldier disappeared from view, Arya thought she might as well get this over with. To walk in the other direction now would only delay the inevitable. She was going to have to meet this Bastard Knight sooner or later. It might as well be sooner.

Sam had to trot breathlessly behind her to keep up with the fast pace she set. Suddenly realising she might seem much too eager to meet this lord, Arya slowed almost to a standstill, causing Sam to crash into her, with a surprised “Ooof”. Bounce into her might be more appropriate, for Arya had never felt a man as soft as Sam, but he was heavy with it and the two of them nearly toppled over under the impact. They both laughed as they flayed around, trying to grab onto each other to stop from toppling over, breaking the tension between them. They continued on, side by side, at a much more companionable pace.

It wasn’t long before Arya became aware of Sam fidgeting beside her. She tried to ignore him, but she couldn’t ignore the deep, sighing breaths he took, as if readying himself for something. By the Gods, here we go again, she thought. Then came the inevitable “Err…Lady Arya…”

“What is it Sam?” she asked with an ill tempered groan.

“What Queen Daenerys said is true Arya. Lord Baratheon is indeed very large, but he is not as intimidating as he looks once you get to know him.”

Arya snorted. Why was Sam bothering her with this? Couldn’t he understand that she didn’t care? “There’s no man scares me Samwell Tarly.”

“Well don’t you go scaring him neither.”

Arya chuckled, quite pleased The Hand of The Kings thought her suitably scary.

Sam blushed, but wasn’t going to be put off and continued “By all accounts he’s stuck on you and some might say you can be rather…ah…intimidating yourself.”

When Arya scowled at him in a way that could only be described as intimidating, Sam added under his breath “not me of course…just some…other folks.”

By now they had reached the end of the corridor that led to Jon’s solar. Sam was wringing his chubby hands together. He obviously had yet more to say and stopped well before they reached the solar. Arya reluctantly stopped beside him, folding her arms and waiting impatiently for him get to the point.

“What I’m trying to say is….now the war’s over, those who have been through the seven hells deserve a little happiness…that’s all. You should take it wherever you find it and if Jon thinks you’d both fit together…well, I think you ought to take his advice and at least try it.”
“Pah! Marriage advice from two crows!” Arya scoffed sarcastically, rolling her eyes and marching towards the solar door.

She ignored the attempts at cheerful greetings from the two guards. More bloody crows.

As she pushed the door open, her first thought was how unusually dark the room was. It took her a moment to realise that the man standing looking out of the window was blocking out most of the light, but she didn’t have time to study him as Jon was striding towards her looking even grumpier than usual.

“Good day my King!” she greeted with mock cheerfulness.

He replied with what was almost a snarl. Arya presumed matters were not well today between the King and Queen. First Daenerys was crying and now Jon was growling at her. Perhaps The Queen’s moon blood had come again.

Jon cocked his head towards Ghost, although his eyes, dark and furious never left Arya’s. The Direwolf was at his side in an instant. Arya half expected Nymeria to follow Jon and Ghost out of the solar, as she had done before, however, she made no move. Nymeria was lying, head resting on her paws, ears alert, all her attention focused on the man at the window. Arya wasn’t sure what was worse, being deserted by or being ignored by her wolf.

Arya was barely aware of Jon slamming the door shut, as her gaze followed Nymeria’s to the window. She had to admit, she had seldom seen a man taller and, as he was still in full armour, his shoulders looked unfeasibly wide, silhouetted against the light from the window.

The way he stood, hands clasped behind his back, the way he carried himself, the magnificent sword hanging from his hip, everything told her this was a seasoned Knight used to command. To her surprise she felt a wave of excitement. Let me see this Bastard Knight and leave him in no doubt as to my intentions!

“Let us get this over with!” she demanded loudly, addressing his back. She had seized the initiative she thought smugly; attacking and driving forward as she would if she had a sword in her hand.

As he turned sharply towards her, she saw the scar curving under his eye just as Daenerys had described. A glimpse of strong features; a straight nose, prominent cheekbones, a black beard, then his face was in shadow as soon as his back was to the light.

To be continued…
Unable to properly make out his face in the shadows, she concentrated on the rest of him. His armour was black and unembellished; lacking the gaudy prancing stag she had been expected. She had never seen such armour before; the single plate of the chest and the smaller, solid steel components for the shoulders and arms were complimented by hundreds of interlocking lamellar plate pieces to the sides, underarms, joints, anywhere free movement was needed. It would be of tremendous advantage in a close sword fight. She would need to know the source of this fascinating armour.

His hair, black as night, hung to his shoulders. It was scraped back from his forehead, as if wet. As he stalked towards her, she saw it was indeed damp and droplets of water glistened on the shoulders of his armour, as if he had made a very recent effort to make himself presentable. He was anxious to impress. The thought made her smile. She would make it abundantly clear to him that he should not have bothered.

Although she could not see them clearly yet, she was acutely aware of the Knight’s eyes raking her up and down. Let him look. She doubted her short hair and men’s britches would be much to his liking.

Having taken the measure of the rest of him and as he now stood within touching distance, she finally looked to his eyes. She was as tall as most men and used to looking them directly in the eye, but she had to look up to this one, catching her breath as their eyes met for the first time. His were indeed as blue as the clear sky behind him. She felt an odd tightness in her stomach. She must be hungry, for it could not be anything else.

“So you want to get this over with? I am pleased you are so keen Lady Arya. Should I fetch my cloak and carry you off to the Godswood? Or would you prefer I call for a Septon? Either way, we could be married before ‘tis time to eat.”

Her first reaction was surprise - how did he know she was hungry? Her second was indignation. Carry her off to the Godswood?! He was laughing at her! There was a devilish twinkle in his eyes as he grinned down at her. She felt herself blushing to the roots of her hair for having blundered into such a trap.

“I did not mean that!”

His grin drew her gaze to even, white teeth. As the tip of his tongue licked dry lips, her stomach lurched again. Lack of food, she told herself very firmly.

He was transfixed, gawping at her like a green boy, but he couldn’t help himself. His heart was hammering so hard, he thought it might burst from his chest.

With her height and shorn hair, she might have passed for a lanky youth at first glance, but how anyone who looked past her clothes could take her for a man was beyond him. By the Gods, she was beautiful; her skin was golden from the Braavosi sun, a few freckles dusted the bridge of her nose, her lips were full and red and tempting. He could almost taste how sweet her mouth would be. Her face had changed, grown, become a woman’s, although he could still see the wild girl he had known when he was a boy.
She was at once achingly familiar and wildly exotic; her smoky eyes were so like Jon’s he felt he already knew all of her, while the still lucid part of his brain was trying to tell him he didn’t know her at all – that she could be a merciless assassin. But she held no Braavosi sword now and all he could see was the girl he had known, grown into the woman he had dreamed of.

He would have known her anywhere, at anytime, but he saw no hint of recognition in her eyes for him. He was unshaven and filthy from the road. As he dragged his hand over his chin, he realised it was no longer covered with merely stubble. Ten days without shaving had been enough to begin a beard, thick and strong. Perhaps her failure to recognise him was not so unexpected after all.

He could tell she was trying not to stare, to maintain her sense of detachment, but her eyes had raked over him the same way his had to her. The noise of his blood thundering through his veins was so loud that he almost missed her saying “You have not cleaned your armour properly, for there is blood on it.”

They were here to discuss marriage and she was scolding him for the state of his armour?!

As she reached out to touch the steel plate, he caught her hand. Far smaller than his, but with long, strong fingers and a palm callused by the hilt of a sword; a woman’s hand, but also a warrior’s. The first contact his skin on hers sent a stab of lust through him. He wanted more. He wanted his mouth on her and knew that still wouldn’t be enough.

“Do not fret lady. ‘Tis not mine.” His words came out hoarse with lust and longing.

“What makes you think I would care if it was?” She snapped, trying to slide her fingers out of his grasp. He was nowhere near ready to let her go.

Her words were fierce, but he knew they lied. He had felt her shiver as his hand caught hers, heard the hitch in her breath. He saw the blush begin at the top of her tightly buttoned tunic, rise up her graceful neck and warm her cheeks. She was flustered, un-nerved by him and, by the Gods, he liked that. He wanted to make her squirm some more before she realised who he was.

“You concern is touching. Maybe next time you see blood on my armour, you should flutter your eyelashes and try to look a bit pale, in case it is mine Milady.”

He knew, from days of old, that she would not like that. Sure enough, he had to bite back another grin as she hissed “Do not call me that!”

“Why not? ‘Tis true. You are a lady. I am a lord. Come sit with me, while we discuss getting this over with”.

“There is nothing to discu…” He didn’t let her finish, placing his free hand firmly on her back, deliberately stroking it downwards as he guided her towards the nearest chair. Although she stiffened under his touch, he could feel her heat under the layers of clothing; feel the strength of her glide under his palm as she moved. The scent of her hair, mysterious and surprisingly feminine drifted up towards him, sending his pulse racing. Short as her hair was, he wanted to wrap his fingers in it, bury his face and inhale all of her. His heart threatened to punch a hole in his ribcage.

It had been only a few minutes, but already he had touched her more than anyone else had since she was a child and worse, she was letting him. His hand on her back was hardly an intimate touch, yet it unnerved her much more than any direct assault ever had and as soon as the warmth of it was gone she wanted it back. What in seven hells had come over her?

He was beside her, pulling over a chair and sitting in front of her so his huge, armoured knees
touched hers and she could not escape the intensity of his gaze. She had to fight the urge to pull away, to cross her legs, cross her arms, put some barrier between them.

He still had one of her hands in his. How had that happened? She watched, as if frozen, while he entwined their fingers and stroked her palm with his strong, calloused thumb. How could these little touches from him be enough to make her feel so...so flustered? She wasn’t a silly ninny like Sansa, who got all excited by the mere presence of a Knight. But his lord was charming, she could not deny it. She imagined this must have been how King Robert was before the drink and the Lannisters turned him sour. But charming or not, she would not yield; she was better, stronger than that.

Why was her breathing fast and shallow? She caught her next breath and held it...calm as still water...before slowly exhaling.

“Jon has spoken to you of my...ah...wishes.”

Ah yes, his damn wish to wed her. That brought her crashing back to her senses. Those sky blue eyes shone with hope. She had every intention of crushing that hope.

“He has. And I will not marry. Ever.”

She tried to remove her hand from his again, but he held it firm. He had the strength of an ox.

Arya was already beyond the usual marrying age for high born ladies, yet she claimed she would not marry. He could not understand why. Everyone got married; unless they were afflicted with greyscale or some other pox. Although men might choose a solitary existence as a sellsword, a wandering minstrel or the like, ladies always had to take a husband. There was no other option, unless they wanted to depend on their brother’s generosity for ever and live as an old maid. Surely that wasn’t Arya? There was a nagging doubt at the back of his mind though. Were the Faceless Men like the men of The Night’s Watch – sworn never to marry? Was that why she refused to marry - ever? Without a weapon in her hand she was just a girl, albeit it one he had dreamt about for years. He still could not, would not, believe her one of those assassins.

“You must have always known it was inevitable. A lady must always marry to strengthen her family in some way, be it for gold or arms or lands.”

“Ahhh...but I am no lady!” she said smugly.

“Oh, but you are Milady and your brother and King has decided you must marry” he shot back, equally smugly.

“If he thinks he can make me, he’s a bigger fool than you!”

Lord Baratheon purposely ignored the insult and ploughed on, determined to make her see reason. “You have to marry someone!” He maintained stubbornly, “and why not me? Am I not more desirable than most? I am a lord now. The Storm Lands were wealthy once. With proper stewardship and protection they will be so again.”

“Marry you?!” she made a big show of grimacing as if she’d just eaten something nasty and then pretended to gag. “I would sooner marry your...your...” she searched for something suitably insulting “...your horse!”

As her words stung him, an awful thought occurred. He had never contemplated this before in any of his daydreams or grand plans, but perhaps she was one of those strange women who preferred another woman to a husband. Is that why she denied the possibility of ever marrying and insisted on dressing like a man?
“Is it just me you wish to avoid, or is it every man?” he growled, his tone carrying more of a bite than he had intended.

Even as he asked, she narrowed her eyes and glared at him. “I have no need of anyone.”

It was such a ridiculous thing to say, he threw his head back and laughed. That annoyed her even more, as she ground her teeth and struggled harder to remove her hand from his. He held her tighter. She had to bite her lip to stop from crying out. The frustration was far worse than the pain.

“Surely you jest Milady? To claim to need no-one is folly!”

“I certainly have no need of you!”

He was taken aback by the coldness of her words, mirrored in the cold, grey steel of her eyes. He released his hold on her hand so quickly it was as if she had burned him. Her chin was raised, her expression defiant and mocking.

She could tell he was angry. It poured off him in waves. She could see the muscles in his jaw pulse as clenched his teeth tightly. Ha! He would never want a wife who would goad him like this!

Arya watched with satisfaction as he closed his eyes and ran a huge, thick fingered hand through his hair, messing with his earlier attempt to make himself presentable. Several thick, black strands fell over his forehead framing his face and stirring something long forgotten in her. She shivered. It was one of those rare times when the earth seemed to shift beneath your feet and you do not know if what you see is a memory or a glimpse of the future.

He took in a deep breath, held it in, blew it out slowly. Then his eyes snapped open, catching her studying him intently. She hastily looked away.

“ Enough of these games!” His voice was sharp and hard. She imagined this was the way he barked orders to his men. “Do you not recognise me Arya? Did I mean so little to you?” he demanded.

Recognise him? Now the words were spoken, her having to look up at him, the black slash of his eyebrows as they frowned at her, the scalding anger in his blue eyes began to stir a long buried memory. The way he said her name – she had almost thought he had called her “Arry”. An awful realisation was beginning to dawn.

“After everything we went through, do you not know me at all?” he asked, more gently this time. He was finally rewarded with a flicker of recognition.

Arya smoothed her suddenly clammy palms down the front of her britches. He was a man, when she remembered only a boy. But still…

“Gendry?” she breathed hoarsely.

“It’s been many years since I heard that name, but Aye, ’tis me Milady.”

Seven hells it was him. How had she not seen it before? Because she had not thought on him for all these years.

This made everything even worse. How had he come to be Jon’s most trusted captain? Commander of the infamous Bad Company? Lord Baratheon? And he had just asked her to marry him! How in seven hells had that all happened? He was just a stupid bastard boy.

“How did you get here? How do you come to know Jon? You are a Baratheon? Really?”
He laughed; a deep, melodic sound that she hadn’t expected. A man’s laugh. They hadn’t done much laughing while fleeing from King’s Landing, but he’d obviously changed. As had she.

“Still the same Arya. So many questions.”

She wanted to tell him she was not the same Arya but her throat was suddenly and inexplicably too dry and tight to allow her to speak.

“I was a Knight of the Hollow Hill when last we parted.”

All she could manage was a nod in reply.

“Do you remember the Lannister gold cloaks seeking Gendry Waters from Flea Bottom?”

Again, she could only nod.

“They did not stop in their search and it seemed wise at the time to become someone else.”

“Weyland” she managed to mutter.

Again he laughed “Aye, amongst others; The Smith, The Black Knight and now…” he paused as if for effect. She could hear the pride in his voice and see his new found arrogance in the way he leaned further in towards her and grinned as he added triumphantly, “…Lord Baratheon of Storm’s End.”

He was looking at her in that way again that made her shiver. She felt uncomfortable, out of her depth and she didn’t like that. She didn’t like that at all. She was always in control; calm as still water. Yet something was not right, why had Jon not told her?

“Why has Jon been demanding I marry some lord I have never met before?”

He looked uncomfortable for the first time. Ah, she had landed a well aimed blow!

“Jon does not know we are already acquainted, does he?” Arya pressed.

“No.” Gendry admitted, reluctantly.

“Why would you deny we were old travelling companions…friends?”

“Aye, friends” he sighed in a way that made it sound like ‘friends’ wasn’t something he particularly relished.

For the first time he avoided her eyes. In a deep, gruff voice that seemed to be not as certain as it had been before, he said, “I let you leave and I could not find you again. I failed you and I was unsure whether you would want to see me again.”

So this was the reason. He was ashamed, or at least embarrassed. Why need he be? She had always assumed Beric and the rest of The Brotherhood had searched for her, but The Hound had been too clever by far and then there had been the battle at the Twins. Even Brienne of Tarth could not have found her then. Gendry tortured himself for naught. It was all so long ago and she had not allowed herself to think on it since.

“So this was the reason. He was ashamed, or at least embarrassed. Why need he be? She had always assumed Beric and the rest of The Brotherhood had searched for her, but The Hound had been too clever by far and then there had been the battle at the Twins. Even Brienne of Tarth could not have found her then. Gendry tortured himself for naught. It was all so long ago and she had not allowed herself to think on it since.”

“It makes no matter now.” She shrugged.

“It makes no matter now.” She shrugged.

“I am relieved you are not bearing a grudge.” He smiled again and he did, truly, look relieved. “I have thought about you always Arya and I hope…that is…I want…”
She knew what he wanted and she did not want to hear it from him. Maybe she was made of ice after all. She had not thought on him in years. To silence him, she lifted her hand and traced her finger tip along the scar that cut below his left eye. To her surprise he flinched, although her touch had been gentle.

“‘You have changed so much Gendry Waters. How did you get that scar?’”

She had been wondering since she first laid eyes on him.

He stiffened. “‘A woman,’” he said after a pause.

It was no lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth either. Despite the tenderness of her touch, he could not afford to let this line of conversation continue. She had arched one eyebrow in interest and was waiting expectantly for him to say more on it. He needed a diversion. He had seen the glint of steel in her boot as soon as he had sat in front of her. Needle was still to her hand, just as it always had been.

He untwined his fingers from hers and reached up to tuck a stray curl of dark hair behind her ear. It was an old sword fighter’s trick – distract and disarm. He let the fingers of his left hand brush against her cheek, smiling as he heard her catch her breath and saw her eyes flicker shut momentarily. Despite her cold words, the ice lady was flesh and blood after all. If he took her in his arms now, would she melt against him like warm honey?

He stroked his thumb gently from her ear to the corner of her mouth, while he dipped his right hand into her boot and withdrew the knife, holding it up triumphantly before she even realised what he had done.

“‘Stick ’em with the pointy end Arya!’”

He chuckled as he watched first surprise, then disbelief and finally anger cross her face.

She made a grab for her blade, but he had anticipated that. He held it up high and behind, well out of her reach.

“Give…me…my…Needle…back” she gritted out through clenched teeth.

“I will, in return for a kiss” he teased, hoping he might salvage something from the meeting yet. Aye, a kiss from a riled Lady Arya would do very nicely. She looked even more appealing when her blood was up, flushed and eyes flashing with indignation.

Arya was furious. She would have kicked him, but he wore full armour and she would have only broken her foot. How dare he trick her like that and, like a silly little fool, she had fallen for it. What would the Kindly Man make of her weakness? She hadn’t even wanted Gendry to kiss her and yet she had closed her eyes for a moment and given him his opportunity to disarm and humiliate her. If she was ever going to kiss anyone, it would absolutely, never, ever be him.

“You have not changed at all! I always knew you were stupid and a bastard! Now I know you are a thief too! I am glad I had not thought on you in five years. And I do not want to have to think on you in the next five!”

The look of shock on his face as her words stung him only drove her on, “And you stink!” she spat, for good measure.

He stood up quickly, towering over her and slammed Needle flat onto the nearest table with the palm of his hand. His blue eyes had turned to frost.
“And I had forgotten that you never had any manners or a sense of humour!”

Ignoring him, she quickly grabbed Needle, secreting it safely back in her boot.

He had had enough. Her scorn had turned the blood in his veins to ice. The ever-present bastard’s voice in his head mocked him – you expected her to just fall into your arms? And she hasn’t thought about you in years you fool. She is a highborn lady, sister to the King, and you will always be a bastard, no matter how high you think you have climbed.

This was certainly not how he had imagined their reunion ending, but then he was a fool right enough.

He wasn’t even aware of Nymeria at his side until he attempted to take a step towards the door and his leg was met by an immoveable object. The Direwolf rubbed her flank against the armour of his thigh and hip. No doubt it provided a good, hard scratching surface. His fingers automatically trailed through the warm fur. As Nymeria growled contentedly, he felt the anger that had been pouring off him moments ago dissipate.

His thoughts still churned as he absentmindedly scratched behind the wolf’s ear and was again rewarded with that almost purr of satisfaction. Why could Arya not react to him that way? He had almost thought he had her when he caressed her cheek. She had momentarily lost control and relaxed into him, closing her eyes and uttering a faint, but utterly beguiling, sigh. But then he had ruined it all by taking Needle from her. He realised with a sudden rush of guilt that he had shamed the Master Swordsman, perhaps even shamed a Faceless Man. He had managed to trick her and take her blade from her easily. ‘Twould be a hard lesson for her as he had used her emotions against her.

Distract and disarm. He had momentarily forgotten the last, and most important, part of that triangle - Destroy.


He had certainly destroyed any affection she might have had for him.

He suddenly ached with tiredness and regret. He made a move again for the door. Yet again Nymeria was in his way, preventing his escape. The damned wolf had more sense than he did. He could not leave it like this.

“I apologise Milady, it was a poor jape. Forgive me.” He bowed stiffly to Arya.

She seemed in no mood for an apology, keeping herself turned away from him, her hands balled into angry fists. He supposed anger was better than tears. He wondered if she ever let herself cry.

While their meeting has not gone as he had hoped, there was no doubting the strength of his feeling for her. These years apart had only served to cement his resolve. There was no one for him but her and whether she knew it or not, she wanted him too. He had seen a glimpse of desire when his hand had caressed her face. But then he had destroyed it before it had properly begun. Perhaps she had never had a man touch her like that before? She dressed like no lady and invited no attention from the opposite sex; in fact she actively discouraged it. It began to dawn on him that she had most likely never even been kissed before. Perhaps what he had done in jest, meant rather more to her than he thought.

In one matter however, she was correct; he undoubtedly did stink like a pig. He would rid himself of his armour and the dirt of the road and ponder his battle plan, for he had no doubt he would be a battle to win her hand. This was one battle he would not allow himself to loose.
“Until we meet again Milady” He said tightly, turning on is heel.

Finally Nymeria let him go. He stomped out of the Solar before she had a chance to call him stupid, bastard or thief again.

-o-

Arya was seething with anger, but she didn’t know if it should be directed at him, or at herself. She found herself muttering “stupid bullheaded bastard boy” under her breath as she and Nymeria watched him stalk away. Those words stirred another, long forgotten, memory. She was back at The Peach. She was a child again and he was still just a boy - not the grown man who had asked for a kiss mere moments ago.

She had called him those names before when he protected her from a drunken letch. He had tried to help her then and all she had done was scoff at him for pretending to be her brother when she should have thanked him. He had been furious. During all these years, she had never given a thought as to why it had riled him so. She had never understood until now.

Long since buried, his words now came back to haunt her,

"I'm too bloody lowborn to be kin to M'lady high."

She felt ill. He was raised as high as her now. If she was a true friend, would she not have congratulated him on claiming his father’s name and his succession to the Lordship of the Stormlands - just reward for the part he played in her brother’s victory?

Seven hells – even Nymeria was looking at her reproachfully. Her Direwolf had never let anyone touch her like that before and then Nymeria had blocked his passage, as if she hadn’t wanted to let him go. His bloody charm obviously worked on Direwolves too.

Perhaps Daenerys and Sam were right. She had to marry someone if she wanted to stay here; Jon had made that plain enough. Gendry had tried to help her again today by offering to marry her and what had she just done? Poured scorn on his offer, scoffed at him at every opportunity and pointed out his failings.

She felt ashamed. He was as much of a friend as she had ever had. He had offered for her hand and she had laughed in his face. She almost ran after him to beg his forgiveness, but her pride held her back. She was a lone wolf and a wolf would not beg. Best to let both of their bloods cool now, as one of them might do or say something more that they regretted. From the pounding of her heart and the tightness in her chest, she suspected it may be her.

Arya let him go and she couldn’t have said how much time passed before she walked out of the solar, still utterly distracted by what had happened between them.

She was immediately confronted by a wall of black crows. There were four of them now; perhaps the bloody things were breeding. Her eyes flicked to their hands, resting on the hilts of their swords. What had happened to their annoyingly cheery greetings?

“Let me by.” She demanded.

The biggest crow shook his head. “We are to escort you back to your chambers Lady Arya.”

“You will do no such thing. I go where I please.”

“No longer. By order of King Jon.”
Black gloved hands tightened on sword hilts. The big one with the gruff voice continued, “You are to stay in your chambers until meal time when your presence is requested in the Great Hall. If you refuse to attend, you are to eat alone in your chambers and remain there until King Jon attends you on the morrow.”

So Jon was tightening the screws. If she would not co-operate, he would deny her freedom. She could not, would not tolerate that.

“You may escort me to Lady Sansa’s chambers instead.”

The four of them looked at each other, unsure. Bloody crows. They were prepared to die for a dream, but confront them with anything to do with ladies and they crumbled.

“Unless King Jon expects me to attend dinner in britches, which we all know he does not, I will need to borrow a dress.”

She watched in smug satisfaction as the crows reluctantly acquiesced to her demand.

Jon had made the first mistake in this battle of wills. He had underestimated his opponent.

Chapter End Notes

Coming next Friday…Dresses and duels.

Hope you enjoyed that. Am I forgiven for the previous cliff-hanger?
Two sisters, two dresses

To say Sansa was surprised to see Arya was understatement. That she was flanked by two scowling crows was even more of a surprise.

“Right boys. You can wait out here…unless you fancy helping me try on dresses?!”

Arya pushed past them into Sansa’s chamber, not in least surprised that the crows seemed absolutely dumbstruck by Sansa’s beauty. It had always been the way.

Even Arya had to admit her sister looked particularly stunning at that moment, having been caught unawares by their visit. Her auburn hair, normally so carefully and tightly braided, cascaded loosely around her shoulders, falling to her breasts in a shimmering curtain of burnished copper. Her simple green dress, devoid of all the decoration expected at court, only served to emphasise her perfect figure; full breasts, slim waist and curving hips.

As Arya slammed the door shut in the crow’s faces, she suspected there was a real danger of their lolling tongues becoming trapped in the door.

“Dear sister, I admit I am surprised to see you here.”

Arya threw herself in the nearest chair. “And I admit I am surprised to be here. Particularly as ‘tis to borrow a dress.”

“A dress?”

“A dress.” Arya confirmed coolly, as if borrowing a dress from her sister was an everyday occurrence.

Arya picked up an apple from the fruit basket on the table and crunched into it. Strange, she had thought herself so hungry earlier, when in Jon’s solar, but now she had no appetite at all. She tossed the apple back into the bowl, never minding the fact that a bite was out of it. Despite the famine Jon insisted was looming over them all, there was a plentiful supply of food in The Red Keep.

“Of course you may borrow a dress. You may have any one you wish. But why?”

“Jon has sent two crows to watch me. He’s decided that I can’t leave my chambers unless ‘tis to attend his bloody feast.”

“And you need a dress to attend the feast?”

“Correct.”

“But, you have never bothered attending dinner in the Great Hall before. Why now?”

“Because I could have gone before if I’d wanted and I didn’t. Now he tells me I have to stay in my chambers, so now I want to go.”

“Oh, I see,” Sansa muttered. In truth, she did not see at all. It sounded as if her sister was simply being difficult, but Sansa had given up trying to understand the whys and wherefores of her little sister’s contrary behaviour when they were children. Sansa had found it easier just to pretend to
understand then and she saw no reason to try to work out what was going on in Arya’s head now.

“By the Gods, your room smells nice,” Arya sniffed, sitting up from her slouch and looking around. When she looked to the window, the reason was obvious. Dozen of beautiful plants and cut flowers in a variety of pots and vases, each one more beautifully decorated than the last, filled the sills and covered the floor by the windows. It truly was an indoor garden.

Arya hopped up to admire them more closely. She could hardly put a name to any of them, but as neither Winterfell nor Braavos was renowned for its produce, ‘twas hardly surprising. She did recognise the tiny purple blossoms on wild mountain thyme from The North and large white lilies from warmer climes. There were miniature sculpted trees with leaves of the glossiest green, every colour of rose imaginable and at least a dozen other varieties of flowers that Arya couldn’t begin to name.

As Arya trailed her fingers over the blooms, different fragrances drifted up towards her. She thought each one more wonderful than the last.

“I had no idea you were a gardener,” Arya murmured, feeling rather overawed. Was there no end to Sansa’s accomplishments?

“Alas, I can take no credit for this,” Sansa said with a wistful smile, “they are all gifts from Highgarden.”

Ah! Now Arya was beginning to understand. “A tribute from a certain Tyrell Lord perhaps?”

Sansa blushed. “Lord Willas says he wishes me to have something beautiful to look at.”

Arya rolled her eyes. She had no doubt it was Willas Tyrell who wished to have something beautiful of his own to look at. Someone beautiful, if truth be told. Arya didn’t want to know any more.

“So I need a dress…”

“Of course. You may take your pick.” Sansa opened one of her closet doors to reveal a row of dresses, their colours almost as varied as those of the flowers at her window. “We are not dissimilar in height and I can easily make any adjustments you wish.”

“I shall wish none. I don’t care what it looks like. I just need a dress. Any dress.”

Sansa sighed. She wasn’t going to argue. “Then which do you prefer?” she asked, pulling out a scarlet one. It was of the finest silk and would suit Arya’s dark colouring perfectly. Sansa had never worn it. The red clashed with her hair, but if truth be told, that was not the reason it had been ignored. It had been a gift from a terrible man. A man she would rather never think on again. She should have burned the dress years before, but it was far too fine to destroy, unlike the man whose gift it had been.

“Urgh. No.” Arya wrinkled her nose and pulled a face. “I shall have the grey one.”

Sansa shook her head. They grey was a favourite of Sansa’s as it glinted like steel against the warm auburn of her hair. On Arya, with her dark hair and grey eyes, it would look drab and plain.

“I think you should try the red sister. It will suit you so much better and…”

“The grey.”

Again, Sansa could not be bothered to argue. With a sigh of resignation, she took the grey dress from
her closet.

Arya already had her back turned towards Sansa, her tunic off and was removing her undershirt. Sansa looked up just in time to see layers and layers of white cloth tightly bound around Arya’s torso, before they disappeared under the dress. After a bit of wriggling, Arya turned around triumphantly. “There, ’tis fine.”

’Twas anything but fine. As Sansa had suspected, the dress drained every bit of colour from her sister. If Arya stood still in front of a grey stone wall, she might disappear altogether. But Sansa did not let her true thoughts show on her face. She had spent her life hiding everything inside. So much so, that now she sometimes didn’t know if what she really thought was any different than the bland platitudes and half truths that spilled so easily from her mouth.

“It will do, I suppose. Come here so I can adjust the bodice and lace you up.”

Arya, being obliging for once, walked over with the most unladylike gait. Sansa suspected her sister was putting on an act especially to irritate her, as Arya usually moved with the easy grace of a cat.

“A lady should glide when she walks Arya, not roll like a sailor.”

“Ha! But I am no lady…” Arya started to say, then changing her mind, muttered “…oh never mind.” It seemed to Sansa there was another part of that conversation she had missed.

“It might help if you take off your britches and boots off.”

“Why?” Arya asked, surprised, “No-one can see them under this.”

“But…oh…never mind. Do what you like! You always did.”

“I did not!”

“Did so!”

Arya gritted her teeth and snarled at Sansa. Sansa placed her elegant hands on her perfectly curved hips and tossed her long, auburn hair so it settled beautifully over one shoulder. Then she looked disdainfully at her younger sister.

“Why don’t you just throw another orange at my face and be done with it? Be sure to give me my dress back first though!”

Arya was sorely tempted to do just that, but she needed the bloody dress if she wanted to thwart Jon and she could think of nowhere else to get another at such short notice. She certainly didn’t want to have to go to a dress shop. Seven hells! She would rather chew off her own hand!

“All right. Truce.” Arya muttered reluctantly. “But only because I need the dress.”

“Take the stupid dress. You look awful in it. It doesn’t fit, the colour doesn’t suit you at all and that hideous binding you are wearing is poking out the top. I don’t know what you think you are doing, but you will impress no-one in that!”

“Who says I want to impress anyone?! I just need a dress to wear to the bloody feast. Nobody will care what I look like and even if they did I wouldn’t care!”

“Suit yourself then, for you will suit no-one else!”

“Fine!” Arya yelled.
“’Tis fine for me then too!” Sansa yelled back.

There was a tentative knock at the door. Both sisters turned in unison to the door and yelled “What?!” at exactly the same time. They might have found it funny if they had not both been so angry.

“Err…ladies…is all well?” The biggest crow looked tentatively around the side of the door, as if he were using it as a shield. Perhaps he had heard the comment about oranges being thrown and suspected he might be the target for the next one.

“Yes it is!” Arya snapped first. “What’s your name crow?”

“Grenn…my…ah…ladies.”

“Seeing as you are here Grenn, fasten this dress up for me.” Arya turned her back to the door, presenting him with the unlaced dress and glaring directly at Sansa, daring her to demand the return of the dress now.

The crow looked as if he had been asked to drown his own Grandmother.

“Hurry up man. What are you waiting for?” Arya snapped over her shoulder.

The crow stumbled in. He looked from Lady Sansa to the laces and back to Lady Sansa, his eyes wide and pleading.

“Well, I’m not helping her!” Sansa said, with a determined shake of her auburn hair.

Grenn slowly and very reluctantly took the laces in his hands. His adam’s apple bobbed repeatedly as he swallowed, looked at the laces in his shovel hands and swallowed again.

“Forgive me ladies.” He muttered, letting the laces slip through his fingers, “But I know not how. I have never…I have never…”

“Ooooooh!” Arya stamped her foot in frustration. “Bloody crows. We know you have never had a woman, but surely you must have laced your mother’s or your sister’s or someone’s dress before?!”

The bewildered crow shook his head miserably.

“Seven buggering hells. Away with you then!”

Grenn looked as if he had never been so pleased to be ordered out of a room in his life.

Arya sighed deeply. Then, fixing a forced, contrite smile on her face pleaded, “Please will you help me sister?”

“Only if you try the red dress on first sister.” Sansa answered sweetly.

“Fine” Arya muttered through gritted teeth.

So the grey dress was discarded and the red pulled over Arya’s head. Sansa dragged her sister by the hand over to a full length mirror.

“Stand here while I lace you and we can talk as sisters should.”

Arya groaned and rolled her eyes.
“See Arya, you are the bigger sister now,” Sansa smiled, standing behind her sister. “Twas true, although the difference was not much, “and you could be very beautiful if you had a care.”

Facing the mirror, Arya pulled the most grotesque face she could. Sansa, catching sight of Arya’s reflection, pulled the laces as hard as she could, making Arya yelp in pain.

“Behave sweet sister, or I shall leave you in a predicament.” Sansa tugged again.

“Seven hells, how do you breath?” Arya gasped.

“These dresses are not made for sword fighting or chasing cats Arya.”

Tug. Yelp.

“They are made for showing your figure, poise and elegance. And this would fit much better if you removed that ugly binding.”

“I won’t.”

“Then this will need to be even tighter.”

An even harder tug. A louder yelp.

“See Arya how it shapes your waist?”

Arya did see, but she wasn’t going to admit it.

“See how the scarlet silk brings out the red of your lips, makes your eyes look bright and your hair shine?” Sansa smiled approvingly.

The dress was pretty. Pity about the rest Arya though, self consciously running a hand through her unbrushed hair.

“Your hair is shorter at one side than the other sister.” Sansa observed wryly.

Arya had never noticed before, but now Sansa pointed it out, ‘twas obvious. Arya cut it herself, but only when it got in her eyes and annoyed her too much.

“Will you let me fix it for you? And I could apply a little kohl to your eyes and stain to your lips. You would have the men falling at your feet.”

Arya narrowed her eyes at Sansa in the mirror, certain her sister was going to start laughing at the joke any second, only she didn’t. Instead Sansa met Arya’s eyes in the mirror. She looked serious, genuine, as if she had truly meant every word. That only made Arya feel more uncomfortable. She would much prefer that Sansa made jokes and teased her about her appearance as she used to, rather than pretend her plain little sister could ever be anything other than Arya horseface.

“The only men I want falling at my feet are the ones who have felt the sharp end of my sword.” Arya muttered.

“Not even one recently made lord, who I hear has offered for your hand?” Sansa probed, her blue eyes studying Arya intently.

“Certainly not! Never! None of them and certainly not him!”

“‘Tis a pity then, as I hear he is quite a catch and our cousin desires it.” Sansa sighed wistfully,
amused by the vehemence of Arya’s denial.

“Our cousin?” Arya wondered.

“King Jon.”

“He is our brother! ‘Tis the way we were raised and he will always be brother to my mind.”

“You always were his favourite.”

“Pah! Well it does not seem so now. He is adamant that I wed one of his lords.”

“You should be grateful if he has given you a choice Arya.” Sansa said with a sorrowful smile.

Before she saw her sister’s pained expression, Arya had never given a second thought as to what Jon had asked of Sansa.

“Is he forcing you into marriage too?” Arya demanded, full of righteous indignation on Sansa’s behalf.

“Not yet, but it will come.” Sansa sighed wearily, “I have been traded by men all my life, ‘twould be no different now.”

“But what of this Lord Tyrell who showers you with such pretty flowers?”

“He is all that stands between King’s Landing and starvation Arya. Jon has bid me do anything that needs be done in order to keep Willas here and keep the supply carts rolling from Highgarden.”

“Anything.” Arya echoed, wondering exactly what Jon had meant by that.


Still looking in the mirror, Arya watched Sansa’s hand reach for hers. Arya felt the softest fingers brush against hers before Sansa squeezed her hand gently.

“I am glad you are returned Arya, for I have felt so adrift.”

Never had they felt closer. Adrift. Arya knew exactly what her sister meant; anchorless, rootless, moving but with no purpose. The only purpose Arya had for all these years was revenge. The Kindly Man expected her to give up the past, but she hadn’t, she couldn’t. She had held her ever present, burning need for revenge tightly, deep inside herself. All Arya had was her revenge. She wondered what Sansa had, as she squeezed her sister’s hand in return.

Sansa’s eyes shone with unshed tears. “Do you think we shall ever see Winterfell again?” Sansa whispered, her voice thick with longing.

“Yes.” Said Arya firmly. “We shall. Together.” And as easily as that, a promise was made and a bond at last formed between them.

“Then I shall pray it will come soon.” Sansa said, with a faint smile, “And meantime sister, let me help you. We have our own battles to fight. We may not fight out there on the battlefield as the men do, but we fight all the same. Now let me look at your hair…”

At that moment, Arya could have refused her sister nothing. She did not even complain when Sansa sent one of the crows to call for a bath.
While they waited on the maids to bring buckets of steaming water to fill the metal bath, Sansa made Arya strip off her boots and britches and layers of bandages.

Generally, Arya avoided looking in mirrors. To see herself wear another face was a shocking thing she had never become used to. Sometimes she would forget, for she always felt the same inside. Then a careless glance in a mirror, a reflection of an alien face staring back, was enough to send her mind spinning. So Arya avoided mirrors, but Sansa had her standing naked in front of a full length one now.

Sansa had helped unravel yard after yard of material from Arya’s torso, shaking her head at the read welts on Arya’s skin left from the tight bandages.

Arya found the crisscross pattern of angry marks reflected in the mirror just as unsettling as seeing a stranger’s face. She self consciously rubbed at her skin to force blood back into the bound areas.

“Are you so determined to deny you are a woman that you torment your flesh?” Sansa asked reproachfully. “We woman are made to suffer enough without inflicting it upon ourselves.”

Arya did not want to look in the mirror any more, for she did not like what she saw. She liked the hard, lean parts of her body and not the soft, vulnerable parts. As soon as the bath was ready, she all but jumped in.

Sansa insisted upon sprinkling the steaming hot water with a variety of fresh rose petals from her window. Arya had to admit it was wonderfully relaxing soaking in the tub, enveloped in a cloud of rose scented steam, while Sansa ran her hands through her hair, gently twisting it this way and that.

“I wish we had been closer when we were younger Arya. All I remember of us is shouting and arguing and over such silly things.”

“Well, they didn’t seem silly at the time” Arya muttered, closing her eyes, distantly recalling last time they had argued; over Mycah and Joffrey and Nymeria’s sister Lady. If it had not been the last time, it had certainly been the worst. Unbidden, an image of Mycah appeared behind her eyelids. He was young still and innocent in her mind. Frozen in time, not grown older and bitter like the rest of them.

Arya did not let herself think of him often. When she did, like now, a lump came to her throat and she fought it down. Faceless men were not prey to the emotions of the flesh that weakened lesser mortals. She was stone, she was blood of the wolf, assassin, faceless and she could sell her skills to whomever paid most. Yet, despite all her training and all her hardness, she could have cried when she remembered Mycah, who had died only because he was her friend.

Her work was not yet done. The Hound had to pay. Arya would have her vengeance. Every name on her list obliterated from the face of the earth. Nothing and no-one would prevent her or divert her from her task.

Arya listened to Sansa hum beside her and felt her sister’s gentle fingers in her hair. For a long time Arya had been angry at Sansa, she had been angry at everyone. But it had not been Sansa who had ridden down an unarmed boy. Sandor Clegane would pay the debt in kind and soon.

Arya’s reverie was interrupted by Sansa’s happy chattering, “In Volantis ‘tis too hot for the women to wear their hair long and I have seen women from there with hair cut short in an attractive way. I would do that for you sister.”

Arya began to half heartedly protest, but Sansa pointed out that at least she would not leave it lopsided. Arya reluctantly agreed. It did not matter much. Nothing did until her task was done, her
Sansa bid her hang her head over the back of the bath as she got to work with small, sharp scissors. Arya had never allowed herself to suffer anything like this since Acorn Hall when that lady… Smallwood wasn’t it? had washed and dressed her and cut her hair. Arya had been forced to wear Lady Smallwood’s daughter’s dress. The girl had been sent away to wait out the war with some Septa. Arya had even been given the dead son’s clothes to wear as they left. Arya found herself wondering if Lady Smallwood’s daughter had survived the war and what had become of the Lady herself. Arya hoped she was reunited with her daughter and happy, for Lady Smallwood had been kind. A smile came unexpectedly to her lips.

The Brotherhood had been welcomed warmly at Acorn Hall as Lady Smallwood had once been a lover of Tom Sevenstrings. Arya had a much better idea now of what that entailed than she had at the time and wondered if Lady Smallwood and Tom had renewed their acquaintance that night, while her husband was away fighting. Arya supposed she would never know and she had no idea why it bothered her now.

‘Twas the tune Sansa hummed as her deft fingers stroked and worked on her hair, that made Arya think of Tom Sevenstrings and the rest of The Brotherhood. And that brought her thoughts back to Gendry. He had changed so much, ‘twas no wonder she had not recognised him. She had told him he smelled back then too, but it hadn’t stopped her from rolling around on the floor of the Acorn Hall smithy with him as he tried to tickle her. She screwed her eyes tight shut, grimacing at the memory. Why did it make her squirm now? The uncomfortable truth was that she would not mind finding out how it would be to roll around the floor with him now. She could easily bring to mind the feel the warm of his hand on her back, stroking her cheek, the intensity of his stare that could make her blood run both hot and cold at the same time. It would not be so hard to give her body to a man like that. But he wanted a wife and she could not give him that.

“What is that tune you hum?” Arya asked her sister, in order to distract herself from thoughts she could not allow herself to have about Gendry.

“I forget the name, but it is a sad tale of a lord and his lady. He wants to keep her safe and warm and guard her with his sword, but she wants no such thing and says she would rather sleep in the forest or some equally awful place than in his featherbed. ‘Tis much too romantic for you Arya. You wouldn’t like it at all.”

“I wouldn’t like it at all.” Arya repeated automatically, before Sansa pushed her head forward and promptly poured a jug of cold water over it.

Arya cursed with the shock of it, then reached up to feel how much of her hair had been taken off, but Sansa squealed “Stop!” Arya hovered her hand in mid air.

“Oh, don’t touch it yet Arya. Please let me finish it all and then we can have a grand unveiling!” Sansa clapped her hands together in delight. Arya was too far down the road to retreat now. She might as well give in with good grace.

As Arya towelled herself dry, Sansa held up and cast aside various small clothes and shifts and petticoats until she found a combination to her liking. Then she made Arya put it all on. Arya realised with some amusement that she was being used as a full size doll by her sister to be dressed and decorated in accordance with Sansa’s wishes. For the decoration was next.

She was led to chair away from the mirror and sat down in her small clothes of the finest silk, while Sansa applied creams and potions to her face. Everything had an exotic sounding name that Arya never bothered to listen to. However it seemed to make Sansa happy to name and explain the use of
everything. Arya got the distinct impression that Sansa was expecting her to pay attention and memorise the names and uses of these potions. Arya had no intention of doing so, but she would not tell her sister that. To do so would only start another argument.

Whenever Arya opened her mouth to try and protest that it was too much, there was no point and she would be taking it all off again anyway, she was silenced by Sansa’s tut-tuts and complaints that all her good work would be undone if Arya did not sit still.

Finally, just as Arya was nodding off to sleep, Sansa proclaimed her ‘done’.

Then came the dress. Arya knew Sansa would insist on the red, but she put up a final, half hearted argument for the grey anyway. As expected, she lost that argument.

The laces of the red dress were tied tightly. A ruby ring was forced onto Arya’s finger, and her hair was brushed and smoothed.

Sansa finally presented her sister to the mirror with a flourish and an excited “Tah-dah!”

For perhaps the first time in her life, Arya was lost for words.

Chapter End Notes

Once again I was too ambitious with what I thought I could accomplish in a week, particularly as this was a short week, the previous chapter taking me until last Sunday to finish. So I am afraid you will just have to wait until next Friday to find out what Gendry thinks of Sansa’s efforts. I’ll make sure it is worth waiting for!
Arya had never felt so irritated by so many people, in such a short space of time and for such a stupid reason in all her life.

She was lined up with a gaggle of other ladies, waiting to make a grand entrance into The Great Hall. As much as she tried to ignore their excited twittering, these shrill ladies invaded her thoughts, setting her teeth on edge and shredding her already thinly stretched patience. Every time she closed her eyes, took a breath and started reciting Swift as a deer, quiet as a shadow… she would hear the word ‘Baratheon’ mentioned and then some idiot female would giggle. Arya would curse under her breath and have to begin again.

Daenerys and Sansa had tried to engage her in conversation, but she’d had enough talk of dresses and lords for today. Indeed, with every passing minute, she was regretting having let Sansa talk her into any of this.

Her own image staring back at her from Sansa’s mirror still burned behind her eyelids. To her surprise, her sister had cut her hair even shorter, but in the sleek Volantis style. Sansa had darkened her eyelids and lashes with kohl. A hint of red salve on her lips and cheeks made her look flushed. And then there was that red dress.

Arya had spent years trying to be invisible, to disappear, in order to strike when least expected. But not now. There was only one reason to wear a dress like this – to attract attention. Male attention. It was the most uncomfortable of feelings. Why could Sansa not have let her wear the grey dress? Why could she not have been content to stay in her room?

She was here now and she had to deal with it. As Arya had been trained to do, she immediately assessed and dismissed all of the assembled ladies as no threat at all. All except one; the lady immediately to her left. She was silent, but had cunning brown eyes that watched everything. Her clothes and jewels proclaimed her to be a lady of the highest order. Older than both Sansa and The Queen, she exuded a confidence and sophistication that left Arya in doubt this lady considered herself to be superior to them all.

To Arya’s relief, she made no attempt to engage in conversation, seeming content to watch and asses everyone else in the line as Arya had done.

Finally, Lord Varys gave the order to go. The door to the Great Hall was opened. Daenerys stepped through and the parade began.

Queen Daenerys was, naturally, first, followed by Sansa and Arya as ‘sisters’ to King Jon. The red dress was tight and made it difficult to breathe, much less walk. Arya felt ridiculously exposed, although, in truth, more of her was covered than usual. The hem of the dress reached to her toes and the sleeves to her wrists, but it was her chest that was bare to the world, or at least that’s what it felt like. Bits of her that had never seen the light of day before were pushed up and on show in a way that made Arya blush.

Worryingly, Sansa’s dress fitted rather too well. Arya told herself it was because her shoulders were wider, her back broader. She had never given her breasts much thought before, except to bind them and curse that she had them at all. Now, every time she looked down, she could think of little else.
She hoped ‘twould be only her thinking like that tonight.

As the Ladies made their way into The Great Hall, the men who had been there for some time already, stood up, as was custom.

Although Arya felt a thousand pairs of eyes on her, she knew there was one blue set that followed her every move. She had never been more certain of anything in her life. Arya fought the urge to look up, knowing her eyes would find his. She would not do it. Besides, if she didn’t keep her eyes fixed on her feet, she would no doubt step on the hem of her own dress, or worse Sansa’s. That would be typical; she would trip and fall flat on her face in this stupid dress right in front of everyone. She did however manage to look up long enough to scowl and stick her tongue out at Jon. He only looked amused by it, raising one eyebrow at her, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Seven hells, but he was infuriating!

Then it happened.

Daenerys stopped beside Jon. Sansa took a few steps further and stopped between Aegon and another lord. Then there was Gendry, his hand on the back of the empty chair Arya was to sit on. He was clean shaven and much more the boy again she had known, grinning expectantly towards her. His eyes raked over her and her stupid red dress, from the top of her head to the tip of her toes and back again. ‘Twas obvious he liked what he saw.

She looked from his face, to his hand resting on the back of her chair. It was such a simple gesture but it said everything. Of possession. She would sit beside him and he would pour her wine. His hand would brush against hers, accidentally at first, but then he would become bolder and take her hand in his. Perhaps he would make her laugh, his blue eyes twinkling as they shared some tale from their past and her blood would run hot and cold all at the same time. He would compliment her on her hair as an excuse to touch it, stroke her face and she would close her eyes again and imagine where it might end. But she knew where it would end. She knew what he wanted and she could not give it to him. She could not do it. How could she think of the future when the past was not laid to rest?

“I cannot sit there.”

Arya grabbed the back of the chair nearest to her as a drowning man might grab at a rope. The sophisticated lady behind, the one with the cunning eyes, bumped into her, muttering a sailor’s curse under her breath.

Varys glared at Arya and jabbed a fat finger towards the chair claimed by Gendry’s hand. She shook her head and turned away, catching the perplexed and then annoyed look on Gendry’s face as she did. The lady with the cunning brown eyes was ushered forwards to the empty seat. Arya was aware of Gendry nodding politely to the lady, but his reproachful eyes remained fixed on her.

Arya found herself clutching the back of the chair between Sam and Tyrion Lannister, who were currently exchanging puzzled glances.

“‘Tis an unexpected pleasure Lady Stark.” Tyrion bowed low. Arya noticed he was standing on a box, for otherwise he would not have been able to see over the table. A plump cushion was placed on his chair, ready to raise his golden Lannister arse to an acceptable height.

“You’re not supposed to be sitting here!” Sam muttered out of the side of his mouth. “We’re supposed to get Margaery Tyrell and you’re supposed to sit beside you-know-who.”

“No I do not know who and I am perfectly happy here, thank you Master Hand.” Arya said, trying
to sound regal and above reproach like Queen Daenerys.

Tyrion winked at Sam. “I am sure Sam and I are safer with you Lady Arya. Perhaps I should be more specific… our cocks need no longer fear for their safety tonight.”

“Our cocks might be safe Tyrion, but I fear our heads are in mortal danger of losing our bodies courtesy of Lord Baratheon’s sword.”

Tyrion and Arya followed Sam’s gaze. Sure enough, if looks could kill, Sam and Tyrion would already be welcomed into The Stranger’s arms.

“What business is it of his where I sit?” Arya scowled. From further down the table, Gendry scowled back.

“Ah, you are but an innocent child,” Tyrion sighed “You have much to learn of the ways of court my dear. I hear Lord Varys toiled day and night for all eternity over this seating plan.”

Sam and Tyrion laughed heartily. Arya did not see the humour. As Daenerys was now sitting down, she decided she’d better sit also, before Varys changed his mind and made her sit beside Gendry after all, in accordance with his wretched seating plan.

Once Sam and Tyrion were similarly settled (Tyrion on his cushion) Arya asked them why their cocks were not safe from Margaery Tyrell. She asked in a loud whisper as an old lady was sat to Tyrion’s other side. Arya did not wish to alarm such a frail old lady her with such an improper conversation. Had she known then, that the frail old lady was Lady Oleena Redwyne, grandmother to Lady Tyrell, Arya would have not bothered to hold her tongue.

“I hear your sister-in-law is insatiable and not too fussy either, as long as the cock is attached to a wealthy lord, eh Tyrion?” Sam waggled his eyebrows at Arya and Tyrion.

Tyrion showed no sign of being bothered by Sam’s barbed comments and was quick to retort, “First, she is hardly my sister-in-law and second, I am sure you would know better than I Master Hand. I hear power, as well as wealth, are the aphrodisiacs the lady craves.”

Sam blushed scarlet.

Arya craned her neck around Sam’s bulk to catch a glimpse of this insatiable lady.

Arya could not see Lady Tyrell’s face, as she was turned entirely towards Gendry, but Arya could see Margaery stretch out one pale, elegant hand to cover Gendry’s. He did not remove his. The insatiable, not too fussy, Lady Tyrell then tossed her head, sending her chestnut main tumbling over her shoulder as she leaned in towards Gendry, her interest and intent obvious.

“She is too old for him and surely she must already be married!” Arya huffed, not liking what she saw.

“Aye, but look to her husband, my nephew.” Tyrion nodded towards a podgy boy of about twelve, who still had soft, childish features and a rather simple expression on his round face. “You understand why she seeks her pleasure elsewhere?”

Margaery Tyrell sought pleasure from Gendry?! How dare she! And there it was; jealousy, like a stab in her heart.

“If he is foolish enough to bed another man’s wife, then she is welcome to him!”
Sam and Tyrion exchanged knowing smirks behind Arya’s back.

As the realm now had two Kings and one Queen, Sam and Tyrion attempted to explain to Arya what a nightmare the seating arrangements had become. Despite pretending not to care, Arya was secretly fascinated to hear how Varys had pointed out to Aegon that, with Jon sat beside his Queen, Aegon might be seen to be the second King if he sat to Jon’s right. As soon as it had been mentioned by Varys, Aegon seized upon the issue and so the whole, age-old, established seating order had to be rewritten. Now Queen Daenerys sat in the centre of the long table, with Jon and Aegon on either side. Thereafter the arrangement was lady, lord, lady and so on, in decreasing order of seniority.

To say Arya felt conspicuous amongst such illustrious company was an understatement. She felt as if she was the newest attraction at a freak show. It seemed as if all eyes were on her and, if they weren’t actually looking at her, Arya was sure they were gossiping about her. If she could have possibly got up and walked away she would have, but to do so would probably annoy Jon so much he might suggest chaining her to her room next. So she sat and tried to keep her elbows in and her knees together as she looked at the bewildering array of cups and glasses, knives and forks in front of her.

She couldn’t help imagining Septa Mordane rubbing her hands together in glee as Arya desperately tried to recall everything the old Septa had tried to teach her and Arya had been so determined not to learn.

For the first time in her life, Arya found herself wishing she had paid more attention. She could not see Sansa in order to copy what she did, which had been Arya’s usual way of muddling through such situations when they had been younger. Much younger. She groaned inwardly. She would be reduced to copying fat Sam. Arya imagined his manners would be no better than a pig at a trough, but at least he wouldn’t be likely to comment on her manners, or rather the lack of them.

Arya looked down the table towards Gendry. She couldn’t catch his eye. In fact, as she bobbed her head in front of and behind Sam’s bulk, repeatedly, she was tempted to think he was deliberately ignoring her. At least his hand no longer seemed to be captive of the Tyrell harlot.

Arya couldn’t help but wonder how Gendry was coping as she never remembered him having a hint of any manners when they were children. She wondered if he felt as out of place as she did herself. Arya felt a sudden pang of camaraderie in adversity, but despite trying to surreptitiously take a look down the line at every opportunity, she was not able to make him notice her. It seemed he was in a huff. Stupid, bastard boy.

She need not have worried about her manners though, as both Sam and Tyrion’s were impeccable and easy to emulate. As Sam pointed out, rather proudly, he had been raised to be Lord, before adding, rather sadly, that was before he had been sent to The Wall. Then followed a nostalgic discussion between Tyrion and Sam about life on The Wall. Arya was fascinated. She had always hoped to go when she was younger, to find Jon. How different things might have been if Yoren had managed to take them there. Once again her thoughts turned to Gendry; once again she did not wish to contemplate what had passed between them earlier in the day and his wishes, nae, his expectations of her.

As the first course of oysters in their shells was served, Aegon stood up. Of course, when one of The Kings stood, silence fell across the entire hall.

“Lords and ladies, good people of Westeros, tonight we are celebrating the safe return of our new Lord Baratheon and his Bad Company…” Arya watched Gendry raise his glass towards the back of the Great Hall. There was a loud cheer from that direction, followed swiftly by some booing from another section.
“Golden Company” Sam chuckled.

Aegon smirked, but was not distracted, “…as always, we must thank Lord Tyrell and Highgarden for its bounty…” The lord who sat on the other side of Sansa, nodded graciously. So that was Willas Tyrell of the flowers. Arya craned her neck to see him better. She was so busy peering that it took a jab in the ribs from Tyrion’s stunted finger for her to realise that Aegon was now talking about her, although he was smiling down at Sansa “…and we have another cause for celebration tonight as Arya Stark has finally decided to prove to us that she is indeed a woman. Now House Stark can now boast of two beautiful ladies.” He purred, like a predatory big, silver cat.

To Arya’s absolute horror, when she turned her attention away from Aegon and looked out across the hall, a good proportion of the sea of faces was now looking directly at her. Aegon raised his glass in a salute to Sansa, before draining it down in one. Arya didn’t know who was more uncomfortable; Sansa or herself.

Just when Arya thought things couldn’t possibly get any more excruciatingly embarrassing, she heard the scrape of chair legs on flagstones echo around the silent hall as someone else moved to stand up.

Arya craned her neck to search for the culprit. Seven buggering hells! It was Gendry, drawing himself up to his full height with glass in hand. She would have happily let Baleron burn her to a cinder if it meant she didn’t have to witness what she suspected was coming next.

Gendry turned towards her, his eyes boring into hers as he lifted his glass in a salute. His deep voice boomed around the Great Hall, just as his father’s had all those years ago.

“To the stunning Lady Arya Stark!”

All assembled then lifted their own glasses and cups in a toast. The words “To Lady Arya Stark”, spoken by a thousand voices all at once, echoed around The Great Hall. Every single eye was trained on her. Arya knew she was scarlet from the tips of her toes, to the top of her head. Gendry took a sip from his glass, raising his eyebrows at her over the rim. She felt herself gritting her teeth, screwing her hands into fists and digging her nails into her palms until she was sure she would draw blood.

Stunning? No-one had ever called her that before, unless it was in reference to some hard blow she had struck to their head. How dare he humiliate her like that! Was that his idea of a joke?! Everyone would be laughing at her from now until next winter, or perhaps the winter after that!

Arya cursed Gendry under her breath with every unsavoury oath she knew and a few she just made up. Tyrion turned from Lady Oleena Redwyne, with whom he was having a conversation about the merits of making wine by combining different types of grape (which Lady Redwyne appeared to regard as heresy), to Arya.

He fixed those mismatched eyes on her and said calmly,

“Cursing like a soldier is really rather unbecoming of one so stunning, Lady Arya.”

“Don’t you mock me too Tyrion! We freaks should stick together.” She hissed, drawing him a menacing look.

Tyrion banged his cup down on the table with a ferocity that made Arya, and a few others nearby, jump.

“If anyone stood up in front of this crowd of sycophants and arse lickers and called this freak
‘stunning’ and what’s more meant it, then I would happily get down on my knees, suck his cock and thank him any other damn way he wanted me to!”

“Eh? Sucking his cork you say? Are we still talking about wine?” The Queen of Thorns shrilled across at them, causing Sam to splutter so hard, his mouthful of wine shot across the table and landed on the floor on the far side, much to Daenerys’ disgust.

Ignoring both Lady Redwyne and Sam, Tyrion continued fiercely “Considering the matter further, I might actually have to stand on a stool, to pleasure that particular Lord, but he defended you when Aegon sought to mock you and you curse him for it! For shame Arya, I thought you better than that!”

This time she was angry at herself too because what Tyrion said was right. That’s what a friend would do for another friend wasn’t it? Bugger. She might even have to thank Gendry for it. No sucking of cocks though. Bugger, bugger, bugger.

Arya huffed and cursed again, even angrier than before. “What are you doing here anyway Lannister? I though you lost this war. You should be off licking your wounds and counting your gold somewhere else.”

“I am glad ’tis your brother I negotiate with and not you Lady Stark, for I assure you, King Jon wants me here, counting my Lannister gold into his eagerly outstretched hand.”

“Watch your tongue Arya.” Sam warned. For once, Arya took his advice and turned her back on Tyrion, leaving him to converse with old Lady Oleena about boring wine.

The rest of the meal passed slowly, as Sam was not half so entertaining without Tyrion and the meat, still oozing blood was not much to her liking. Nevertheless, she learned more about the precarious nature of the peace during that hour, than she had during the rest of her stay in the Red Keep.

Once the final course of cherries and cream had been served, Daenerys had a muttered, hurried conversation with Jon and he, seemingly reluctantly, stood up to address the crowd.

He clapped his hands loudly. The crowd felt instantly silent,

“Lords and ladies, good people of Westeros, we are at last at peace…” cheers broke out from all points around the hall. Jon had to raise his hands and call for silence before the crowd would stop cheering long enough for him to continue “… my Queen tells me that in peacetime we should dance.”

He smiled down at Daenerys and she up at him. No-one could have mistaken the warmth between them.

“So… tonight we shall dance!”

At his word, a group of brightly clad musicians ran out from a side entrance to much enthusiastic applause and cheering. As they hastily set up their instruments, couples and small groups were already beginning to gather at the front of the hall, before the dais. An army of servants shooed away the diners who remained at the foremost tables and carried the tables and chairs away to be stacked against a wall. Within moments, the instruments were being tuned and the eager dancers stood impatiently, waiting on the Kings and Queen to take the lead.

Jon stood and offered Daenerys his hand. She accepted it willingly, looking every inch The Queen of the realm. Aegon was also standing, offering his hand to Sansa. She took it with deference, bowing her head to him, a sweet smile on her lips. On the other side of her, the look on the face of
Willas Tyrell would have curdled milk.

Arya looked down the table to Gendry, glaring fixedly ahead. He seemed to be trying to resist the desperate attempts being made by Margaery Tyrell to get him to dance. To Arya’s amusement, Lady Tyrell was rescued from her predicament by Sam, leaving Gendry alone. Perhaps he would come and rescue her now as she had no wish to dance or to be left sitting alone at the top table to be an object of everyone’s pity.

But still Gendry did not look at her. Instead he lifted his glass and drained it in one. Every time she had seen him tonight he had that glass either in his hand or to his lips. She did not have time to ponder it further, as Willas Tyrell was standing before her asking for this dance, although he looked as if he would rather drink that milk he had just curdled than have to.

She opened her mouth to decline, but Tyrion caught her eye with another very disapproving look. So she tried to conjure up one of Lady Sansa’s sweet smiles and accept Lord Tyrell’s offer with good grace. As she rose to take his hand, Gendry finally looked her way. Yet another very disproving look. She was damned if she accepted, damned if she didn’t. Well if he didn’t want her to dance with Lord Tyrell, then he should have asked her himself!

Willas Tyrell walked with a limp, but at least his sour expression dissipated as they approached the dance floor and assumed their positions for the first dance. She had seen these stiff, formal dances many times before, but had never participated in one. How hard could it be? Lord Tyrell looked like he knew what he was doing and Sansa was there to follow. Dancing to music was just like water dancing only easier, surely.

It turned out not to be quite as easy as Arya had thought, but she was observant and her reactions were quick. Besides, Willas had a steady hand. This was a slowly, stately procession of a dance and she did not notice him limp much. He only grimaced once and Arya thought that was more to do with the sound of Sansa’s laughter reaching them as King Aegon twirled her around unexpectedly, rather than any pain in his leg.

As they stepped apart and together again, Lord Tyrell commented upon how much like her sister Arya looked. As he said it, his eyes darted across the floor to Sansa; a vision of loveliness in green and auburn. Arya snorted in a most unladylike fashion.

“You have a twisted sense of humour Lord Tyrell.”

Willas gave her a puzzled look. “I would have thought comparison to the most beautiful woman in the seven kingdoms would have pleased you Lady Arya. I am not sure why I am the recipient of your sarcasm. I merely sought to compliment you both on your comeliness, a trait which obviously runs strong in the Stark family.”

Arya wasn’t sure if he was still jesting or if the fool was serious. Perhaps his eyes were as damaged as his leg.

“Sansa is the beauty in the family, there is no doubt. I, on the other hand, do not count beauty amongst my list of accomplishments.” She grinned wickedly at the thought. Put a sword in her hand and Willas Tyrell would know where her talents lay and ‘twas not in looking pretty to please some lord.

He smiled as if her words amused him. “Pray tell me of this list of accomplishments then Lady Arya. It must be impressive indeed if beauty does not feature on it.”

“Ah, beauty is not on it, but humility is Lord Tyrell…” Arya gave him a sly smile, “…so I shall not
bore you with the details, except to confess that it is a long list.”

As Willas laughed, his eyes crinkled rather attractively at the sides, “Such beauty and such humility. The Stark sisters are indeed peas in a pod.”

Willas was a natural dancer and, when she was unsure of the steps, he guided her in the right direction without commenting on her lack of skill. It was almost a pleasurable experience, submitting to the ebb and flow of the dance, spoiled only when, on every turn, she would catch Gendry glowering at her over his wine glass.

She was quite sorry when the dance was over, Willas graciously bowed and kissed her hand, “The pleasure has been all mine Lady Arya. I confess my leg does weary me after a while, but I hope you will favour me with another dance anon. I find your beauty and your wit a pleasing combination.”

Arya did not know what to make of that. Was he jesting with her again? But Willas had no sooner let go of her hand than Sam appeared beside them, offering his hand to her.

“May I have the pleasure lady Arya?”

“If you think dancing with me will be a pleasure, you are more fool than you look Samwell Tarly.”

Still, she let him take her hand and this time the music was faster and the dance more lively. For a fat man, Sam was surprisingly light on his feet and his obvious enjoyment of dancing was infectious. He whooped as he twirled Arya away from him and cheered as she returned. Arya found herself laughing too as other couples took up Sam’s enthusiastic version of the dance. She was too busy twirling and laughing to notice Gendry calling for another wine skin and draining down another glass.

She was flushed and giggling when they eventually stopped and Sam nodded to Gendry. “A word of…” he was panting, “…warning. He does not usually drink for fear of becoming his father.”

To Arya’s mind that’s exactly who he looked like. Alone on the raised dais, wine glass in his hand, save for the fact that he looked sullen and angry. At least King Robert was a merry drunk.

“Tread warily Arya, for he is not himself when under the influence.” Sam cautioned.

“I have every intention of avoiding him anyway!” Arya replied haughtily.

“I hope you do not mean me little sister.” Jon said from behind.

“Errr…no, not you. But I was just going to sit down.”

“Not yet. I need to talk to you.”

Arya blew out a deep breath, certain that Jon was going to moan at her again. This time for ruining Varys’ damn seating plan.

He led her into the line of dancers, standing waiting for the musicians to begin again. In front of them, Aegon stood beside Daenerys. Together they were the perfect image of a Targaryen King and Queen: Aegon so tall, slim with a regal bearing, Daenerys all soft, ripe curves and both, of course, with their unmistakable Targaryen silver blonde hair.

Arya decided, on looks alone, Jon was by far the better match for The Queen of Dragons. They were light and dark, ice from the North, fire from the South, the perfect contrast, rather then the perfect compliment. Aegon and Daenerys were too alike. It was unsettling and too much of a reminder of
Targaryen madness. Although Jon was as much Targaryen as them, his looks were pure Stark.

As she and Jon stood in line behind the Targaryens, Arya wondered how the two of them looked together. In this stupid red dress and with all Sansa’s fixing, did she and Jon look as much the mirror image of each other as Aegon and Daenerys? Did their height, dark hair and eyes draw attention? Arya could not believe any couple could ever be as striking as two silver Dragons.

The dance started and Jon moved through the paces passably well, leaving Arya to struggle somewhat, as he was not the subtle, gracious tutor that Willas had been, nor the enthusiastic innovator Sam was.

“What are you doing here Arya?”

That caught her off guard. Had he not wished her to come to dinner after all?

“I am here because I love wearing dresses and dancing brother,” she smiled as sweetly as she could, although the words might have come out as more sarcastic than she had intended.

“Do not try and play games with me Arya. Tell me why you are returned from Braavos.”

Oh, that.

“Because you sent Brienne to fetch me and here I am.” She tried another saccharine sweet smile. He was not amused. However, the dance took them apart for a few moments and she had time to gather her thoughts.

Brienne had called to her in the street in Braavos and had immediately spoken to her of Jon and Bran and Sansa. Arya had made the impulsive decision there and then to just leave with her. She had needle secreted on her person and there was nothing at the House of Black and White to hold her. She had turned her back on her old life in an instant, the hope of being reunited with her family overriding any thought of, or loyalty to, the Kindly Man.

That very night Brienne had obtained passage for them on ship bound for Westeros. Surely Jon did not know of her time with the Faceless Men? Brienne had never given any indication of knowing. A sick feeling washed over her, but she would not let it overcome her. Jon could not know and she would give nothing away.

“I fled to Braavos after what happened at The Twins. I had nowhere and no one else to go to. I tried for The Wall Jon, truly I did, but I could not make it. I was…only a girl then and all alone.” It was all true, as far as it went.

She saw his expression soften. He always had a weakness for her and it was there still. She would use it if she needed to, but for now she had him where she wanted him. Arya tried to look sad and look up at him through her eyelashes the way she had seen silly women do when they wanted something from a man. If she had thought she could do it convincingly, she would have tried to tremble her lower lip.

“If I could possibly have saved you all of that, I would have. I searched for you too. I even thought I’d found you once. You must believe me Arya. You have always been so precious to me.” It was said with such passion and sincerity, she almost felt a bit guilty for manipulating him like this. She threw her arms around him in a bear hug. He would like that and he would hate it in equal measure. Hopefully he would stop talking about it.

“Oh, I know it, I know it, Jon. But I am here and I do not want to think upon those awful times again. I have you and Sansa now and I want to be a good sister.”
Jon was obviously taken aback by such demonstrative behaviour and, although he patted her back very briefly, he quickly extricated himself from her hold gently but firmly.

He held her at arms length, “And I want to be a good brother. I am pleased to see things are improving between us and you have made an effort tonight Arya.”

“Thank dear Sansa, for ’tis all her doing – not mine.” She tried to look humble and fluttered her eyelashes. He began to look rather sceptical. Perhaps she was overdoing it with the eyelashes.

As they joined in the dance again, he continued, “Lord Baratheon seemed to appreciate your efforts, although I doubt your refusing to sit beside him would please him much.”

The both turned to look at that Lord, glaring at them over his wine glass.

“I do not want to speak of him,” Arya said airily, trying to sound disinterested. She did not want to go over this again. Not tonight, not with Gendry’s eyes following her everywhere and his having stood up and toasted her and not after what Tyrion had said and her beginning to think kindly of him.

“I was wondering how your meeting went?” Jon cocked his head, staring intently at her as they moved apart and then together.

Arya could not bear it. “I do not want to speak of it or him or marriage or any other lords or dresses or…or anything!”

“As you wish. We shall discuss it later.” Jon shrugged.

“Aren’t you going to chastise me and nag me like an old woman?”

“Not tonight.” He said simply and, damn him, he finished the rest of the dance in silence.

Without the distraction of conversation, she was able to look more often at Gendry. A tall, broad man with greying hair was standing in front of the dais, talking to him, and from the look on Gendry’s face, he did not like the conversation.

“The wine they serve to the Lords must be better than the sour piss we’re getting tonight, judging by the amount of it you’re drinking.” Lem observed wryly as Gendry took another long drink.

“Aye. ’Tis acceptable.” Gendry muttered, swirling the finest wine from the Arbour around his glass.

“Come and sit with us. At least you would have some company.”

“As you know, my place is here now and besides, I prefer the view from up here.”

Lem followed his gaze to the beautiful woman in the scarlet dress dancing so gracefully with King Jon. “Aye, well I cannot disagree with that. She has certainly grown up. If I had a choice between sitting across from Jack-Be-Lucky or watching her, I’d be sitting where you are sitting my friend.”

Lem turned again to his one time pupil. “You’re doing yourself no favours by getting drunk up here, while she’s dancing over there boy.”

“Have you finished your lecture old man? Then go and leave me in peace.”

Lem narrowed his eyes and set his jaw. “Have I ever given you advice that wasn’t good and true? Have I ever steered you wrong?”

“No,” Gendry admitted reluctantly, “but you never taught me how to dance either.”
Lem threw his head back and laughed long and hearty. “The transition from bastard Knight to great lord was never going to be an easy one, but I did not anticipate dancing present such an obstacle. I only wish all our problems could be so easily overcome.”

Gendry didn’t reply, instead he kept his gaze fixed on Arya. It was not hard to loose himself when he watched her. She moved with a grace that enchanted and fascinated him. He alternated between imaging her with a sword in her hand, fighting him with all the strength and skill he had witnessed in the training yard and imagining her naked under him, the long, graceful lines of her body arching up against him as he took her hard and deep.

Lem, seeing his comrade so lost in thought, simply shook his head and walked off, back to the rest of Bad Company and their piss poor wine.

Arya was not in the best of moods when the music stopped. Jon was all but ignoring her and immediately stalked off; Gendry was still silently staring, but would not ask her to dance. She was sick of both of them. Her mood was not improved when she heard a deep, rich voice behind her say, “So Arya Stark has breasts and not a cock after all.”

She whirled around to find King Aegon standing there, a slow smile curving his mouth. Those purple Targaryen eyes, bewitching on Daenerys, were far too disconcerting on him. He held out his arm.

“She said she was not dancing with you.” She snapped, wishing her breasts were not quite so obviously on show.

“I wasn’t asking.” King Aegon replied in a mocking tone. “Walk with me.” He took another step towards her, arm still held out.

The other couples were pairing up and assuming their positions for the next dance. She wanted to get away from this place. Gendry’s eyes still bored into her, Jon was also watching now, from his place on the dance floor beside Daenerys. Would she be forgiven if she caused another scene on the dance floor with another King? Probably not. Arya reluctantly took Aegon’s arm. She might be able to steer him towards the door. As she placed her arm on his, Margaery Tyrell appeared in front of them.

“I thought this was our dance Aegon.” She purred.

“Alas, Lady Arya claimed me first. She simply cannot bear to let me go, but as she is too exhausted to dance any more, she has begged me to take a turn around the hall with her.”

Arya was speechless, ‘twas all such blatant lies. Lady Tyrell narrowed her eyes. Margaery may have only shown mild curiosity towards her before, but now Arya knew she was marked as a rival. Arya could not have cared less. The grand lady reluctantly moved aside to let them pass.

As Aegon steered Arya from the dance floor, he murmured into her ear, “I owe you a debt of gratitude for saving me from that awful woman. I fear she will suck me dry, leaving only a magnificent, empty husk behind.”

Arya glanced across at him as he led her on. Was he really so vain? He might be a Targaryen Dragon King, but he was still just a man. From what she had seen and heard, a spoiled, wicked, far too pretty man, but just a man all the same.

“I am glad you are saved and not to be sucked dry.” Arya said, trying to sound cool and matter-of-fact. “Now please let go of my arm and I shall leave you to find some more agreeable company.” She moved her arm away, but his fingers tightened on her wrist immediately, not so much that they
hurt her, but just short of it. He was fast and strong, stronger than her and knew how to judge his strength precisely. She would not be able to break his hold easily. It was an uncomfortable thought.

“Who says I do not find your company agreeable?” he murmured.

They were at the edge of the dance floor now. Arya looked longingly towards the door, but Aegon steered them back towards the dais and to their seats in the centre. The top table was almost empty – most of the lords and ladies occupying themselves with the dancing. Gendry still sat sullenly in the same seat. A serving girl was filling his wine glass. Again. Arya gave him a beseeching look, which he studiously ignored. Why would he not come and save her from Aegon’s unwanted attentions?

Aegon steered her past Willas and Tyrion, sat together, deep in conversation. As she passed behind, she saw Tyrion had drawn a frame or cage and that Willas’ leg was laid across Tyrion’s lap. The two of them gestured animatedly between the drawing and Willa’s twisted leg. ‘Twas a strange scene indeed to behold at the top table!

As Aegon reached the centre of that table, he pulled out the chair next to his and motioned for her to sit down. She didn’t want to. She wanted to leave. Gendry was glowering at them both. There would be no rescue from him.

Aegon sat down first and hauled her down beside him. At least he let go of her wrist when they were seated. She rubbed at it angrily.

“I did not know you had such a magnificent figure under those ugly men’s clothes you favour. I suspect you do not have an inkling of the effect such a figure has on a man, otherwise you would always dress like this.” A wicked smile curved his elegant mouth. “I can assure you Lady Arya, every man would surrender to you immediately without the need for you to draw your sword.”

She had no interest in his silver tongued lies. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but before she could utter a word, a gruff, deep voice above her growled, “You’re wasting your time with the she-wolf Aegon. She wants no man. She’s just a cock tease in a red dress.”

Arya stood up and slapped him.

She slapped Gendry across the face as hard as she could. The sound was shocking, like the crack of a whip, echoing around the Great Hall. Everyone, all at once, fell silent.

Her hand was stinging with pain and she could see the mark of her fingers on his face.

He lifted his hand and for an awful moment she thought he was going to hit her back, but he touched his fingers to the side of his mouth. Blood was beginning to trickle from there, where Sansa’s ring had caught him.

And then he made it even worse.

“You’re welcome to her Aegon.”

He turned and stormed out of the hall, his expression stopping anyone from saying anything to him.

He just needed to get away, not caring where he headed or why. He just needed to try and erase the sight of her, blazing with righteous anger in that damn red dress and the pain of seeing her with every other lord except him.

Arya, Aegon and every other person in The Great Hall stood and watched him go.
How dare he! Not caring what anyone else thought, Arya gathered up her skirts and ran after him.

By the time she reached the door of the hall, he was almost out of sight. The corridor was now only dimly lit by candles flickering in a few wall sconces. He looked like a black shadow flying down the corridor.

She shouted after him, demanding he stop. If he heard, he never turned. She started running after him, but in this stupid dress and with his long, angry strides, she doubted she would be able to catch him if he did not stop.

“You come back here and apologize to me Gendry Waters!” she yelled at the top of her voice.

That stopped him and he turned sharply around. His scowl did not soften, but at least he started back up the corridor towards her. She stopped and unwittingly took a step back when they met as his anger and the size of him was shocking. She felt vulnerable and exposed in this stupid dress and wished she had on her usual britches and tunic. Then she might feel more inclined to try and knock some sense into him.

In the flickering candle light, his face was all anger and shadows. A vein beside his scar pulsed with barely controlled rage. His fists were balled at his sides.

“I’ll apologize to you, if you apologize to me for ignoring me while you throw yourself at every other fucking lord in there” he growled back, his voice deep and hard, reverberating around the empty stone corridor and making her shiver.

“What gives you the right to comment on what I do or do not do?! And I did not throw myself at anyone!” she yelled.

He took another menacing step towards her, “you laughed and flirted constantly with Sam and Tyrion throughout dinner, you were danced and kissed by Willas Tyrell, you threw yourself around Sam on the floor, embraced Jon and allowed yourself to be led away by that fucking cunt Aegon!”

She held her ground, shaking with anger and indignation, but her voice was not as steady as she would have liked, ”’twas not like that at all.”

His breath was fast and shallow as he approached her, dipping and tilting his head. She recognised that look in his eyes. She had seen it before; the first time they had met in Jon’s solar. Lust.

“Tell me how it was then Arya. Tell why you want every lord except me.”

She took a step backwards and found herself against the cold stone wall. She shivered again as he leant over her, but she didn’t think it was just the cold. Swift as a deer. Quiet as a shadow. Fear cuts deeper than swords. Quick as a snake. Calm as still water.

“I do not want any of them.”

He dropped his face down to hers so that his lips were almost against hers. His eyes were focused most disconcertingly on her mouth. He reeked of wine, his breath warm and moist against her skin.

“Do you want me?”

“You are drunk.” Calm as still water.

“Aye, drunk enough to tell you that no other man will ever love you as I do.”
He traced the edge of her bodice ever so slowly with his finger tips. She batted his hand away, he brought it back. Her red dress revealed too much skin, and at the same time, not enough. She smelled of roses and warm, aroused woman. It was hardly fair. No wonder he was lost. There was no one for him but her. There never had been. There never would be.

Everything about him was hard except his touch, gently sliding over the globe of her breast, feeling the rise and fall of her breast, hearing her breathing change.

She tried to take a step to the side to get away from him. He immediately placed one hand flat against the wall beside her, preventing her sideways escape. Before she could begin to slide the other way, he pinned her to the wall with his thighs. She had a wall against her back and his body was hard as stone pressing against her front. Arya knew exactly what part of him was pressed against her stomach now, but she tried not to think of that. She should be trying to free herself, but instead her hands were resting on his chest. She should be pushing him away, but instead the steady ‘thump-thump’ of his heart seemed to be all that anchored her in a storm of emotions.

He bent his head to kiss her, but she turned her head away.

“What are you so frightened of? ’Tis just a kiss Arya.”

“Do not.” Her voice was husky and raw.

He covered her mouth with his before she could say any more. She froze.

Why would she not respond to him, melt against him, fight him, anything rather than this…this…coldness? He could not bear it.

“Kiss me back.” His own voice was hoarse.

She turned her head away again. He followed her mouth with his.

“Kiss me back.” He repeated, his voice rough.

Finally she looked at him. Eyes huge, shining like silver steel in the darkness. “I cannot.”

“Cannot?” he echoed. He was drunk, but not that drunk. She hadn’t said “will not”; she had said “cannot”.

She made the mistake of wetting her lips with the point of her tongue. He could not resist. His mouth was on hers again before she had time to realise what he intended. Her lips were parted and this time he slid his tongue into her mouth. This time he wanted to taste all of her.

That one kiss from him, tasting of sweet wine with a hint of metal from where she’d bloodied him, was more intoxicating than anything she had ever drunk in her life. Everything else was forgotten as his tongue slid against hers, teasing, dancing, sucking. And she wanted more.

He tried to kiss her slowly. He tried to control his rampaging body. He kissed her much more slowly than he wanted to, pressed himself against her much more gently than he needed to. He did not want to scare her. He did not want her to say ‘cannot’. He wanted her to moan his name and say ‘yes’ and ‘please’ and ‘now’.

Her body softened against him first, her hands relaxed against his chest, then her mouth, accepting him and finally, finally, the first tentative touch of her tongue against his.

It was wonderful. It was terrifying. He was drunk on wine and she was drunk on his kisses.
She was so lost in the kiss that she did not notice his hand until it touched the inside of her thigh. It was warm, reassuring and shocking, rough and gentle, all at the same time.

His fingers found one leather strap and his hand stopped. She did not want him too.

“Do not stop.” She murmured into his mouth. She moved her hand to the back of his neck and wound her fingers into his hair, pulling him down. She did not want him to stop, did not want him to leave. Ever.

He ran his hand higher. He found the second strap and stopped again. His fingers follow the strap around until they touched the cold steel of Needle.

Gendry lifted his head forcefully. “At any moment you’re going to slit my throat aren’t you?” he muttered, his voice deep with desire.

“I might,” she said, with a wicked glint in her eyes.

“There are worse ways to die.” He kissed her again and this time she arched against him.

“Arya! Are you unharmed?” Sansa’s voice rang out anxiously from the end of the corridor.

Hearing her sister’s concern was like a bucket of cold water in the face. Arya froze. What was she doing? Gendry relaxed the pressure of his hips against hers and let her skirt fall down again as he withdrew his hand. They both turned towards the voice.

“She is fine.” Gendry called back through gritted teeth, his annoyance obvious in his voice, his stance, in everything.

“She didn’t ask you, Lord Baratheon.” Aegon’s smooth voice called back.

Arya felt Gendry stiffen with anger and heard the almost growl from deep in his throat.

“Yes I am unharmed,” Arya shouted quickly before Gendry could reply to Aegon, adding “so far” under her breath, so only Gendry could hear.

Arya wondered what Sansa and Aegon could see in the shadows. Probably not much and Gendry was careful to shield her from view with his body. Arya peeked out from under his arm. Sansa stood at the top of the corridor, worry etched on her beautiful face. King Aegon was behind her, arms folded, face expressionless.

“You need to let me go.” Arya hissed.

“Stay with me.” His eyes glittered in the candle light.

It was too much and whatever spell had been between them was broken. “I want to go.” She ducked under his arm.

Arya didn’t know where the question came from, but all of a sudden she needed to know why he had almost ignored her all night then kissed her as if he was consumed with a need he could barely control. “If you want me so much, why would you not dance with me?”

His mood changed instantly. He straightened up and set his jaw. All cold, hard, fury again. She could see the muscles clenching and unclenching his teeth. “Where do you suppose a bastard like me would have learned to dance?” he snarled and, without waiting for an answer he turned on his heel and stalked away.
She was so shocked by the whole encounter she made no move after him this time and simply stood and watched his huge form retreat until he turned the corner, out of sight.

“Arya!” Sansa called again from the end of the corridor.

“Coming.” Arya brushed her finger tips against her lips where he had kissed her. She felt bruised by his desire and shocked by her own response. This changed everything. Were such things visible? She walked slowly back towards Sansa and Aegon. She was about to find out.

Chapter End Notes

And so will we, but we have to wait until next Friday…

This chapter owes a lot to my Fanfic friend Brazilian Guy and his astute insight. It would have been quite different and not nearly as good without him. I have to thank him for his advice and support. I am in your debt Ser!
How to woo a Wolf

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Thump-Thump

Thump-Thump

Thump-Thump

She could feel his heart beating in time with her own. She felt deliciously warm and safe. Content. ‘Twas a wonderful feeling. Arya rolled onto her back, uncurled and stretched, arms way out above her head and toes pointed down as far as they would go. When had she ever woken feeling so hopeful? She couldn’t wait to discover what this new day would bring.

A smile curved on her lips as she reached a hand under the covers towards him, seeking her warm, hard Gendry. Yes, hers. She turned, expecting to see him open his blue eyes, waking up as she had with a delicious, wicked smile on his lips. But instead her hand found cold empty linen and an undented pillow.

She sat up with a start. Where was he? Where had he gone? She looked around frantically. All she could see was her own bare room in the grey, early morning light. There were no men’s boots at the side of the bed, his clothes weren’t discarded in a heap and his sword wasn’t to hand on the floor. There was nothing. Nothing except that red dress hanging over the back of her chair.

Arya collapsed back on the bed and flung her arm over her eyes. It could not be true. She was alone. It had been so real. She had heard his heartbeat. Nae, more than that, she had felt it. His warm breath had feathered her neck. It was real. She would swear on it.

She curled herself up into a ball and screwed her eyes shut. She would go there again. Breathe, concentrate, listen, focus on that thump-thump. Nothing else. Just that. Just him.

It was like sinking, but in a wonderful way, like falling slowly through layers of soft feather beds. If she thought only on his heart beat she would find him again. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth again. He was back; it had not been so difficult. He was wrapped around her, so warm and strong. She never wanted to leave this, loose this. They could lie here forever and be content. She held him to her, concentrating on his heart beat, being soothed by its steady, dependable rhythm and felt herself drifting off to sleep.

It was so wonderful, she knew she should just surrender herself completely to it. But part of her wanted to see him, part of her wanted proof it was him. The desperate, lonely other part of her told her to just take it, accept, don’t question, why can’t you just enjoy it you fool? Of course, curiosity won with her. It always did.

Arya opened her eyes, but she didn’t really. She opened her eyes in her dream and he wasn’t there. Instead of black hair, she saw white pelt, instead of blue eyes, she saw red, as knowing and ancient as the heart tree in Winterfell. Those red eyes held everything she had ever wanted. There were no human words to describe what she saw there. It was beyond words, deep, elemental, primal. She could call it home or family, pack or belonging and still it wouldn’t be nearly enough. It was life and death, all or nothing. It was everything. And it was just a dream.

A single tear escaped from the corner of her eye. She wiped it away immediately. She was a fool and
she wouldn’t cry over a dream.

She angrily uncurled herself once more, throwing back the covers and swinging her legs out of bed. She stomped across the room and pulled out her bindings and britches and tunic again. Why should it matter anyway? She had a task to complete and could not allow herself to be detracted. All she knew was emptiness and death and she was not done with death yet. Had she not sworn an oath to herself, over and over and over,
Weese,
Dunsen,
Polliver,
Raff the Sweetling,
The Tickler and the Hound.
Ser Gregor,
Ser Amory,
Ser Ilyn,
Ser Merhn,
King Joffrey,
Queen Cersi.
Valar Morghulis.

As she bound down her breasts and dressed herself in soldier’s attire, she felt herself return. By the time she had secreted Needle in her boot, she felt strong again and in control. She could not stop until it was done. Soft and safe was not for her. Her need for revenge burned as fiercely as it ever had. That was all she needed to warm her. It had been forged in the murders of Mycah and her Father and in the blood of Harrenhal. She would be relentless as the wind on the mountains and the waves of the sea. She would have her revenge.

-o-

Gendry awoke with a pounding headache and it was not caused only by last night’s wine.

He sat up in bed with a groan and dragged his hands through his hair. Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck.

He had called her a cock tease in a red dress and he had received a hard slap for it. Aye, he deserved that and more. He rubbed his fingers over his jaw where she had landed her blow. He doubted any other woman could have hit him as hard as his fierce she wolf. The thought gave him a perverse sense of pride and made him smile, although that did not last long.

Had he even apologised when she had demanded it? He could not remember. But he could remember his hand on her smooth, strong thigh and her tongue in his mouth. By the Gods, he would never forget it! Seven hells, the thought made him hard as a rock again and he needed a piss. ‘Twas a pity all the blood had been in his cock last night too and not in his stupid, empty head.

As he swung his legs over the side of the bed, he spied the broken table and empty wine skin on the floor. Bugger. He had forgotten about that too.

Lem, Anguy and Tom O’Sevens had woken him at some God forsaken hour, reeling drunk and hell bent on teaching him how to dance. Mercifully, all three of them together had been too drunk to drag him out of bed, but he did recall Tom collapsing on top of the table as he staggered about in a drunken farce of a dance. Gendry also remembered trying to jam his head under his pillow in an attempt to drown out the noise of Tom’s drunken playing and Lem’s even more drunken advice.

The old man had repeated himself over and over, in that way drunkards are wont to do and Gendry
suspected he must have fallen asleep with his pillow over his head while the three of them still ranted over him about dancing and wooing. Bugger that old Lem. His heart was in the right place, but his timing was all to cock. Gendry had to smile though, who would have thought dancing so bloody important.

It was coming back to him now; all three of them had been advising, nae demanding that he woo Lady Arya properly. Wooing. Even the thought made his head ache more.

Gendry did allow he needed advice, for she had not woken in his bed this morning. Last night she had claimed to want to leave, despite her body telling him otherwise. And she had said ‘cannot’. He did not pretend to know what she meant by that. Had he the right soft words and practiced charm, like Aegon, he might have sweet talked her into his bed last night. After all, she had demanded he not stop when his hand was on her thigh! Bugger that horse’s arse Aegon! If Aegon had not interrupted them, Arya would have urged him on and would his fingers not have found that warm, soft place every woman has and every man wants? Aye and he was sure he would have found hers slick with desire for him.

Bugger, he would never manage to take a piss if he did not stop thinking on her thighs and what lay beyond. He would seek advice and not from those three drunkards. He would seek his council from the man who knew her better than anyone. Aye, Jon would offer sound advice, he was sure.

-o-

When Arya wrenched open the door to her chamber, after the third, aggressive knock, she was ready launch into a tirade of abuse at the Crow she suspected was disturbing her solitude.

However, when she opened the door, ’twas not a crow she saw -’twas nothing at all. Until she looked down and saw Tyrion’s mismatched eyes and nose-less face staring up at her.

“Oh, ’tis you.” She snapped ungraciously.

He bid her good morning and bowed with a flourish, once more putting her manners to shame.

“You’d better come in I suppose.” She muttered reluctantly, stepping back to allow him entrance.

“Even if you have no care for your honour Lady Stark, I have a care for mine. It would not do either of our reputations any good if I was seen entering your chamber alone.”

Arya looked across at the two crows propping up the wall opposite her chambers. She hadn’t seen these two before, but it seemed she was going to have to get used to a pair of crows watching her wherever she went and no doubt reporting back to King Jon.

“Agreed. You have another purpose on calling on me I presume?”

Tyrion gave her a broad smile, “Indeed I do Lady Arya.”

He stepped back, pointing the way down the corridor with another bow and flourish.

With a sigh, Arya closed the door behind her and started walking, slowly for her legs were much longer than his.
“I see you have donned your armour once more.” Tyrion observed wryly as they walked.

Arya looked down at her tunic, about to call him a blind fool, until she realised what he meant. She was buttoned up to the neck. Underneath, her breasts were once more bound, her legs clad in men’s britches and boots.

She had no answer to his quip, so she merely nodded.

“We did not part on the best of terms last night Arya.”

“You are particularly observant this morning my lord.” she replied dryly.

“I feel I owe you an explanation.”

“You owe me nothing Lannister, nor I you.”

Tyrion sighed and stopped at a window, with a seat below, cut from the thick castle wall.

“Let us sit here and talk, as otherwise I shall get the most painful crick in my neck.” He hopped up onto the seat, without waiting for her to agree.

Arya looked back down the corridor at the crows following a distance behind. Yet again her options were limited. This was intolerable. She reluctantly sat beside Tyrion and gazed moodily out of the window.

“I want you to know why your cursing Lord Baratheon vexed me so last night.”

“I had thought perhaps it was jealously? I do recall you wanting to suck the man’s cock.” Arya tried to keep her voice cool and disinterested as she said it, but ‘twas hard not to smirk. She expected Tyrion to splutter and curse in shocked outrage, but ‘twas obvious Tyrion Lannister was far better practiced at this verbal jousting than she was. He simply rubbed a finger across the scarred middle of his face where his nose aught to be and fixed her with his strange, piercing eyes.

“You can scoff at my advice Arya, but I will have you listen first.”

Tyrion was in no mood for japes. She was reminded of Jon. Everyone was so bloody serious all of the time now.

“Pray continue then.” She muttered.

“I am aware that your brother wishes you wed to Lord Baratheon and I intend to tell you of my own, arranged marriage in the hope that you can learn from it.”

Arya’s ears pricked up. To be married to a Lannister, even a stunted one, would have once been a great honour for a lady. Before the war. Before the Lannister’s lost.

“My father wished an alliance between her Great House and ours to further his own ends of course. He always was a greedy, grasping prick. I was given no say in the matter. Neither was she.”

It was Tyrion’s turn to direct his gaze out of the window, while Arya studied him intently. She was as interested in why he was telling her this as she was to hear the tale.

“We did, however, enter the marriage with different intentions. I was prepared to make the best of it and, despite appearances and what you may think Arya, I am not a bad man. I even hoped in those days, I could make some lady a decent husband. Nae, a good husband.” Tyrion added softly. He shook his head and sighed before continuing, “My lady wife however, was of a different mind. She
did not rage against me or attempt to flee from me. No, she was not so obvious in her contempt. She lay beside me every night but her thoughts were ever elsewhere.”

He paused and shook his head sadly again.

“Have you any idea what it is like to lie beside your beautiful wife night after night and know she wishes she was elsewhere? To have her beside you and know her thoughts are not with you? ‘Tis torment of the cruellest kind.”

They sat in silence, both looking out of the window, across the plain, both lost in their thoughts. Arya’s wandered quickly from Tyrion’s loveless marriage to her revenge. The Hound was out there somewhere, hiding from her. She wondered if Brienne had found him yet.

“Are you thinking on Lord Baratheon?” Tyrion asked suddenly.

Arya looked at him, startled. “No, of course I am not.”

“Then I think I have made my point.” Tyrion shrugged and sighed, “I know him not, but from what I hear, he is a good man. I would not wish the marriage I had on a good man.”

“You worry for naught. I have no intention of marrying him.”

“Think hard on it Arya. ‘Tis all or nothing with men.”

Arya mumbled “I shall,” having no intention whatsoever of doing so. He was a queer man this Lannister. He had been to The Wall and back, given instructions for Bran’s saddle, won the battle of the Blackwater single handed by some accounts, been a Hand of the King, been on the losing side in a war and yet was welcomed back to King’s Landing by her brother with open arms. Now Tyrion spoke to her of love and longing too.

Tyrion gave her a sad, lopsided smile and dropped down from the seat onto the floor.

“You do not know of whom I speak do you?”

Arya shook her head.

There was no smile on his face and a deep sadness in his eyes as he gave the name of his bride, “Sansa Stark.”

Arya could only sit and gawp as Tyrion Lannister, half-man and once husband to the most beautiful woman in the seven Kingdoms, waddled away.

-o-

They hear voices outside in the corridor. Pyp, stationed outside Jon’s Solar as guard, opened the door and announced “Weyland approaches and he don’t look happy.”

“Show Lord Baratheon in as soon as he arrives” Jon snapped. Pyp looked displeased by the reprimand, but nodded a reluctant acknowledgement before closing the door with more force that was strictly necessary

Sam chuckled, “I can’t get used to calling him Lord Baratheon either – you can hardly blame Pyp.”

Jon’s attitude softened somewhat. “I know” he sighed, “all the same; we can hardly expect everyone
else to use and accept his new title if we do not ourselves.”

“True,” Sam conceded, as the man himself flung open the door, stomped across the room and dropped into the chair opposite Jon’s desk in a fury of long limbs, boots and steel.

To a background of constant, inventive cursing, the new Lord Baratheon kicked his boots up to rest on the corner of Jon’s desk, shifted his sword scabbard and settled himself comfortably in the chair. Only when he was so settled, did he look up at his two friends.

“Oh, sorry. Not interrupting anything am I?”

“Only our attempts to work out how to build our fresh water canals and pay and disperse the army” Jon muttered irritably.

“Oh, that again.” Weyland groaned, immediately disinterested. His skills lay in fighting and bending metal to his will, not in this penny pinching and administration.

In truth Jon and Sam were glad of the distraction, for the answer to their problem was not an easy one. Thousands of men expected to receive some payment for their efforts in the war, but as no new lands had been conquered and no new treasures won, there was no gold to pay the army. Soldiers would not leave empty handed to return to their homes, or at least they would not leave happily.

The last thing Jon wanted was more dissent in the Kingdom, but it looked as if that particular problem would need to wait as his friend obviously had a need to talk now.

“I need your help” Weyland demanded fiercely, looking from Jon to Sam and back, as if defying them to refuse.

Jon and Sam exchanged a quick, surprised glance. The three of them had offered each other counsel countless times over the years, but for their friend to storm in like this and demand assistance – was hitherto unknown.

“Oh, sorry. Not interrupting anything am I?”

“Only our attempts to work out how to build our fresh water canals and pay and disperse the army” Jon muttered irritably.

“Oh, that again.” Weyland groaned, immediately disinterested. His skills lay in fighting and bending metal to his will, not in this penny pinching and administration.

In truth Jon and Sam were glad of the distraction, for the answer to their problem was not an easy one. Thousands of men expected to receive some payment for their efforts in the war, but as no new lands had been conquered and no new treasures won, there was no gold to pay the army. Soldiers would not leave empty handed to return to their homes, or at least they would not leave happily.

The last thing Jon wanted was more dissent in the Kingdom, but it looked as if that particular problem would need to wait as his friend obviously had a need to talk now.

“I need your help” Weyland demanded fiercely, looking from Jon to Sam and back, as if defying them to refuse.

Jon and Sam exchanged a quick, surprised glance. The three of them had offered each other counsel countless times over the years, but for their friend to storm in like this and demand assistance – was hitherto unknown.

“Oh, that again.” Weyland groaned, immediately disinterested. His skills lay in fighting and bending metal to his will, not in this penny pinching and administration.

In truth Jon and Sam were glad of the distraction, for the answer to their problem was not an easy one. Thousands of men expected to receive some payment for their efforts in the war, but as no new lands had been conquered and no new treasures won, there was no gold to pay the army. Soldiers would not leave empty handed to return to their homes, or at least they would not leave happily.

The last thing Jon wanted was more dissent in the Kingdom, but it looked as if that particular problem would need to wait as his friend obviously had a need to talk now.

“I need your help” Weyland demanded fiercely, looking from Jon to Sam and back, as if defying them to refuse.

Jon and Sam exchanged a quick, surprised glance. The three of them had offered each other counsel countless times over the years, but for their friend to storm in like this and demand assistance – was hitherto unknown.

“Of course” Jon and Sam both said together, causing them both to chuckle and earning them a scowl from Lord Baratheon.

He took a deep breath and blurted out, “I must woo Lady Arya and I do not know how.”

Sam tried to suppress a guffaw of laughter, but his attempt wasn’t wholly successful and he ended up choking and spluttering. His two friends looked at him with something bordering distaste. That only made Sam want to laugh harder.

These two great warriors could win a Kingdom together, yet Sam was sure Jon had no more idea how to woo a woman than Weyland. As he tried to recover himself, it occurred to Sam that what his two friends together knew about wooing women could probably be written on a piece of parchment the size of his thumbnail.

Sam could not resist his next comment, “I fear this is not our area of expertise my lords. I suggest we should seek expert advice on wooing from King Aegon.”

Weyland’s face was black as thunder. He lifted his big boots off the desk and slammed them on the floor “If you think I’m going to that pretty, preening horse’s arse for his advice on this, then your head’s gone as soft as your belly!”

“I shall leave you two lords to discuss this matter alone then,” Sam said, pretending to be offended. Aegon’s easy charm with the ladies, not to mention his impeccable manners, dress and martial skill
irked the other two men, and Weyland in particular, who had been raised without any of Aegon’s numerous advantages.

“As you wish” Weyland growled, obviously annoyed by Sam’s suggestion that Aegon held the answer to his problem and also that Sam himself was apparently not even going to bother listening. Sam had paid him heed and offered his council before, no matter what the difficulty. But this was different. Sam knew that his two friends were truly going to need some expert advice if Weyland wasn’t going to embarrass himself again as he had at the feast last night.

Sam’s suggestion to involve Aegon had simply been a jape to irk Weyland and it had obviously succeeded. Sam had another, altogether better, plan. His friends needed a woman’s perspective as, left to themselves, Weyland and Jon would no doubt come up with some ridiculous battle plan to carry Arya off or something equally inappropriate.

There was little doubt Jon’s advice would be to ‘steal’ her in the wildling way and Weyland’s attempts to impress her with his size and strength and his new title were the last things that would be likely to win the hand and the heart of Lady Arya Stark. Even Sam, who considered himself no expert on ‘wooing’ either, knew that forcing a husband on her (or opponent as that’s what she would more likely think him) would never work.

While some women might wish to be stolen and won by force, Sam was certain Lady Arya was not one of them. To take her by force would only breed the simmering resentment of the vanquished. Arya would only believe herself crushed under the heel of her conqueror’s boot and a resentful, subjugated woman, particularly one who was so skilled with a blade, was not what any man wanted in a wife.

No, a much more subtle approach was called for in the seduction of Arya Stark. She would need to be convinced that marriage to Weyland was what she wanted; otherwise she would fight it, and him, tooth and nail.

If Sam could see this, how could they not? He sighed. Perhaps he wasn’t so ignorant of this ‘wooing’ as he thought.

Sam already has his own plans under way, ready to put into effect as soon as the situation in King’s Landing had stabilized enough to allow the Hand of the King…Hand of the Kings and Queen, he reminded himself proudly, to be able to pay a long overdue visit to see his father.

Of course meeting his father again after all these years would not be the main purpose of the visit – the primary goal was to be reunited with those he loved who were still under his father’s care. Although Sam had to admit, he would derive no little satisfaction from arriving back in Horn Hill with a retinue of Knights and the associated pomp that befitted a visit from The Hand of The Three Headed Dragon. He had even wondered if King Jon could be prevailed upon to accompany him. Jon would not leave King’s Landing until Daenerys was with child and The Gods only knew when that would be. But perhaps then Sam could persuade his friend to embark on a short tour of his Kingdom, which would happen to include Horn Hill. Maybe Jon would even travel on Drogo. How much would that impress his father? See what I have become? See the company I keep – the useless, bookish son you cast out?

Sam allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction as he hurried off to find Daenerys. He would ask The Queen to hurry to her husband’s solar and talk some sense to these two love struck idiots.

Jon and Weyland watched the door close behind Sam.

“Fat lot of use he was,” Weyland growled.
Jon rolled his eyes. “Best not to use that word around him at the moment.”

“What word? Fat?”

“Yes” Jon agreed, exasperated. “He’s increasing sensitive about it since we arrived here. For the first time in years we have food a plenty and this is when he decides he must limit what he eats! I don’t know what’s got into him. You’d think he had a woman somewhere he wishes to impress with his warrior’s physique” Jon sighed.

“Well, if doesn’t already, he’ll no doubt be seeking one soon. That’s what we all fought for wasn’t it? To have a safe place to call home? A place to settle with our wives and raise our sons?”

Jon wondered if that was what he had fought for all these years. It hadn’t been at the beginning. Back then, as a man of the Night’s Watch, he had been prepared to die to ensure that the rest of Westeros could live in peace with their wives and sons. When had that changed? When had it become personal? When had it become about what he wanted too? Not when Stannis had offered him Winterfell. He had resisted then, but now…now he would give it all up without hesitation if it meant Daenerys could bear him sons. He wanted nothing more than to live at peace with his wife and his children on his own lands.

Weyland watched as a look he had never seen before crossed Jon’s face. It was gone in an instant as Jon suppressed whatever was troubling him. Weyland knew better than to press the matter now. Jon would share any problem or worry he had when he was good and ready and besides, Weyland had enough of his own problems to deal with at the moment, without seeking more.

So, when Jon groaned, rubbed his hands over his face and repeated aloud the matter at hand, “So you want to woo Arya?” Weyland decided that focusing on his own problem at the moment would be sufficient for them both.

“Aye.” Weyland admitted curtly, before realising he had better offer more detail if he expected Jon to be able to offer advice. It pained Weyland to have to speak about such things, as no doubt it pained Jon to have to listen, particularly as the topic of discussion was the seduction of Jon’s youngest sister.

Weyland ran his hands through his hair and groaned as he remembered the events of yesterday. He had to disclose all, embarrassing as it was.

“Lem and Anguy tell me I need to ‘woo’, your sister. I am beginning to think that they are correct, as my own efforts have been…sadly lacking…” Weyland trailed off before ending with a heartfelt groan.

Jon groaned as well. His own efforts to convince Arya that she needed to marry had also been woefully unproductive. He didn’t think he understood Arya at all himself, so how in seven hells he was supposed to help Weyland “woo” her was beyond him. However, Weyland had never refused him assistance before and he wasn’t about to deny his friend now. So Jon had to reluctantly ask “So this wooing business is Lem and Anguy’s, no doubt carefully considered, advice?”

Weyland covered his eyes with one big hand, massaging his temples and avoiding Jon’s eyes as he began his tale of woe

“I have not been entirely truthful with you Jon. I can only hope you forgive me and believe me when I confess that it has been in this one matter only. I have told you no lies and this is my only sin of omission.” He took a deep breath and launched into it…

“I met your sister before. Many years ago, when we were both children, fleeing from King’s
Landing under the protection of Yoren, a recruiter for your beloved Crows. Would you believe we were making for The Wall?"

As Weyland gave his confession, he saw shock, disbelief and finally understanding cross Jon’s face.

So many things had happened to his friends and family in the last seven years that Jon did not know; perhaps would never know. Everyone had their own story of surviving the war and he was truly not entirely surprised by his friend’s confession. Jon had begun to suspect as much. In fact, he felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders – there was still an almost unbearable weight of other matters pressing down on him, but at least he no longer had to hold himself responsible for making Weyland fall in love with his sister. After a long pause, during which time Weyland looked miserably apprehensive, Jon replied,

“I met Yoren once. He accompanied us from Winterfell, when I first left with my Uncle Benjen for The Wall. To find out that it was he who rescued Arya from King’s Landing and was supposed to bring you both to me...” John shook his head, bewildered. “So many coincidences... it makes me believe there are greater powers at work here, binding our fates.”

They had discussed such things before. Two bastards, who should have had nothing, yet had achieved so much. Just luck? Coincidence? Jon was convinced the Old Gods favoured them and who was Weyland to deny it?

“So I finally have my explanation as to why you were always so eager to hear my childhood stories about Arya.” Jon chuckled, waggling his eyebrows at his friend.

Weyland blushed. Jon could not remember ever seeing his friend blush before and it was a most disconcerting sight. Both of them shifted in their chairs, suddenly finding opposite corners of the room entirely fascinating.

“Yes, you do,” Weyland admitted rather reluctantly.

“You obviously never made it to The Wall.”

Finally Weyland chuckled, breaking the tension in the room “No, we did not and I have often wondered how different things would be now if we had.”

Jon laughed too. It never ceased to amaze him how one pivotal moment could change everything. What if he had never gone to The Wall? What if Robb had lived? Ygritte? It was a dangerous game playing “what if?” so he merely shook his head, gave a wry smile and let his friend continue.

“Ned Stark had been executed and Yoren was helping Arya escape from King’s Landing for obvious reasons. Me – I wasn’t so sure, but someone apparently paid him to take me too.”

“Jon Arryn – the one I was named after” Jon interrupted.

Weyland raised his eyebrows in surprise. Jon was named for a Hand of the King? Weyland often
forgot that they weren’t the same, weren’t two bastards raised with nothing; that Jon had come from a life of privilege.

“Aye him. He never spoke to me; might have spoken to Tobho, but not me. Ned spoke to me though. Asked me about my mother – not that I could tell him much, but he did say to Tobho that if I ever wanted to wield a sword I should be sent to him.”

Weyland stood up and slowly drew the Valyrian steel sword from his scabbard, holding it out, so that the black and red blade caught the morning sun, sending beams of light bouncing around the solar.

“And here I am; sworn shield to Jon Snow, Ned Stark’s Bastard of Winterfell and custodian of ‘Oathbreaker’, forged from Lord Stark’s own Greatsword”

“Not for much longer I hope?” Jon fought to keep the anticipation from his voice.

“No, not for much longer old friend. I promised you that. Now the war is won I will re-forge ‘Ice’. Tobho tells me it will take three days and three nights.” Weyland flicked his wrist and swung the Valyrian steel through the air with a dramatic ‘whoosh’.

“You understand that I wish this business with Arya to be settled first?” Weyland looked at his King over the edge of his sword.

Jon knew his friend was reluctant to part with the Valyrian Steel, but he had sworn an oath and would not dishonour himself by breaking it. However, it had crossed Jon’s mind that perhaps his friend sought to hold onto a final bargaining tool in case Arya refused him. Would he withhold ‘Oathbreaker’ until Jon could provide Arya’s hand in marriage? Jon certainly hoped not, as Arya’s hand was but a faint hope the moment.

Jon took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He did not want to test his theory. Damn his sister. He would not force her and doubted if he could, even if he wished it. No, she must see Weyland as a suitable choice herself and enter the arrangement of her own free will; a plan which seemed to currently teeter on the very edge of failure.

Could it be that their only hope was Lem and Anguy’s suggestion of ‘wooing’ Arya? What a fucking mess. If they were going into battle and this was their only plan, he would have had the fool who came up with it demoted back to foot soldier.

However, as it did seem to be their only plan, Jon supposed he had to provide any assistance he could. “So you have met my sister before, yet despite this, she is not amenable to your proposal of marriage. You seek to woo her in order to…encourage her to take you to husband.”

“Have you a better idea?” Weyland asked wearily.

Jon shook his head.

“Then listen to my tale and then offer me your advice, for The Gods know I need all the help I can get!”

Lord Baratheon settled himself down again in a chair and began…

“We were on the run from King’s Landing, from Lannister goldcloaks. At Harrentown Lannister men overcame us. Very few of us survived, and alas our protector Yoren did not. Arya insisted we bury him at least.”
Jon nodded, listening intently. It was fascinating to finally be able to piece together parts of his sister’s and his friend’s lives during wartime.

“After that, we had no leader, just us and a few other misfits, headed for The Wall. I thought all was lost, but Arya had a plan. She was the youngest of us, but it was her plan we followed even then - to make for Winterfell where she was sure we would be welcomed with open arms by your brother Robb.”

Jon rubbed his brow wearily. It was all so long ago and so many were lost. “Aye, my brother in name and he would have welcomed you Weyland. A strong arm is always of use and a Smith especially so.”

“You flatter me” Weyland replied, rather sarcastically Jon thought, before he continued with his tale,

“In those days, I was not yet wise enough to avoid the unwanted attention of those who wished me dead. I still went by another name…”

“Gendry Waters” Jon finished for him.

“How did you know?” The man himself asked, clearly surprised.

“‘Twas the name Arya shouted after you last night.”

Gendry bristled. Had they been spied on? “And you know this how?”

Jon looked to Ghost. Gendry followed his gaze. He did not recall seeing the white Direwolf at all last night, but then his mind had been on other things.

“Ghost?” Gendry demanded, “You spied on me through Ghost?”

“I did not spy!” Jon said forcefully, “And nae, not Ghost…Nymeria.”

“You can warg through her too?” Gendry asked incredulously.

Jon shook his head slowly, “I cannot, but yet…’tis hard to explain. I think the bond between the two Direwolves grows. I think Ghost sees or hears what Nymeria does.”

“And this was the first time?”

Jon shrugged. “‘Tis hard to say, as I always know I am with Ghost, but I could see him last night and yet neither of us could see you. Still I heard the name. It had to be Nymeria for she slunk out of the Great Hall after Arya.”

“I had no idea,” muttered Gendry, feeling very aggrieved. Yet he could hardly blame Jon for spying if neither he nor Ghost had even been there. Nymeria with her tawny pelt would have been hard, nae almost impossible, to see in the dimly lit corridor.

“There have never been together since they were young. Perhaps ’twas always the way with them?” Jon wondered aloud.

“A shared awareness?” Gendry mused. He thought on the sixth sense that came upon you in the heat of battle; an unseen blow you knew was coming that led you to duck, leaving your enemy’s blade slicing through air where your head had been moments before, the reassuring certainty that your brother-in-arms guarded your back. Aye, there was something at work in those times, even amongst men.
Jon shrugged. “All I can say is that it seems to grow stronger. I had suspected, but last night was the first time I was sure.”

Gendry thought on Nymeria blocking his way when he intended to leave after the harsh exchange of words with Arya over needle and of Nymeria rubbing herself on his thigh. ‘Twas uncomfortable to think on. Jon could have seen it all.

“So…Gendry Waters.” Jon changed the subject.

“Aye. It seems another lifetime ago. I had almost forgotten the name, although the experiences never fade.”

“So you and Arya were making for Winterfell together?”

“Aye and I would have claimed we were friends. Your sister was a force to be reckoned with even then. She was only a child and a slip of a thing; called herself ‘Arry and pretended to be a boy.’”

“Something she still attempts now I fear.”

“And man who mistakes her for a boy now needs his head looked.” Gendry replied with feeling.

Jon nodded, but thought his friend was obviously looking more closely than most. There was no mistaking her sex in that red dress last night, but in her usual men’s garb, at a quick glance you would only see the height, the short hair and the slim build. Jon considered most would be easily fooled, but if you looked more carefully, there was a delicacy to her features that was not apparent in even the most beautiful boy. There was a grace about her neck and the way she carried herself and even, although she tried to hide it, a curve about her hip and her arse that no man could ever posses. No, at the age of ten and seven, Arya’s days of fooling anyone into thinking she was a boy were nearing an end.

“I think that might have been the first time I had ever seen her in a dress,” Jon snorted.

“I have, once before.” Gendry smiled at the memory of Arya in a dress in Acorn Hall “…although I’d concede she looked quite different last night.” He had told her in Acorn Hall that she looked like a nice oak tree. He groaned and shook his head. Truly, his way with words had not improved much in the intervening years.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. Both of them looked to the door in irritation, but both men’s expressions softened when they saw it was Daenerys who sought entrance.

Jon and Gendry stood, up, Lord Baratheon bowing his head with respect, while Jon strode over to the door, delighted to see his beloved wife in any circumstance.

“My Queen, I am afraid you arrive at a most inopportune moment…” Jon began, intending to gently send her away.

“Do not try to dismiss me Jon, Sam told me of the problem and I am here to offer my advice.”

Jon and Gendry exchanged surprised glances. Gendry also gritted his teeth apprehensively. It was hard enough admitting his failings to Jon and Sam, but Queen Daenerys as well? Good grief, he might as well ride off to Storm’s End now and hide his head in shame.

Daenerys was full of worthy intent, bustling in and seating herself in the chair vacated by Sam, before either Jon or Gendry had a chance to argue; not that Gendry would and Jon had begun to realise that arguing with his wife when she had an idea in her beautiful head was a fruitless task. So
both men sat and waited for Daenerys to begin.

Daenerys fixed Gendry with a determined look. “Lord Baratheon…last night you gave us a remarkable impersonation of your father.”

Jon gasped at her directness, while Gendry looked aghast.

“Your father was notoriously fond of drink and whores. Where do you stand on this Lord Baratheon?”

“You cannot ask the man that!” Jon gasped, shocked by his wife’s question. A man would never question another’s drinking habits and, although he knew Gendry avoided whores, men’s behaviour in relation to such things was surely no concern of a woman!

Daenerys pointedly ignored her husband’s outburst, her eyes remaining on Lord Baratheon. She would have her answer.

Gendry groaned and rubbed his big hands over his face, before straightening up, looking her in the eye and replying,

“My Queen, I have heard many, many stories of my father’s boundless appetite for both. As a result, I seldom drink anything but small beer, as I fear ending as he did.”

Daenerys wondered if he meant ending a drunken letch or as a rotten King.

“And whores?”

“Daenerys!” Jon snapped. She went too far!

“I have no reason to avoid answering The Queen’s question Jon,” Gendry muttered. “I have spent too long with the men of The Night’s Watch and other men of honour to find satisfaction in a paid woman Your Grace. My heart lies elsewhere.”

The Queen favoured him with a small smile. Good answer. Arya would be pleased to hear that.

“You said that you seldom drank and yet last night it was noticed by all that you were well into your cups before you left…in a hurry.” Daenerys said delicately, she did not wish to directly mention that humiliating slap directly. Yet.

Jon glared at his wife. A man would never cast all this up to another. His glare was once again pointedly ignored by his wife.

Gendry had his eyes fixed on the far corner of the room. “I…I foolishly resorted to wine to dull my…my…”

“Jealousy?” Arya prompted.

“Aye” Gendry nodded miserably.

“Caused by Arya declining to sit with you? Jealousy that was only increased by her dancing with every other lord?”

“And in getting drunk I only succeeded in embarrassing myself and offending Milady more. I now seek to reverse the damage I have done to my cause and am assured by my companions that wooing Lady Arya will bring her to me.”
“Well, it was noted by all that, after she stuck you, she chased after you. I think a good many men would think having Lady Arya in that red dress running after you would be worth any amount of pain.”

Lord Baratheon looked up hopefully “Really? They did not piss themselves laughing?”

“Well, perhaps that too,” Daenerys had to smile, “but I think you left a good few jealous men behind you.”

The thought seemed to give Lord Baratheon some comfort as he looked marginally less miserable than before. There certainly seemed to be no artifice about the man, for his emotions were plainly writ across his face.

“So you wish to woo Lady Arya?” Daenerys continued, causing Gendry to blush like a maid.

He gave a brief nod of his head to confirm that was indeed his intention.

“I am of the opinion all women wish to be wooed, whether they admit it or not, but you must plan your approach carefully, taking account of your intended’s temperament, circumstances and expectations.” Daenerys said firmly, arching one very elegant eyebrow and looking pointedly as Jon, who now found he was the one blushing like a girl.

He had stormed into Daenerys’ bedchamber while she still slept and forced her into marriage with him later the same morning. Wooing had never come into it. The circumstances had demanded such haste Jon told himself, but nevertheless, she had pricked his conscience and he resolved to embark on some belated wooing of his own.

“You must tell me of what has passed between you already.” Daenerys said, turning her attention back to Gendry.

Despite deciding he would rather face The Others again than have to discuss this with a woman, Gendry knew better than to refuse a direct order from The Queen, so he began hesitantly,

“The Lady Arya and I were acquainted before…before now. We first met as children, fleeing from King’s Landing at the start of the war…”

Daenerys was surprised by this revelation, but she wanted to know if this Lord’s intentions were truly motivated by the love he professed to bear her good-sister or if this was part of some scheme to strengthen a future Baratheon claim on the Iron Throne. Jon refused to believe that Gendry’s desire for Arya’s hand was motivated by anything other than love (in which term was also implied a healthy doze of lust) but Daenerys meant to find out for herself. Sam had presented her with the ideal opportunity and she did not intend to waste it.

“Pray continue…”

“Well…um…we spoke again for the first time yesterday.”

“Did the meeting go well?”

He didn’t need to open his mouth to confirm it had not. He looked miserable again, as if he had just been handed a sentence to a year’s hard labour.

“It did not go in accordance with my expectations.”

She waited for him to elaborate, nodding her head gently to encourage him to continue.
“I…ah…I had anticipated the moment of our being reunited many times…”

From the flush that crept back up his firm jaw, Daenerys was sure he had ‘anticipated’ much more than a conversation with Arya. No doubt he had frequently dreamt of bedding her as Daenerys knew men were wont to do, particularly soldiers, deprived for so long of female company and affection. They had to believe they were fighting for something and that their efforts would be rewarded when they returned home victorious. It was quite apparent that Gendry’s expectations had been far greater than the reality.

“…I had thought about her many times over the years. As she was Jon’s sister, hearing his talking of her…er…kept my interest constant.”

Jon looked rather uncomfortable, as if Gendry was giving away their secrets. Daenerys had to keep from laughed out loud at the two of them.

She could imagine them huddled around some meagre camp fire in some God forsaken place, or on some tedious march, sharing stories of family and the women they had bedded or hoped to. Daenerys wondered if she had ever been the topic of such a conversation between them and resolved to ask Jon at some opportune moment, perhaps after they had lain together and he was feeling softly disposed towards her. She might get the truth then, as any other time he would be too bound by those stupid codes men seemed to adhere to, never to talk of their feelings and dreams to women.

“So, you were expecting a joyful reunion? During which you would ask Arya to become your lady wife, which honour she would accept without hesitation?”

Gendry nodded miserably.

“But she did not accept your offer?” Daenerys asked gently.

“No my Queen she did not.” Gendry took a deep breath before forcing himself to continue, “She declared that she had not thought of me since we had parted and expressed no desire to marry and was particular to point out that she had a definite aversion to marrying me. She was like steel; cold, hard and unyielding.”

The Queen had to suppress a smile at his comparison. This man obviously loved steel and, given time and if he was shown the way, perhaps he could soften and bend Arya, the way he mastered his beloved metal.

Last night, Arya had slapped him, run after him and Sansa had not been sure what they were doing in the corridor afterwards. Daenerys was not sure where Arya’s affections lay, but she intended to make it her business to find out.

Gendry toyed with the pommel of his own sword as he relived the encounter. After a long pause, while the three of them considered their expectations of that meeting, Gendry looked to Jon and spoke again.

“I took Needle from Arya with stealth, trickery and force”

It wasn’t quite how it had happened, but it was still better than admitting he had asked for a kiss and been refused and then there was the matter of his scar…

Gendry rubbed the hard ridge of skin on his cheek. It ached now. He didn’t often think of it anymore, but his whole head hurt and it wasn’t just the after-effects of last night’s wine. He considered himself a master of warfare and of metal, yet Arya had the power to reduce him to a green boy again. He hated being so unsure, so unprepared, making so many mistakes and having to
admit them to others only added salt to the wound.

Jon groaned “Arya would not take kindly to that.”

“No she did not and I fear I weakened my position still further by getting drunk last night.”

Daenerys had heard enough. She was satisfied, convinced his regret was genuine and his love was true. Lord Baratheon, she decided, was honest, passionate and, to Daenerys’ relief, seemed to genuinely wish to marry Arya, rather than seeking to strengthen his claim to the Iron Throne. He and Arya would make a good match. He would temper her fire and she would strengthen his mettle.

Once you got used to his scar he was handsome, perhaps even very handsome and once he stopped acting like an unworthy bastard and got used to his role as a Great Lord, she was sure he would be firm and just. There was however no doubt he needed a strong woman by his side. His lack of lordly manners and social skills was all too apparent and his drunken behaviour at the feast last night concerning. He would need much assistance to cope with the running of a castle and lands. He needed someone determined, someone who would not tolerate the drinking or whoring that had blighted his father’s life. Who better than Arya to keep him in line and ensure he did not stray into such debauchery? Arya would never tolerate such behaviour, as some women might.

Daenerys stood up to go. Immediately, as was expected, Gendry and Jon also jumped to their feet.

“I bid you good day Lord Baratheon…husband.”

The two men exchanged a puzzled look.

“Err, Daenerys…you have not given us your counsel as to how Gendry should woo Arya yet.”

She tried not to let them see how annoyed she was with herself at her omission. Damn. She had been so intent on discovering Gendry’s intentions and true nature, she had forgotten all about why Sam had asked her here in the first place. She must think of some advice on wooing and quickly.

Giving herself time to think, she slowly and deliberately turned to an expectant Gendry with all the Queenly poise she could muster.

“That is a magnificent destrier you ride Lord Baratheon. Who trained the beast?”

She watched with satisfaction as his chest swelled with pride. “I did Your Grace.” Affording a destrier was hard enough; a broken one had been well beyond his purse, but, to his surprise, Gendry had found himself to be very good with horses and had trained Thunder himself, albeit with some guidance from old Lem.

“Then you will know the virtues of patience and devotion. You will know how to get the animal used to your touch, your weight, your command, without losing any of the spirit that made the horse so desirable in the first place.”

“Aye, Your Grace.”

“I suggest you apply the same patience and devotion to wooing Lady Arya as you did to your horse…and there should be marginally less risk of Lady Arya kicking you in the head and killing you.”

Gendry threw back his head and laughed loudly. The Queen had just compared Arya to his horse! That would please his Lady none, but he had to admit he could see some wisdom in it. Both had
tempers that were fearsome to behold and both loved a good fight.

As he laughed and relaxed, flashing his straight white teeth, Daenerys decided he really was very handsome. She turned to Jon. “The idea you and Sam have of using the army to construct a canal and aqueduct to bring fresh water...I think it a good one. King’s Landing stinks and I shall leave come the summer if something is not done about the smell.”

Jon looked startled.

Gendry was initially surprised that The King had chosen to share his problems and plans with The Queen, as it was not usual for a woman to be privy to such things, much less offer her opinion. But as he watched the understanding pass between them, Gendry realised this is what a husband and wife were meant to do; share their burdens and seek support from the other. He would learn that lesson and, if the Gods were willing, he would seek Arya’s counsel on the running of his own lands and soon.

“I hear they have such things in Bravos. As Arya has spent a great deal of time there, I suggest you seek her opinion on the project My King.”

“As you command, My Queen.” Jon bowed low to his wife and the playful smiles that graced both of their faces were proof of the affection between them.

“No time like the present. Arya should be sent to survey possible locations for the aqueduct and for diversion of the Blackwater today. As we are not so far from the river and as we are at peace, I think an escort of one well armed Knight should be sufficient to ensure her safety...”

It was Gendry’s turn to smile.

“...and as I think the day will be a warm one, the Knight should ensure that he has sufficient food and wine for a mid day meal, as it will undoubtedly be too hot to ride back until late afternoon. In fact I think it may be so hot that the Knight should take some soap and cool off in the river.”

Gendry couldn’t help but be shocked and also rather offended as Daenerys turned on her graceful heels and headed for the door. He surreptitiously tried to sniff under his arm. First Arya and now The Queen were telling him he smelled. Perhaps it was his clothes? He could not remember how long he had worn the same, meagre collection of threadbare shirts and britches. Lord Baratheon should have some new, appropriately lordly, clothes! He was so caught up in his plans for a new wardrobe for himself and his new squire too, that he did not notice The Queen pausing at the door, until she coughed politely and addressed him again.

“Lord Baratheon, when the time comes, as I hope it will, you must ensure that Lady Arya is well acquainted with ‘The Lord’s Kiss’. Believe me, no woman will wish to leave your bed once you have bestowed that upon her.”

Gendry opened his mouth to ask, but Daenerys silenced him by saying haughtily, “Ask my King!” before leaving the solar in a swoosh of petticoats and a shake of her long, silver hair.

Gendry turned to Jon to ask, only to find the King, mouth agape and flushed scarlet. Ah, this ‘Lord’s Kiss’ was obviously a powerful weapon and what warrior would not wish to posses such a weapon?

“Jon...?” he started to ask, only to be silence by a wave of Jon’s hand as he made his way to the corner table where the cups and wineskin were placed.

“I know you won’t want one, but believe me, I need a drink before we have this conversation.” Jon muttered as he poured himself a large cup of wine and proceeded to down it in one go. Then to
Gendry’s amazement, he poured himself another and it was hardly past breakfast!

Jon contemplated the second cup and decided he would perhaps refrain after all, as he did not wish there to be any impediment to the ‘discussion’ he would shortly be having with his temptress of a wife.

“I shall make this brief, in order to save your embarrassment and mine and also because I have a pressing need to visit my wife in her chambers. Now about this ‘Lord’s Kiss’…”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed that. See you next Friday…
As soon as Gendry left, Jon sent for Arya. She was, as usual, in her men’s attire. For once he was pleased.

“I have an urgent task that requires your attention. You are not otherwise engaged I hope?”

She shook her head and dropped into the nearest chair, kicking her boots up on the edge of his desk, just as Gendry had done not long before. Arya began noisily munching on an apple she pulled from her pocket. Last night’s efforts at conformity seemed to be forgotten and once again she had no lady-like ways about her at all.

Jon began pacing his solar. His need was genuine. Although he doubted Arya was the person to bring him the information he needed, he had to make this convincing or she would refuse to go and he wanted her to go.

“We intend to build a canal like the ones in Braavos to bring fresh water from the river into the very heart of King’s Landing.”

He watched for her reaction out of the corner of his eye. She did turn her head towards him. At least he had caught her interest.

“And build another to take away the foul water.”

She nodded her approval. “This place stinks.”

“I have the army to build it for me and I want to put the men to work as soon as possible, but I need plans, a route, constructions schedules, materials, foremen. I need everything…”

“Including the gold to pay for it?” she asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Aye.” He said curtly. He wasn’t going to get into a discussion about that with her. “You have been to Braavos…”
She gave him a nod of acknowledgement.

“Ride out today and report back to me with your thoughts. Can we do it? Where do we dig the channel? Any obstacles we must avoid? I need your help Arya.” He hoped he sounded convincing.

“I must go now?”

Yes! He had her.

“Aye. Now. Every day we delay is a day wasted, another day I feed that army for no reward. I will have an escort await you at the bailey gate. Report directly back to me when you return.”

“Pah! I have no need of an escort!”

May the Gods preserve him from headstrong women!

“There are 20,000 men down there, most of whom have not had a woman since winter. They will not care for your rank or your men’s garb, only your…your sex. Now do not vex me Arya and do as I bid for once!”

She reluctantly nodded her agreement and rose slowly, tossing the half eaten apple nonchalantly across the room to land perfectly in his upturned helmet. It rolled around the inside one, twice, three times, before gently coming to a halt in the middle.

If he didn’t wipe his helmet clean immediately, his hair would smell sweetly of apples for the next week. He stifled a snarl of irritation. Seven Hells, he loved his sister, but he would be relieved when she was Gendry’s responsibility and not his.

Jon walked over to rescue his poor, sticky, sweet helmet.

Her voice at the door stopped him in his tracks, “Do you ever dream you are Ghost?”

Ah, he had wondered when she would ask this. He couldn’t keep the smile from his lips.

“I used to think it a dream.”

“Used to? And now brother?”

He turned around and walked over to her, gently taking her hands in his, one bare, one burned and hidden in leather as always. He had never noticed before how similar their hands were. Long, slim fingers, wide palms. His was just a bigger, harder version of hers. He smiled again. No-one was as alike to him as her. By the Gods how he had missed her.

“I spent time with the wildlings. They have not forgotten as much of the old ways as we have.”

She nodded, eyes wide and eager. He saw the Winterfell girl again who used to run after him and hang on his every word. This was the Arya he wanted with him, not the sullen, secretive Braavosi assassin, if assassin she was. He was still unsure of her, too wary to trust her, yet he loved her too much to distance himself from her.

“They call me a warg. To them ‘tis a rare gift, a talent that can be trained and perfected.”

“To see as an animal sees?”

“Not just any animal. Do you not believe we have a connection to these Direwolves? Do you not think there is a reason we found them?”
“You found them Jon. You.”

“Aye, for all of us.” He sighed as he remembered that day. How he handed over the pups, thinking there was none left for him, for the bastard. Until he found the albino cub alone in the snow. The strange one. The outcast. Like him. And had there not been a bond between them from that day forward?

“Can you train me to do it?” Arya asked excitedly, her face lighting up.

Jon nodded as Ghost got up from the floor and padded over to them, gently butting his great head in between their entwined hands. Ghost avoided anyone other than Jon, so Arya was rather taken aback, until she realised what was really happening here, “You did that didn’t you? You made Ghost come over to us.”

“Not made Arya. Asked.”

Nymeria rose languidly and joined their circle. Jon and Arya looked at each other and smiled.

-o-

“I need food!” Gendry demanded of the first kitchen maid he saw. She was a stout, plain woman who startled and gawped at him, dropping the bag of potatoes she was carrying, ignoring them as they rolled about the stone floor.

Belatedly Gendry thought it wasn’t likely that many Great Lords visited the kitchens. He should have sent a maid or a squire to carry out his bidding, like a real lord would. He clenched his jaw and ground his teeth together. He was as much a lord as the rest of them. He would need to remember it and act accordingly.

The woman regarded him warily, crossing her arms over her ample bosom.

“A man of your size – I’m not surprised.”

Realising he would need to explain more, but resenting the time it would take, he started barking orders, as he would at his men

“I need bread and cheese and wine, a blanket or cloth for sitting upon, perhaps some cakes and all to fit in saddle bags. And cups and plates and wine, did I say wine?” He thought on his aching head. “Better make that watered wine.”

She looked at him as if she was regarding her most dim witted kitchen lad.

“You mean a picnic?”

“Aye.” Why hadn’t he thought of that word? Probably because he only had a vague idea of what the word meant before she used it. A picnic. A peacetime word if ever there was one. No wonder he had never uttered it before.

“Are you riding out today Lord Baratheon?”

He nodded; rather taken aback that she knew who he was. It had only been a few weeks since Jon had bestowed that title upon him and, for at least half the time since, he had been out on the King’s
“Then I shall I have your peace offering for Lady Arya brought to the stables.”

She gave him a sly smile and even dared wink! Seven hells, even the kitchen wenches knew what an arse he had made of himself last night!

“I am obliged.” He muttered, regretting his drunken behaviour more fiercely than ever.

But at least the first part of his plan to woo Arya was underway. He headed off to the stables at a great pace to find a suitable mount for his Lady. Gendry had learned at least one lesson from yesterday. He would not repeat his mistake with needle. Nae, he would win no more battles by trickery. He meant to find her the fastest horse in The Red Keep.

Gendry normally saddled his own horse, but not today. ‘Twas time to act like a lord and have someone else do his bidding.

As he marched into the stables, he called out to the nearest lad, “Where is my squire?”

The words were barely out of his mouth when Ty appeared. Gendry barely recognised him. He was clean and wearing a nearly new tunic and britches. They were too big for him, probably loaned to him by one of the smaller men of Bad Company, but still he looked much improved. His hair was long for a boy and golden. Had it sat upon a girl’s head, you would have declared her a beauty for it and his face was as pretty as many a girl’s. This young squire would have the ladies flocking around him in a few years, there was no doubt of that.

Gendry grinned at Ty, clasping him on the shoulder in greeting, but Lord Baratheon’s good humour was not returned.

“I will prepare your horse My Lord.” Ty muttered. It seemed to Gendry as if the boy was glaring at him.

“What’s wrong with your face this morning? Did those old fools allow you wine last night?” Gendry demanded. Mayhaps the boy was experiencing his first hangover if he had tasted some of Lem’s sour wine last night.

“’Tis not that my Lord. I can hold my wine.” Ty said, squaring his shoulders and standing as tall as he could.

Gendry had to stifle laugh. He had no doubt than one cup of unwatered wine would send this pretty slip of a boy running for the nearest chamber pot to empty his stomach.

“So if ‘tis not the wine caused this ill temper, what is it boy?”

“Can I speak plainly My Lord?” Ty asked, a painfully earnest expression on his scrubbed face.

Gendry jerked his head towards the other stable lad, indicating he should make himself scarce. The boy scampered away immediately.

“Of course. There should be no secrets between a Knight and his squire.” Gendry smiled benignly down at Ty. Again it was not returned.

His squire’s voice was high with tension, as he looked Gendry directly in the eye and said accusingly, “’Twas my understanding that a Knight must always show respect to ladies.”
Gendry groaned. Ty must have seen Arya strike him last night. Was there anyone in King’s Landing who hadn’t?

“Is it your custom to offend ladies sir? For if it is, I intend to squire for another Knight.”

Were The Gods torturing him? It seemed as if they had saddled him with a novice squire who already thought himself the Truest Knight in all Westeros.

“I can assure you that the Lady Arya is the only woman in whom I inspire such violence.”

“I hope you did not give her good reason to slap you.” Ty said, giving him a reproachful look.

Gendry groaned again as he remembered calling Arya a cock tease in a red dress. ‘Twas a good job his young squire hadn’t heard that and ‘twas an even better job Ty did not yet have a sword, otherwise Gendry suspected he might have found himself challenged to a duel. The True Knight here seemingly felt obliged to defend that lady’s honour.

By the Gods, how had he happened upon the most chivalrous youth in the whole of Westeros?

“Things are…ah…rather complicated between that lady and me.”

“Are you saying My Lord that you are in love with her?”

Gendry playfully cuffed his squire around the ear, “Now that, young Ty is none of your business!”

The Squire and his Lord grinned at each other.

“As it happens, Lady Arya and I are going for a ride this morning…” The boy’s grin became broader still, “So I need you to ready Thunder for me, but I will also need another horse for My Lady.”

Gendry grinned with pride as he called Arya his lady. He would dedicate himself to this wooing business and make it so.

“I want the fastest horse here.”

The boy gulped anxiously, “That would be King Aegon’s sand steed, but we are not even to exercise the beast without his say so.”

Gendry briefly wondered if it would be worth risking Aegon’s wrath by borrowing his damn horse, but as he would cheerfully throttle Aegon if he ‘borrowed’ Thunder, Gendry quickly decided against it.

“Not that one then, but the fastest horse that belongs to no King.”

The grin was back on Ty’s face and he beckoned Gendry to follow him down one of the rows of stalls. Half way, Gendry spied a milky white mane being tossed proudly. He hoped this was where he was being led, as a white mount would compliment Thunder’s midnight black perfectly. So he was well pleased when Ty stopped at that stall.

‘Twas obvious from first glance that the horse was fast; its legs were long and well muscled and its flanks sleek. The milky white hide was scarcely blemished and he had to admit he had seldom seen a prettier piece of horseflesh. As the lad carefully approached and unfastened the rope that tethered the animal, the whinnies and prancing proved that the animal was spirited too, better yet a mare, which should avoid any biting or stamping from Thunder.

Gendry gave a long, low whistle of appreciation. “Truly this magnificent beast belongs to no man?”
Surely such a beauty must belong to some Knight with plenty of gold?”

“Perhaps to a Knight who has fallen?” Ty suggested. “No-one has claimed her since King Jon’s army arrived.”

Gendry ran his hand over the horse’s muscled haunch, thinking Arya, indeed anyone, would be pleased to ride this animal. “From now on, this is Lady Arya’s horse and you tell all the stable boys and anyone else who asks, Lord Baratheon said it is so.”

“Should I ready her with a lady’s side saddle My Lord?”

Gendry nearly let out a guffaw of laughter, but the boy had asked in all seriousness. Obviously Arya’s reputation had not yet reached as far as the stables. Gendry was sorely tempted to say ‘yes’, simply to witness Arya’s reaction when she was presented with a side saddle. But such jesting with Arya had done him no favours thus far, so he stifled his mirth and replied, “Nae, a regular saddle will do for this lady.”

As Ty led the horse out of the stall, Gendry enquired if the stable lads had given the animal a name. They had not, thinking its owner must surely come to claim it. But none had come.

“I think Lightening a good name for such a fast horse. You will advise Lady Arya accordingly.”

The lad nodded solemnly.

Thunder and Lightening. Lord Baratheon was well satisfied. This day was promising to be infinitely more agreeable than the last. Now he had to find some soap, as Queen Daenerys had so thoughtfully suggested and he would be well provisioned for this campaign. And where was his picnic? As if summoned by the thought, a skinny kitchen girl appeared clutching two, bulging bags.

“Your…your…picnic lord Baratheon” she stuttered. Her head might be bowed, but Gendry could tell her eyes never left his young squire. Still just a boy and already the girls were drawn to him! Seven hells, this squire of his was going to be a trial in more ways than one.

Leaving Ty and the kitchen girl to pack the picnic, he made his way back down the stalls of horses. As he walked, he considered that wooing a woman might be compared to laying siege. It took planning and patience, but eventually the walls would surely be breached. Having had a taste of the treasures that would be his when Arya finally opened her gates, he would not cease until he had wooed Lady Arya into surrender.

By the gods, she was going to be his!

-A-

Arya was pleased Jon trusted her enough to task her with surveying the river and the thought of a day spent outside of the stifling walls of The Red Keep was very appealing. She could easily loose her escort if she wished and claim it was carelessness on either their part or hers. No doubt Jon would have assigned some more of his trusted crows for her protection and none of the ones she had seen looked like they would be at home in a saddle. Nay, ‘twould be easy to slip away once they were out of sight of the castle walls and Jon’s solar.

So it was an unpleasant and unwelcome surprise to find Gendry, a stable lad and two magnificent horses, waiting on her as she strode into the bailey yard. She did not allow her attention to linger on the horses or the boy.

“Seven buggering hells” she hissed under her breath as she stopped dead in her tracks. He was
dressed in boiled leather and high boots, tall and broad and bursting with male energy. She had not expected to see him again so soon and the breath went out of her when her eyes met his.

“At your service Milady” He grinned and bowed, but his blue twinkling eyes never left hers.

She was first to break their gaze. Last night had been a mistake. He had caught her off guard for he had been drunk and she had not felt herself in that frivolous red dress. Such weakness would not be repeated. She did not need a man and she did not want one either. Not even one who looked so impossibly handsome standing beside that big, black horse of his. The beast could have had the same dam and sire as the bloody Hound’s horse Stranger. The timely reminder of Sandor Clegane and her true purpose was welcome indeed. She gritted her teeth and strengthened her resolve.

This was all Jon’s doing, she thought angrily. Would he never cease in his attempts to have her wed? The lot of a wife was a dismal one, and ‘twas not for her. Never. Ever. And Gendry wanted a wife. Jon should find him a timid, obedient little wife who would bear him lots of squalling babes and make him happy, for clearly she would not.

“Mayhaps I feel like staying in the Red Keep today.” She turned on her heel, only to find herself face to face with two smirking crows.

“Ah well boys, it seems you will have the pleasure of Lady Arya’s company this morning, rather than me.” Gendry shouted towards them with a tone of mock regret.

Bugger, bugger, bugger.

He was laughing at her. The crows were smirking at her. Her blood was boiling. She was better than this. A bunch of idiot men would not make her turn and run. She had been looking forward to a ride in the spring sunshine and she was changing her plans because of him?! This would not do. If she wanted to ride out, she would do it and it made no matter if her escort was one handsome lord or two ugly crows.

She turned around again. She would do this and take great delight in reporting back to Jon that his scheming to bring them together had failed and would never succeed.

Gendry watched in amusement as Arya stomped angrily towards him. What a sight she was, with her dark hair shining in the sun and her steel grey eyes sparking with fire. God’s help him; she was breathtaking when she was angry. At it seemed he wasn’t the only one who thought so; his squire gawked helplessly at Arya. Poor Ty seemed to have lost the power of speech.

“How dare he call her his lady! And he said it with a grin; a slow, wicked, dangerous grin. She would put an end to this nonsense now.

“You presume too much Gendry Waters and you will not refer to me in that way again. You are merely my escort for the day, while I undertake this task for my brother.”

Ahh, the ice maiden was returned, but he was confident he could melt that frozen heart, as he had last night. He bowed again, “As you wish Milady.”

Seven buggering hells, he was the most infuriating man and he appeared to enjoy provoking her at every opportunity. She deliberately ignored him and took the reigns of the beautiful white horse from his squire, who seemed to have affected the position of a statue.

The deep flush of her cheeks as she pointedly ignored him pleased Gendry no end. By The Gods, he
had underestimated the effect those eyes and that mouth could have on him. They sent a spark of desire shooting through him as he remembered his hips pressed against hers, his hand on her thigh, his mouth on hers. Breathing hard, he raked his eyes over every part of her, imagining what lay beneath those clothes. What he wouldn’t give to see her naked! He kept his eyes on her figure as she mounted her horse, imagining how those long legs of hers would feel wrapped around his hips. Seven hells, he was behaving as badly as Ty.

Gendry gave his gawking squire a jab in the ribs. When Ty managed to tear his eyes away from Arya, Gendry gave his head an almost imperceptible shake and mouthed ‘Lightning’.

Finally, Ty remembered his task and blurted out, “Your horse is called Lightning Lady Arya and his is Thunder” in a loud, breathless voice. She rolled her eyes at the names, but she rewarded the boy with a smile that spilled over him like a burst of sunshine. Gendry half expected his squire to fall to his knees with joy. And ‘twas no wonder, he was sorely temped himself if it would mean she would favour him with one of those smiles.

Leaving his dumbstruck squire, Gendry swung himself up onto the massive destrier, who stamped and snorted under the weight, eager to be off.

The two animals whinnied and trotted on the spot, blowing out hot, grey mist into the morning air from flaring nostrils. Arya’s mount, sensing the game was on, pranced to the side, catching Arya unawares and almost crashing into Thunder. It took a deal of strength to pull her horse back around.

“Lightning is a spirited horse. Are you sure you can handle her Arya?”

Arya did not dignify that question with a response. She merely narrowed her eyes and gave him a disdainful look. But for all her haughty demeanour, she was not as confident as she wanted him to think. She had ridden plenty of horses, well ponies, when she was younger in Winterfell, but only a few since and none like this. Travelling here with Brienne had been the first time she had been on a horse in a while and her mount then had been a docile old pack horse and not the spirited animal moving restlessly between her thighs now. Also, the ground looked a deal further away than she remembered.

She had no more time to think about it as, with an encouraging kick of his heels, Gendry let the reign loose and they were off, Lightening following Thunder, whether Arya was willing or not.

Ty ran along beside, whooping and waving as they rode out of the bailey, until they passed under the portcullis and he was finally unable to keep up. “Enjoy your picnic!” he yelled after them as they left him behind.

A picnic? Jon had enticed her into this with talk of a worthy task and in truth he had planned a picnic? Her brother had no shame and Gendry had none either if they thought such tricks would win her favour. And enjoy herself? That was the last thing Arya expected to do this day.

Every one of the guards they met stood rigidly to attention as they passed through the curtain wall, across the bridge, over the dry moat and out of The Red Keep. She knew they did not behave that way for her. ‘Twas a surprise to be reminded he was a great commander now and not the bastard boy from Yoren’s recruits. She looked again at the magnificent warhorse, the easy way he controlled the beast, back ramrod straight, cloak billowing behind and Valyrian steel strapped to his saddle. ‘Twas indeed Lord Baratheon rode before her now. He was clearly her Gendry Waters no longer.

Once through the walls, Arya was greeted by the sight and smell of an army of 20,000 men. A city in its own right, camped outside of King’s Landing. It had been dark when Brienne had brought her here and Arya had not truly appreciated the number of men, tents, horses and equipment until she
was amongst it.

As they rode along the rutted central thoroughfare, churned up by a thousand, nae ten thousand horses’ hooves and wagon wheels, men everywhere stopped and turned to stare.

The first time she heard the shout of “Baratheon!” she assumed ‘twas merely one of his men calling out to him, but as the cry was taken up by more and more voices and as men dropped what they were doing and ran to see him, she realised, with a growing sense of awe and dread just how much he had changed and what he had become.

The chant of “Baratheon, Baratheon!” carried on by hundreds of men’s voices was shocking. As more and more joined in, she heard and saw swords being crashed against shields and feet stamped to increase the melee of noise.

No wonder Jon sought an alliance between the crown and House Baratheon. ‘Twas clear to her now that these men would follow this Lord as they had followed his father before him. But would they follow a Baratheon against a Targaryen king? It had happened before, she thought uneasily.

With the war cry of “Baratheon!” ringing in her ears, Arya finally understood Jon’s need to bind this lord inexorably to the Three Headed Dragon. And he expected her marriage to Gendry to do it. She was to be used to keep House Baratheon loyal to the Iron Throne. Her stomach roiled as the hard reality of her situation hit home.

When Gendry reached under his cloak and pulled out a war hammer, the roar was deafening.

And then everything happened at once. Gendry hauled on his reins and Thunder bunched the great muscles of his flanks, gave a snorting squeal and reared. Huge iron clad hooves pawed the air as the destrier prancing with Gendry swinging the war hammer through the air.

The bellowing roar of approval from the men was too much for Arya’s horse and it panicked, rearing too, tossing its head, wide eyed and squealing as Arya fought to keep control. As her horse plunged forwards and down, Thunder was instantly beside them, with Gendry side stepping his destrier in front of Lightning, hanging out of the saddle, trailing his free hand down almost to Thunder’s flank, catching her horse’s bridle and hauling her to his side. Arya could not make out his words above the noise of horses and men but she cursed him as loudly as she could, hoping he would hear her.

Lightning was immediately calmed by Thunder having four hoofs back on the ground. Amid laughter and bawdy shouts, Arya brought her horse back under control. But even then, Gendry did not relinquish control of the bridle and led her horse behind his. She tugged on the reins, wishing to separate them, but his hold was firm and Lightning was more than happy to follow.

To Arya’s humiliation, he led her horse the rest of the way through the corridor of men and, although she tried to close her ears to it, she heard shouts of “House Stark” and “Lady Arya” and worst of all, “bedding” amongst the continuing cries of “Baratheon!” She ground her teeth and thought of the worst names she could to yell at him as soon as they were free from this hell.

As the rows of tents began to thin out, he finally released her horse. She kicked her heels angrily to Lightning’s flanks and her horse shot forwards, Arya did not allow Lightening her head though and wheeled the white horse around, screaming at him, venting all her pent up anger and humiliation.

“How could you be so stupid…so arrogant…so vain as to pull a stunt like that?! You big Baratheon oaf!” she raged, turning her horse in a circle around him.

“Have you nothing to say for yourself?” she yelled furiously, her eyes blazing as he sat impassively
atop that hellish horse.

“You’ll make your horse giddy.”

By the Gods, she could stand him no longer and yanked her horse around before allowing Lightening her head. This is what the white horse had been bred for and Arya could feel it as Lightening tore forwards. Arya crouched low over the horse’s straining neck as the two of them headed into the wind, across the plain and away from him, as fast as they could go.

Gendry held Thunder back, feeling the gathered strength under him as the big destrier stamped, trotting on the spot, eager to be off. But first he wanted to watch Arya. She looked wonderful, balancing with her toes in the stirrups, heel, knee and shoulder in a tight line, bending forward, riding the motion of the horse with her arse in the air.

When she was a good distance away, he finally kicked his heels to his horse, feeling power exploding under him as Thunder plunged forward.

Gendry knew, one way or another, he was going to be chasing after Arya for the rest of his life, for he would not risk losing her again.

-o-

Arya had run her horse as far and as fast as she could. Although there was no longer a purpose to her day, her horse needed water and so did she. Stopping by the river was a sensible thing to do. She followed the course of the river for a while, keeping Lightening to a trot and then slowing to a walk, giving the horse a chance to cool down before they stopped for rest.

She had no doubt Gendry would catch up with them soon and then she would have to face him again. Her anger had dissipated somewhat during the ride, ‘twas impossible to stay mad with the sun on your back, the wind in your hair and such a glorious horse beneath you. She patted Lightening’s neck gratefully. She would like to ride like this every day and wondered how difficult Jon would make it. When she ‘reported back’ to him as he had asked, she did not intend to temper her anger at his continued interference in her life. But she also wanted him to teach her to see through Nymeria’s eyes. Perhaps she might have to temper that anger after all, she thought with a sigh.

The river formed a lazy ‘S’ shape here and there was a slower moving area that was being separated from the main flow by silt accumulated on the bend over years. One day, perhaps soon, it would be blocked entirely. A pool would be formed and the river would flow straight again, but for now, it looked like an excellent place to stop and water her horse.

She slid off Lightening’s back and led the tired horse down to the water. She had the horse unsaddled and was lying on her back in the sun, by the time Gendry and Thunder arrived. She could feel the earth below her vibrate as the big, iron clad hooves pounded over the ground. She deliberately did not sit up, although Lightening was quick to whinny a welcome.

She heard, and felt him jump down and move around, no doubt leading his horse to the water as she had. It would be easiest to ignore him, she decided. She would just lie here peacefully until Lightening was rested and she was ready to return and, in truth she was in need of a rest herself. She had only slept fitfully the night before, because of her dreams of Nymeria and now her horse riding muscles in her legs, her bottom and shoulders, unused for too long, were beginning to stiffen and ache. But ‘twas a good ache and the sound of the water, the birds in the trees and the occasional snickering of her horse was soothing. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine she was here herself, for hadn’t she always been happiest when she was alone? That way there was no-one to annoy you or let you down.
Gendry was not surprised she was choosing to ignore him. He had expected it. ‘Twas all or nothing with her. She was either raging hot or icily cold. He most definitely preferred her when she was full of fire and preferably melting against him. Patience, he told himself, would triumph over haste and besides, he was hot and dusty. She had chosen a good spot and he intended to remove the grime and smell of the ride before he continued with his wooing.

After seeing to Thunder and laying out the picnic things, he unceremoniously stripped off and waded into the water. He took care to do it where she could get a good view, but not so close that she would feel inclined to get up and remove herself. Nae, a retreat would not suit him now. He wanted to engage her in a skirmish, but on his terms.

Gendry came up whooping and streaming water, shaking his head violently to whip the sodden hair from his eyes. The sun was warm on his back, but out in the water, the wind was chill enough to remind him this was still only spring and summer was a long way off.

He realised she was watching him, surveying his nakedness with brazen curiosity. But as soon as he caught her looking, she turned away, with a haughty, dismissive shrug. He grinned.

“Come in, the water is fine.”

“I am fine where I am.”

Aye, watching me, he thought with satisfaction.

She withdrew to the blanket as he plunged under the water again. He amused himself with floating on his back and splashing for no particular reason, all the while hoping she was paying sufficient attention. He even made a show of soaping and rinsing himself twice over. The things he would do for love, he thought wryly as he washed the second lot of stinging soap from his eyes.

When he finally clambered up from the bank, naked and dripping, he was sorely disappointed to find her laying flat on her back on the blanket snoring softly. He was tempted to go and shake himself over her, as a dog might, in order to wake her up, but he liked the contented sound of her sleeping and, if truth be told, he was rather tired himself. Years of soldiering meant he could fall asleep anywhere, anytime; in the saddle, standing up, it made no matter. Lying on a blanket on the ground next to Arya would be no hardship at all.

As he laid his sword out beside him, so ‘twas always to hand, as was his habit, he smiled as he saw needle close to hers. They were more alike that she would care to admit. She would learn that he could be as stubborn as she, once he put his mind to something. And he had put his mind to wooing her.

He laid himself down beside her, clad only in his britches, but chaste and untouching. Wooing he was sure, didn’t allow for seeking pleasure at every opportunity. So he lay beside her, thinking on a knight and his lady he had once seen carved in stone, laying like this, atop a tomb. There would be plenty of time for pleasure to come he was sure. There was bond between them, he knew it and did not doubt she felt it as well, although she would no doubt deny it if asked. Perhaps it scared her. Slow and steady would win him this race.

-0-

When Arya awoke, she was aware of that wondrous thump-thump again. She let the rhythm soothe her, feeling warm, safe, dreamy, sleepily aroused. She didn’t want to open her eyes, although she knew she would.
When she did, she saw no white Direwolf this time. She was lying with her head on Gendry’s shoulder, his arms draped around her, his hand on her breast. Reality came crashing in on her. She shoved him away from her, lashing out with her fists and feet, yelling “Get off me!”

He had been sleeping soundly and the rude awakening startled him. He moved so fast, she was slammed backwards onto the blanket before she could get away from him. He covered his body with his own, pinning her down, one big hand over her mouth, silencing her, as he scrabbled around for his sword with his free hand.

She bucked up against him, trying to throw him off or at least knee him between his legs, but he was much larger and heavier and after a brief, fierce struggle, he managed to trap her beneath him so she couldn’t budge. She tried to bite his hand, but his strong fingers held her jaw clamped shut.

“Lie still you little fool!” he snarled, as he craned his neck around, searching for any threat, his sword in his hand. She could feel his heart slamming against hers, his ragged breathing and realised he had awoken thinking they were being attacked. In truth he had been. By her.

Seeing nothing, he loosened the hold on her mouth as his breathing slowed. She was trapped beneath him and she couldn’t escape. She wasn’t sure she wanted to.

“That is no way to wake a man up Arya. Particularly one who has seen more than his fair share of fighting” he growled.

It was clear being woken so suddenly had not put him in the best of moods.

She shook her head from side to side, trying to talk, trying to shout at him. He loosened his hold enough for her to yell “Your hand was on my breast!”

“I was asleep!” he snapped, then he gave her a sudden, sly smile, “Perhaps you put my hand there in an attempt to seduce me and then changed your mind.”

How dare he suggest she would try to seduce him! He was the most infuriating man she had ever met!

“Get off me you big…” she managed to shout, before he clamped his hand over her mouth again. She bucked up against him in a vain attempt to throw him off. Then, disconcertingly, she realised he was hard and aroused and getting harder the more she bucked.

“Now that is a dangerous thing to do with a man lying atop of you lady” he murmured against her ear. “A man might take that as an offer.” His voice was soft, taunting.

“An offer to get off me!” she mumbled against his hand, but she didn’t dare move and lay stock still. This time he bumped against her. Just a small movement and she wasn’t even sure it was deliberate until he did it again. She could feel a heat building between her legs where the hardness of him pressed against the softness of her. She knew she should be trying to get her hands between them to try and push him away, but there was simply no room, truly, he was crushing himself against her so.

He bumped her again. She shivered, not sure why, as he had no shirt on and the heat coming from his skin was ferocious. She felt his warmth on her breasts, making her teats harden, even through layers of bindings and clothes. She had no idea what was going on in her body, only that it was out of her control and getting worse, far worse, with every bump.

“What do you want from me Arya?” he whispered harshly.

She turned her face away from him. In truth she did not know. Her lips, her breasts, between her
legs, everything was on fire. She couldn’t think clearly. She wanted him closer still, yet she wanted
him gone. She wanted to lie like this forever yet half hoped he would move away.

They were lying together she thought dizzily. They were lying together, like men and women do, yet
with their clothes on. This was what happened between men and women and had happened since the
beginning of time she presumed. It was nothing to do with him and her. He could be any man, she
could be any woman and her body would react like this.

“What…do…you …want?” he persisted, his breath hot against her ear. This is not what she
wanted…was it? He bit her ear lobe gently, sending a wave of pleasure coursing through her. Why
was she resisting? She wanted this, she wanted…

“More” her voice was a hoarse whisper. She knew he was smiling in triumph and she didn’t care.

He put his knee between her legs and prised them apart, settling himself more fully against her before
he bumped against her again, the hard ridge of his erection making her tremble and grow wet in the
place where he pressed. She lost her breath as sensation danced through her. She felt strange,
unsettled, anxious, wound tight but still she wanted more…much more.

“This would be easier if you wore a dress.” He muttered, moving between her legs. She felt his
hand, warm and strong pulling up her undershirt, shockingly brushing against the skin of her
stomach, then on the laces of her britches. She helped him, tugging at the laces as he lifted his hips
up. She wanted to get them undone as quickly as possible, needing to feel him hard against her
again.

To her surprise he did not seem to want them off, but his hand was on her, warm, long fingers
stroking down, caressing, finding her damp, secret place as a shiver of something swept over her
body. Her skin was hot, her stomach in a knot, the fire between her legs burning as she arched her
hips up towards his hand in silent need.

When he slid one finger inside her she jerked at the sudden invasion. “Do you want me to stop?” he
whispered.

“Nae,” she replied, breathlessly, the word swallowed by his mouth over hers, his tongue teasing hers.
But of course she wanted him to stop, this was madness, this was the road to disaster…this was…
wonderful.

He slid a second finger inside her and his thumb rubbed against that most sensitive part at the top of
her legs. She wanted him to stop, she wanted him to go faster, she wanted…oh, she wanted…she
wanted…

Her body arched rigid beneath his as a thousand tiny explosions of light shot through her. His hand
stifled her cries and it seemed to last forever before she went limp beneath him. Falling back down
from the heights she had just soared to, she hid from him, mortified, pressing her face into his
shoulder. He was going to laugh at her, mock her for giving in to him so easily, she just knew it. He
removed his hand from her mouth and gently turned her face towards his.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered, before he kissed her.
Hope you enjoyed that. The next chapter has to be The Lord’s Kiss…

Until then, Merry Christmas.
Ok, it’s a bit later than usual, but with only 5 hours sleep and starving my husband and kids it still wasn’t ready.

Thanks as always to Brazilian Guy for his inspiration and a special mention to Mrs Jessie Pinkman as I stole her line about a real life horse’s arse!

“No-one has ever told me I was beautiful before…or has done that to me before.”

Gendry liked that. “I will gladly tell you how beautiful you are and give you pleasure such as that, aye and more, everyday for the rest of our lives, if you will have me.”

If she would have him? Arya wanted everything he had to give her and more. She rubbed the back of her hand against his hard stomach, sliding it down further between them until her fingertips touched his laces. Before her hand found what she was truly seeking, he grabbed her wrist, stopping her.

“If we are to avoid my getting a child on you, I would be best to keep my britches on.”

“Can I not…pleasure you the way you pleasured me?” she asked, a little breathless.

“You would do that for me?”

She was pleased by the eagerness of his reply and the hopeful look on his face. She wanted to touch him, feel skin against skin, but she made do with running her hand down the outline of his shaft as it strained against the rough material of his britches, smiling at his sharp intake of breath. She ran her hand up and down again. He let out a strangled groan as she did. Arya was secretly thrilled that she could obtain from him the same sort of reaction he had been able to draw so easily from her.

“Are there not ways…to…to…can you not…?” she stammered, before falling silent, embarrassed by what she wanted to ask.

“Bring us both pleasure without spilling my seed inside you?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“You must not be afraid to ask for what you want Milady.”

“But…I do not know what I want.” The words came out in a breathless tumble. She wanted, oh she wanted, but she did not know quite what or how to ask for it.

“Do you want my cock inside you?”

The crudeness of his words both shocking and thrilling her. Yes, that was what she wanted. She wanted his cock inside her, she wanted it as badly as she had ever wanted anything.
"Yes there are ways." He gave her a wolfish grin, "But first I want to see you naked Arya. I want to lay you down on a featherbed with warm covers, bestow the Lord’s Kiss upon you and claim you as my own."

"The Lord’s Kiss? But you have kissed me senseless already."

"Aye, but not there." He bumped his hips against hers again and she felt his shaft hard against that tender place, sending another thrill through her and another surge of wetness to soak her smallclothes. Where did he mean? He very slowly and very deliberately bumped her there again,

“Surely you do not mean…there?”

“Oh aye lady, I do.”

Then to her surprise, he rolled off her and onto his back beside her. “We must stop.”

“Why must we?”

“For I will not have you for the first time out here on the hard ground and I do not know if I will be able to hold back if we go much further.”

“I do not mind, really I do not.” But even as she said it, she took a surreptitious look around wondering if anyone had already seen them. She saw nothing except their two horses, grazing peacefully by the side of the river.

“Aye, but I mind and I we will do this properly Arya. But let us lie here awhile before we go back, for we have matters to discuss you and I.”

She blew out a low sigh. She hoped he did not mean this marriage business. What was wrong with taking pleasure when the opportunity arose? Was that not what Sam had said, “Those who have been through the seven hells should take happiness where they found it”? And Gendry had made her happy, aye he had made her squirm with it. ‘Twas nothing to be ashamed of, she decided – he was a handsome man and he knew how to please her. She liked his sky blue eyes and his smiling mouth. She liked that he was both familiar and a stranger to her and she liked that he was bigger and stronger than her. It made her feel both a little scared and protected at the same time. It was exciting. He was exciting.

Still, she would be need to be practical. He was a man, no longer a boy. She was no longer a girl, or she wouldn’t be soon if he kept his promise, she thought wickedly, ‘Twas all only natural and hardly surprising.

She would purchase some moon tea. They would take pleasure from each other while they could as Sam had suggested. Gendry would surely be pleased, for she would make no other demands on him; he would still be free in the future to find himself an obedient little wife who would make him happy and she would be free to complete her revenge and, thereafter, providing she survived, do as she pleased. If he mentioned marriage again, she would tell him so, but she hoped he would not mention it just yet.

Gendry pulled her tightly to him with one arm and crossed the other behind his neck, supporting his head and giving him a better view of her. Her dark hair shone in the afternoon sun, little wisps of it curling around her ears and waving gently in the occasional spring breezes that sighed over them. Whatever Arya had done to her hair made her look infinitely more feminine. He wondered if she realised. He resolved not to point it out, as he doubted that would please her. She really seemed to have no idea how beautiful she was and was even oblivious to the fact that every man in the Great
Hall had his tongue hanging out and a tent in his britches at the sight of her in that red dress.

Why she chose to wear such ugly clothes was beyond him. Perhaps when he was ordering himself some new clothes, he would commission some for her too. Oh, not dresses, for she would not thank him for them, but perhaps britches of the softest brown leather and shirts of silk, that would cling to her form in all the right places. Ah, but then maybe he wouldn’t want other men to see the firm globes of her breast or the sweet curve of her arse. This was not doing anything to lessen the discomfort in his too tight britches and ’twas a dilemma he had not happened upon a solution for when she interrupted his daydream,

“I should have thanked you.”

Really? Did she not realise he was hoping she would show her appreciation for the pleasure he had given her when they returned to The Red Keep?

“There is no need to thank me. Your pleasure is my pleasure Arya.” And was it not true? To see her face as she came apart under him was a wonderful thing to behold.

“I did not mean that!” She bumped her elbow against him playfully. “I meant when Aegon made that jape at the feast and you stood up for me.”

He snorted. “Aegon can be an arse. I was not going to let him praise your sister and slight you when you were the more beautiful by far that night.”

Arya screwed her eyes shut and her stomach clenched in a tight knot. Was he joking? Would he joke about this when he called Aegon ‘an arse’ for doing the same thing? She thought not, but she was not fool enough to think herself comparable to Sansa.

“Do not tease me Gendry, for I do not like it.” She tried to make light of it, to sound as if she didn’t care, yet she heard the tremble in her voice and cursed herself for it. When she opened her eyes, she had to quickly turn them to the sky. His eyebrows were knitted together and he looked angry, annoyed.

What was wrong with her that she could not see how beautiful she was? “I am not teasing Arya. Why can you not see in the mirror what everyone else sees – a very beautiful woman? Are the men of Braavos all blind? What has happened to you and where have you been that you have not had a man tell you every single day how beautiful you are and hear him thank the Gods every night for his good fortune?”

Should she tell him that she had been hiding? Hiding behind other faces and guises, learning how to disappear and perhaps loosing a bit of herself in the process. She had tried to hold onto Arya Stark, despite the Kindly Man’s instructions to the contrary, but had some of her been lost in The House of Black and White? Mayhaps that bit of her that could trust and forgive and love? She shook her head and gave herself a mental shake. She was being a sentimental fool.

“I just like hearing you say it stupid.” She gave him what she hoped was a flirtatious little smile, like the ones she had seen other woman give to men when they wanted to distract and disarm them. “Now will you tell me how you came to be Lord Baratheon? For I have not congratulated you on that either.”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. That false smile of hers did not fool him. ’Twas obvious she was avoiding his questions, just as he avoided hers. Once again their similarities were all too apparent. What to tell her about his rise to Lord and what to leave out? He wasn’t secure enough of her affection yet to confess all. Not yet, but soon. His scar itched and he dampened down the itch to
scratch it. That confession would come later, but he would make a start on the rest now,

“I owe it all to Brienne of Tarth.”

That was obviously a good start as Arya pushed herself up, leaning her arms across his chest and settling her chin on the back of her crossed hands, eager to hear his tale.

“After Beric died, The Brotherhood was in trouble.”

“Beric really died?” She sat up, shocked. Although, Beric had died many times before, she had assumed that the trick to bring him back could ever be repeated. “Could Thoros not raise him as before?”

“No, and that is a different tale, for another time. Shall I continue with this one?”

She nodded, settling down again on his chest to listen. He breathed a silent sigh of relief.

“There were ah…certain of The Brotherhood who wanted rid of Brienne for her alliance with Jaime Lannister.”

“I hear she is in love with him.” Arya whispered wickedly.

“Aye. And The Kinglasyer has got a good one there. I only hope he appreciates her.”

Arya sniffed. There was that pang of green jealousy again. She told herself she was being foolish, for on the crossing from Braavos, Brienne had only claimed, with pride, to be great friends and allies with Lord Baratheon. Of course Arya had no idea then, who Lord Baratheon would turn out to be.

“Brienne claims I reminded her of Renly Baratheon from the moment she laid eyes on me. Has she told you of him?”

Arya shook her head. Had Renly not been on the Small Council when her father had been murdered? And had he not fled King’s Landing without lifting a finger to help her father? Arya had him down for a coward and had not been sad to hear he had died. ‘Twas just one less self proclaimed King to worry about.

“She may love Jaime now, but her heart belonged to Renly first and I think she took a liking to me because of that. Do you remember that hell spawn Biter? A companion of that Jaqen you took a liking too?”

Arya startled at the mention of Jaqen’s name. How much did Gendry know? She had never told him of Jaqen’s parting gift. Had she? She nodded hastily, not wanting to discuss Jaqen H’ghar and the path he had set her upon. Must all of their conversations be so awkward and fraught with traps?

Gendry gave her a queer look, but he continued, “Biter was the first man I killed. I put a spear through the back of his neck to save Brienne…and there have been too many more since.”

If she wanted, Arya could have counted how many she had killed by the time Gendry had first blood on his hands, but she did not wish to remember, not here in the sunshine, with the sparkling water and his heart beating in time with hers.

“We became close Brienne and I. I told her about Yoren being paid to take me from King’s Landing and that two Hands’ of The King had wanted to look at me and that both wound up dead shortly after.”
Arya did not want to think on her murdered father either and urged Gendry on to complete his tale.

“Brienne guessed the reason for their interest in me, although she had not yet confided her thoughts to me. I was still a boy in those days without the guts to stand up for what I knew to be right, but the bold Brienne saw something in me I had not admitted to myself. When she was condemned, I did not know what to do, for we were friends by then, but I did not want to go against the will of The Brotherhood. She was to be hanged and…”

“Hanged?! No!” Arya sat up again, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Aye.” How would it go when he finally had to tell Arya ‘twas her own mother, or that abomination of her mother, Lady Stoneheart, who had given the order? That it was Lady Stoneheart who had scarred his face during the ensuing fight? That it was he who had, finally, killed her mother? He forced himself not to think on that now, “When Brienne had her head in the noose she shouted one word, one word that spurred me into action and set me on the path that led me to where I am today.”

“And the word was?”

“Baratheon”

There was silence as they both pondered on the consequences of that one shouted word.

He was the first to speak, “I knew it Arya, deep down I knew it, but I needed someone to believe in me. I needed something to force me to step forwards and claim my father’s name. Brienne did that for me and here I am. Lord Baratheon. My sword there…” he nodded to it lying, gleaming in the sunlight beside him, “’Tis called ‘Oathbreaker’, a gift from Brienne for saving her life.”

“Valyrian steel?” Arya asked, itching to touch it, to test it, to learn for herself if the myths about such swords were true.

He nodded. “’Tis a magnificent sword and I shall be sad to see it go.”

“Go? Where?”

Another deep sigh, “Brienne was given it by Jaime, who named it ‘Oathkeeper’. The Lannisters had Tobho Mott forge this one and another, ‘Widow’s Wail’ from your father’s great sword.”

Arya looked at the blade, in horror this time, no longer wishing to touch it or be anywhere near it. The ‘widow’ of ‘Widow’s Wail’ would be her mother. ‘Twas all Arya could do to choke down her own wail of regret and despair. She wanted to hear no more about it and she did not wish to hear of the other awful events which resulted in Brienne changing the sword’s name from ‘Oathkeeper’ to ‘Oathbreaker’.

“Jon has the other sword and has asked me to re-forge ‘Ice’. ’Tis another task I must attend to before I leave King’s Landing.”

“And you can do that? You can forge Valyrian steel?” There were few men alive who had such knowledge and she was taken aback that he could be one.

Gendry shrugged, as if ‘twas nothing of consequence she asked. “I have not done it before, but I will. Tobho is old and sick, but he will guide me and Sam has books with the spells. He tells Jon that, as there are Dragons in the world again, the re-forged sword will be even more magnificent than before and Jon wants that sword.”

Arya was not surprised to hear Jon coveted ‘Ice’ so much, for it belonged to the Lord of Winterfell
and symbolised the power of House Stark and of the North. In claiming the sword, Jon would be claiming all it represented. The thought sat uneasily with her. What of Bran? Jon said he was in Winterfell and had begun the task of rebuilding the castle as his name-sake ‘Bran the Builder’ had first constructed it. Should the sword not be his?

“I hear your brother Bran is no warrior.”

Had Gendry read her thoughts or had she said aloud what she was thinking?

“Jon will have the sword Arya and there is no-one to gainsay him on this.”

“Not even you? House Baratheon has no Valyrian steel. Why not keep this sword for yourself?”

“I swore my oath to Jon long ago. I will not break my vow now.” He growled, leaving her in no doubt there would be no changing his mind. “In return for my fealty, all of the Storm Lands, the great castle of Storm’s End and my title were given to me, by The Three Headed Dragon. They belong to me. I burn to leave King’s Landing behind and claim what is rightfully mine.”

“Then why do you linger?”

“Is the answer not obvious Arya? I have waited for you, in order that we may claim Storm’s End together.”

“Oh.” Fuck! No matter how she tried to avoid it, their conversations kept coming back to marriage or Braavos or Jaqen or Valyrian steel or countless other things that neither of them wished to discuss. Every word that passed between them was like a duel; thrust, parry, both of them testing the other, avoiding anything that might end the duel prematurely, as if needing to size up their opponent’s strengths and weaknesses. She had no intention of riding to Storm’s End unless the bloody Hound was hiding there. She needed to steer the conversation back onto safer ground,

“But much must have happened since Brienne shouted that word to cause those soldiers to shout your name as they did today.”

“My name? Aye, but ‘tis not Gendry they are prepared to fight and die for Arya. They fight to protect what they have and they fight to gain something better. Lord Baratheon, wielding his war hammer, is a symbol for them, a call to arms, a promise of protection and success in return for fealty. If my ‘stunt’ as you put it, with my horse and my hammer, rallies men to me, encourages men to follow me, to believe in me, then I shall use it as a weapon against my enemies.”

“The men did seem impressed.” She admitted, rather grudgingly.

He snorted, “And you were not?” She did not answer. In truth she was, but ‘twould not do to tell him. She thought him arrogant enough already.

“Do not mistake me for the boy you used to know Arya. While I am still Gendry, I am no longer ‘Waters’ for I have claimed my father’s name and all that goes with it.”

He played with her hair, letting it slide through his fingers, stroking the back of her head, the nape of her neck. He wanted her so much and not just to lie with her. He wanted to claim her as his own, even more than he wanted to take Storm’s End. He wanted to make Arya his for ever, protect her, to make sure no-one could ever touch her or hurt her again. He ached for them to be settled in Storm’s End, to have a home where they could plan their future together, in peace.

They both sighed. Him, for the troubles he still had to deal with in the Storm Lands and because of his desire for Arya. Her, for the implications of his lordship; his need for marriage and heirs and
Jon’s wish to bind House Baratheon to House Targaryen. Arya groaned, Jon thought his own marriage to be so bloody wonderful he seemed intent on forcing everyone else down the same path. However, she was not going to mention that now, for had Gendry not just given her the most delightful pleasure and was she not eager for more?

Nae, she did not want to jeopardise the promise of ‘more’ by arguing with Gendry about his bull headed plan to marry her. Plenty of people enjoyed ‘relations’ without being wed. In that respect, Braavos had been a revelation. Perhaps it was the heat as, although she had been only a child in Winterfell, she was sure that there was not nearly as much carnal activity in the North as in The Free Cities. Perhaps the men of the North had to keep it well hidden in case it froze and broke off. She wondered if that was the real reason those Bloody Crows took a vow of celibacy – fear of snapping their frozen cocks off. She rolled that forbidden word silently around her mouth. Cock. Oh, the thrill it had given her to hear Gendry ask if she wanted his cock inside her. Next time he asked, she would not hesitate, she would say ‘oh yes, now please’. The excitement and the naughtiness of it made her giggle.

“What amuses you Arya?”

Oh, she had forgotten herself and become lost in lustful thoughts of carnal relations. She wriggled against him as she said ‘Nothing’. Denying everything, while at the same time feeling how wet she was between her legs and how her breasts tingled and her nipples tightened, even under their bindings. Oh, she did not want to wait, but he had told her she must, and she did want to hear the rest of his tale about becoming Lord Baratheon.

“So Jon pronounced you Lord before the battle for King’s Landing?”

“Ah, well, ‘twas not really a battle at the end of it. We had to break the siege, for if Queen Daenerys had truly let loose her dragons upon us then the outcome would have been a forgone conclusion.”

“I know that bit.” Arya said impatiently, “I’ve heard about Aegon’s scheming and his trickery to force Daenerys into a marriage with Jon to end the war.”

“Aye, well, ‘twas his idea, true enough, but we all played our part and can you deny it has worked out well for all concerned? Our army was not roasted alive by Dragon’s breath and the occupants of King’s Landing did not starve to death.”

She felt him shrug under her, “I can think on many worse outcomes for The Realm and for us all.” Then he paused for a while, saying nothing but stroking her hair. She could tell he was smiling again, “Jon and Daenerys have made a rare match, have they not? I have never seen two people more caught up in each other than they are. Has Jon told you he scaled the walls of the Queen’s tower and stole her in the wilding way?”

“No!” Arya pushed herself up onto one elbow and stared at him, intrigued. Seven Hells, lying like that, his eyes seemed to be reflecting the pale blue sky above. She could not look into them, for fear she might fall in and never manage to climb out again. She wrenched her eyes away to look down at his chest. She trailed her finger tips through the silky black hair that stretched across the middle and down, wondering where that trail ended. Oh, this was almost as much of a distraction as his eyes. She must take a firm hold of these lascivious thoughts, or she might be tempted to beg him for his Lord’s Kiss here and now and she did not want to beg. Never. Ever.

“Would you have liked that Arya? If I had come through your window and stolen you away?”
She looked up quickly; only to find that he had his eyes shut. Probably because he knew what her reaction would be and he was concerned she would spit in those sky blue eyes of his. “Had you tried, you would not have lived to see another day,” she said, keeping her voice low, hoping it sounded menacing, as she wanted to leave him in no doubt that she would not tolerate such…such…possessive behaviour. She could not be stolen as if she was a horse, or a sack of grain!

“I thought you might say that,” he chuckled, “that’s why I thought it a better plan to woo you.”

“Woo me?” She repeated in surprise; not quite sure what he meant or, if she was being completely honest with herself, why anyone at all would want to ‘woo’ her.

He opened one eye and peered at her, squinting against the sun.

“Aye, woo you. What else would you call this picnic? And that little pleasure I gave you earlier?”

“Oh. I had not thought it so well planned.” So, he had intended her to lie beside him, nae, under him all along! He had expected her to melt under his touch. He hadn’t even had to try very hard, for she had succumbed easily enough. All he had to do was touch her and she was prepared to open her legs for him and truly, her only regret was that he had not gone further. Seven buggering hells. Perhaps she was susceptible to this wooing after all.

“Oh Aye, and I am not finished yet.” He said, a sly grin playing on his lips.

“You are not?” she couldn’t help but be intrigued by what else he had planned, and truly it was hard to keep her face impassive and not grin right back at him.

“I have it on good authority that you will adore my Lord’s Kiss and that when I bestow it upon you, will never wish to leave my bed,” he said smugly.

She bristled with jealous rage. “On whose ‘good authority’ do you have this Gendry?”

‘Twas all she could do not to slap him again or maybe even stab Needle into his heartless chest there and then. How could he lie there smiling and tell her another woman had adored his bloody Lord’s Kiss? Perhaps even the woman who had scarred his face? Damn him to the seven hells! ‘Twas obvious he was more experienced than her, but did he have to cast it and his other women up to her? Mayhaps it was that Tyrell bitch who had been all over him at the feast. She looked as if she could teach any man a thing or two.

When he didn’t immediately answer, she demanded, “Who adored it Gendry? Who?”

There was panic in his eyes as the magnitude of his mistake began to dawn, and she watched his mouth move wordlessly before he finally managed to utter a strangled, “Umm…umm…’tis not as you think Arya!”

“And you know what I am thinking do you? Can you tell I want to gut you right now you heartless pig, oaf, you horse’s arse!” She could control herself no longer and punched him.

“Oof! Oof! Oof!” he grunted as every blow hit its intended target. Then she was up and stalking off to her horse as quickly as she could, as quickly as she could to get away from him! She might have run if she hadn’t thought it would give him the impression that she was fleeing and crying. And if she was crying, they were only tears of rage!

She was almost by Lightning when Gendry grabbed her arm and spun her around.

“At least give me a chance to explain!”
“You…you think I want to hear any more of how you have pleasured other women with your Lord’s Kisses?! You arrogant…you arrogant…bastard!” she spat.

“Calm down and listen to me!”

She tried to turn away, but he grabbed her other arm and pinned them both at her sides. She was taken aback by the suddenness of it and the fact that he had, once again, caught her off her guard. Why did he have to have the power to un-nerve her so easily? When she was with him she was never calm as still water or quiet as a deer or the Arya she knew at all.

“I have never kissed another woman in the way I have kissed you – either on your lips or…” he dropped his eyes to the top of her legs, “…they way I want to down there.”

“Do not make things worse by lying to me Gendry Waters! You said you knew I would never want to leave your bed. Another woman told you that, didn’t she?”

He ground his teeth. ‘Twould hardly help his cause at the moment to tell her it was Daenerys’ idea. Given her fit of rage, Arya would likely run him through and perhaps Daenerys too if she got the chance.

“‘Twas not another woman. In truth I have never…” Seven Hells, this was excruciating, yet he saw no way out without simply telling her the truth. “‘Twas all Jon’s idea.” He blurted out.

“Jon?! You and Jon planned this? This picnic? This Lord’s Kiss? This bloody wooing?”

“Ah, well, the bloody wooing would be Lem and Anguy’s idea.”

“Lem Lemoncloak and Anguy The Archer?”

Gendry gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head. That information seemed to make her angrier still.

“So the whole of The Brotherhood has a hand in this…this…Mummer’s farce?”

“Bad Company now Milady and I did not say that.” He said through gritted teeth.

“I want to hear nothing more that comes out of your scheming Lord’s mouth and as for your Lord’s Kiss – you can shove that up your arse if there’s still enough room up there once you have shoved your marriage proposal and your stupid big head up there too!”

“If you calm down I will…”

“Do not tell me what to do!” she interrupted, her voice hard and cold. “No-one has told me what to do since I was nine and you will not start now.”

“Just because you haven’t had anyone telling you what to do doesn’t mean you haven’t needed someone.”

She swung herself up into the saddle and looked down at him, sneering. “I don’t need anyone.”

How did he salvage this mess? He thought he had her. Seven buggering hells, he could have taken her maidenhead on that blanket, she would have had to marry him and he would have saved himself all this aggravation.

Gendry did not let go of Lightning’s reigns, holding fast as she tried to turn the horse around. “A wager Arya. I challenge you to a wager.”
“I am not interested!” she spat, “Now let go of my horse!”

“If I return to The Red Keep first, I get to bestow the Lord Kiss upon you.”

She curled her lip at him, “You are a bigger fool than you look. Did you not see how fast this horse is? Lightning and I beat that black beast of yours easily.”

“You will take my wager then?”

“If you loose, you pay me twenty gold Dragons.”

He did not have twenty gold Dragons, but if he did not win this wager, he would be losing something much more valuable than gold he did not have. If he let get away from him again, would he ever get her back? He could forget trying to woo her back.

“Aye, I’ll take your wager.”

“Then you are a fool Gendry Waters.”

He bowed stiffly to her, before letting go of the reigns. She immediately turned her horse and kicked her heels to Lightning’s flanks. “I shall see you and your twenty gold dragons back at The Red Keep” she shouted over her shoulder as she rode off in the direction they had come.

With a whistle to Thunder, he began gathering up the picnic things. The destrier came trotting immediately, keen to get going, having seen his new companion leave. Gendry took a look at the half eaten, half packed picnic at his feet. What was he doing? Let whatever wild animals were around enjoy it. He doubted that old kitchen maid would miss a few cups and a blanket. There was no time to waste. He took hold of Thunder’s reigns and patted his old friend’s nose, turning his horse’s head so they could both watch Arya’s and Lightning’s arses recede into the distance.

“See that white mare we were chasing all morning? Well, we need to catch her now boy. You won’t let me down now, will you?” Thunder gave a snort and tossed his head, as if he understood every word and was affronted that Gendry could consider the white mare beyond catching.

Lightning was faster, there was no doubt, but it had been a hard, fast ride here this morning and Ty believed Lightning had not been properly ridden in weeks. The mare would be tired and Thunder had stamina and courage beyond any other horse. Gendry was staking his future on Thunder being able to overtake Lightning and her damn mistress before they reached those red walls.

Gendry swung himself up into the saddle. He didn’t even need to give the word and they were off.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry GRRM. I know you are on record as saying that Brienne’s shouted word is going to be “Sword”, but I think my word is better! I’ve got high hopes for Gendry – even if you haven’t. So there!

And, no Lord’s Kiss …yet. The chapter is too long and it’s not ready, but it’s hot! I won’t make you wait until next Friday as I know you have already waited long enough. You will get your Lord’s Kiss later on this weekend; you just need to patient a little while longer…
Thunder and Lightning

Chapter Notes

Twelve thousand words in a single weekend! I’m spoiling you. Better not get used to it, but I’m hoping it makes up for that week I missed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gendry allowed Thunder his head. The destrier knew what to do, aye, perhaps better then Gendry did himself.

Thunder set a steady pace. Arya and Lightning had set off at a gallop, but Thunder played the wiser game. Many times he and Gendry had covered longer distances than this together. They shared an instinctive understanding, Thunder would slow to a trot when tiring and Gendry never pushed, for his horse would resume the ground covering canter soon enough, his long strides eating up the miles. Gendry was confident Arya had no such plan, otherwise he’d be going cap in hand to Jon, or Gods forbid, Aegon, looking to borrow twenty bloody gold Dragons. Aye, Arya had a high opinion of her own worth indeed.

Lightning was certainly faster, for she was already almost out of view. Gendry reckoned that, setting such a pace, Arya could sustain two or three miles at most before she would have to rest her mount. Slow and steady would win him this race.

Gendry let his mind wander, as it always did when soothed by the steady beat of Thunder’s hooves, rolling like a three beat drum. Arya was as prickly as a hedgehog and each time he thought he had stroked those prickly spines of hers into submission; one wrong word was enough to send her curling into a defensive, angry ball whose prickly armour repelled his every advance. A man could only take so much rejection. They must reach an understanding soon, as Gendry doubted his wounded pride would withstand many more such assaults.

Arya was angry, nae, she was furious, although as the ground sped past under Lightning’s hooves and as the wind blew through her hair, Arya found it harder to remember why she was quite so angry. Gendry had never claimed to be a maid and ‘twas obvious from his first kiss that he was well practiced in the art of kissing a woman senseless. Then why did it pain her so to think of him kissing another woman as he had kissed her, with his tongue dancing in her mouth, his hands warm and possessive on her, drawing her deeper in? Why did her stomach drop away every time she thought of another woman lying beneath him, his whispering soft words against that woman’s ear and putting his cock any other woman who was not her? ‘Twas like a knife stabbing at her, leaving little tiny pinpricks of pain and blood time and again. Seven buggering hells. She was jealous. Arya Stark, who did not want or need anyone, the lone wolf, the faceless man, was sick and green with jealousy.

Arya, who had long believed vengeance alone was enough to sustain her, was no longer so certain. She needed more. She wanted more. She wanted him. There could no longer be doubt about that. Her mind was decided. She would have him, but ‘twould be on her terms.
Over halfway, Gendry spied what he thought was a white horse’s rump in the distance. Thunder blew out a snort of confirmation, as if chiding Gendry for ever doubting it could be done. The gap was closing steadily. ‘Twas obvious Lightning had run herself out, as the horse had slowed to a walk. Gendry’s delight was complete when he saw Arya drop down from the saddle and begin to walk beside her horse.

He patted Thunder’s neck gratefully. The wager was already won. Thunder could continue at this pace for the rest of the afternoon and into the night if need be. However, a little victory celebration was in order and he gave a kick to Thunder’s flanks, sending the mighty destrier galloping to close the last distance between them. When they were near and Thunder began to slow, Gendry urged his horse on, wanting to leave Arya in no doubt of his ability to easily win this wager and claim his prize.

Lightning and Arya both stopped walking and stood silently to watch as Gendry and Thunder approached in a storm of pounding hoofs and dust. Gendry held the reigns in one hand, so he could give an extravagant flourish with his other as he hung out of the saddle and bowed to her. His grin was met by her ill tempered grimace.

Once he was well past, he wheeled Thunder around and trotted the snorting horse back, point proved.

Lightning and Arya were still walking, their heads down, well and truly beaten. He would be magnanimous in his victory and hoped she would, in turn, be gracious in defeat.

“Go on without me, Lightning needs a rest” Arya said miserably as he came alongside.

“No hard feelings,” he grinned, leaning over from his high vantage point and extending his hand. She looked at it.

“Take my hand Arya.”

She reluctantly held up her hand, intending to shake his. She shrieked as he pulled her up effortlessly and plopped her down in front of him. Arya put up a half hearted struggle as Thunder sidestepped, surprised by the sudden extra weight. But ‘twas useless, Gendry had her firmly encircled in his arms and she already knew he was far stronger than she was. Anyway, where was she going to go? ‘Twas a long way down to the ground.

She tried to sit in front of him without touching him, but Gendry hauled her back against him.

“Relax. Would you rather walk?”

He was warm and solid beneath and behind her. She could feel his hot breath stir her hair and the rise and fall of his chest against her shoulder. His strong arms encircled her, holding her captive. There was no escape and she surrendered to him as she leant her head on his shoulder, listened to the beat of his heart and the slow, soothing rhythm of their horses’ hooves. Despite her earlier nap on the blanket, she found her eyes closing and her head nodding as they walked. Why fight it? She was becoming used to surrendering when she was with him and let sleep claim her again.

Arya awoke with a start to see the tents of the army’s camp around them. ‘Twas twilight and there was no yelling of ‘Baratheon’ now. There were few soldiers to be seen and they seemed to be settling down for the night. Lord Baratheon nodded acknowledgements to the salutes he received from the men who noticed them pass quietly by.
“You can let me down now,” she said, her voice little more than a sleepy whisper.

He kissed the top of her head. “We are nearly there Arya. I’ll let you down soon enough.”

She sighed. Then he would claim his Lord’s Kiss and there was nothing she could do to prevent it. A wager was a wager after all. And, truth be told, she felt sleepy content in his arms and lying with him in a featherbed would hardly be the worst she had suffered as the result of losing a wager.

Ty was waiting for them at the entrance to The Red Keep. The boy held a lantern aloft and Arya could see his beaming smile looking up at them as Gendry stopped before they passed under the portcullis.

“You can get down now Arya.”

“But we are nearly there!” She did not want to get down and walk to the stables; she was too content where she was.

“But if you do not get down, then you enter The Red Keep before me and then I loose our wager.”

He let the reins slide through one hand, lifting it over her head so she was no longer trapped. When she made no move to dismount, he gave her a firm push so she slid off his lap and over the side. Ty put out an arm to support her as her feet landed unsteadily on the cobblestones. Her muscles, unused to riding, had seized up and her legs felt as stiff as a new born foal’s. Mercifully, Ty did not let go as she took her first wobbly step into The Red Keep.

Lord Baratheon walked Thunder on into the Bailey yard and then dismounted before striding back towards them.

“Are you alright Arya?” he asked, the concern on his face thrown into sharp relief by the flickering light cast by Ty’s lantern.

“I...I am just a bit stiff.” She muttered as took another few, hobbled steps towards into the yard.

“Ty, see to the horses.” Gendry commanded as, with one fluid motion, he swept Arya up into his arms. Another willing surrender she thought, as she wrapped her arms gratefully around his neck. He carried her across the yard and into The Red Keep.

He did not head towards her room. He must intend them to lie in his bed she thought, as nervous butterflies began to flutter around her stomach.

“Where are we going?”

“Is there a bath in your room Arya?”

“Yes, but this is not the way to my room.”

“We go to the kitchens for I am hungry and you need a bath.”

“I do not!” she said haughtily. She had bathed that ‘morn and was sure she did not yet smell unpleasant enough for him to demand she take a bath. He still smelled vaguely of soap from his showing off in the river, but that was not what she liked best. He smelled most wonderfully of outdoors, leather and horses and something uniquely Gendry that she was finding more and more to her liking each time they were together.

“Your muscles will not be as painful in the ‘morn if you take a hot bath tonight.”
He elbowed open the door to the kitchens. A dozen maids stopped what they were doing and looked up in surprise.

“I need food and hot water for a bath sent up to Lady Arya’s room now!” he bellowed, causing a few of the maids to startle.

“Say thank you!” Arya hissed at him, appalled.

“Thank you.” he snapped, as he turned on his heel and walked out.

“Do you not remember when we were the servants Gendry?” she chided, “how wearing it was to have orders barked at you all day?”

“I shall never forget, but ‘tis a difficult line for me to tread Arya. I wish to be seen as the other, real Lords, are” he muttered.

She looked up at his stern, handsome face, seeing both Gendry Waters the boy and Lord Baratheon the man. “You are as much a Lord as any of them and better than most.”

He smiled with satisfaction as she snuggled into his chest and let herself be carried to her room.

There were two crows sitting outside her rooms. One must have been asleep as he received a kick from the other and shook his head violently as they approached.

Gendry greeted the crows by name before finally setting Arya down outside her door on legs that were a good deal steadier now than they had been.

“You can sleep in your own beds tonight boys. There’s no more need for you here.”

“But Jon said…”

“I will be here until the ‘morn and I can assure you that I will not let Lady Arya out of my sight until then.” Gendry told them with a wink.

One of the crows sniggered and Arya had to stop herself from giving him a swift kick. She could have happily given Gendry one too for that wink.

The crows got up, stretched and made their way off down the corridor quite happily. Gendry had disappeared into her room. After making quite sure the crows were definitely away, Arya followed him in on protesting legs.

He was already sitting on a chair, taking his boots off. ‘Twas such an act of possession. He had been here but a few minutes and already he had made himself quite at home. Those nervous butterflies re-appeared in her stomach.

“Are you not stiff?” she asked, wincing as she hobbled to the other chair.

He threw his head back and laughed.

“Aye, but not where you are Milady.”

It took her a few moments before she understood what he found so amusing. Realising he was thinking on his cock made her more nervous still. She knew she was blushing. She could feel it rising up her neck, to the top of her head.
“I think I have spent so long astride Thunder that my arse had moulded itself to my saddle.” He chuckled, “A hot bath and my Lord’s Kiss will set you right Lady.”

His lazy smile and heavy lidded eyes as he regarded her across the room, made his intentions quite clear. She shivered in fear and delight. She would have to wait a while longer for him to fulfil his promises though as they were interrupted by a hesitant knock at the door.

Gendry bellowed “Enter” before Arya could reply.

A possession of kitchen maids walked in carrying trays of food and pales of steaming hot water.

He ate as if he hadn’t seen food in a month. She watched in silence for a while as he ripped meat from a roasted fowl and devoured a large chunk of warm bread. Eventually she could hold her tongue no longer.

“You may find this hard to believe my Lord, but there is more food in the kitchens. I do not think it likely you will starve, but I do think it likely you will have stomach cramps if you continue eating like that.”

He laughed and held out a piece of meat to her. “I forget my manners. Are you hungry?”

She shook her head. She wanted something, but it wasn’t food.

“‘Tis an old soldier’s habit. Eat now, as it may a long while until your next.”

She looked at him sceptically as he finally slowed his pace and admitted, “Perhaps it is a deeper habit as I can still remember our days of starving on the run.”

When she did not answer he asked gently, “Do you remember them too?”

Truly she hadn’t thought of them in years. The irony was not lost on her. Years of not thinking of him at all and now she could think of little else.

She nodded hesitantly. He covered one of his hands with hers.

“‘Tis all in the past and I need to remember I must behave as a Lord and not as a starving Bastard; always hungry for the scraps from another’s table.”

That was the second time tonight he had mentioned his uncertainty about behaving as a Lord should. It obviously weighed heavily on his mind, although Arya saw no reason for it to. She knew a dozen Lords who had done nothing other than be born to merit their titles, whereas he had earned his by his own efforts. He should consider himself better than those other Lords, she thought, not beneath them.

He stood up as more maids arrived with more pails. He ordered the maids not to pour the last few into the bath. They set the pails down beside the huge tub and Gendry strode after them to the door. He ordered that no-one was to disturb him until the morning. Then he dropped the latch in place. There was no escape.

She tried to calm her hammering heart. The heated glint in his eyes as he walked slowly back towards her told her she was wise to be nervous.

He removed his shirt, tugging the edge out of his britches and pulling it up over his head in one fluid motion. It was discarded behind him as he approached. She tried not to watch, but he fascinated her. She studied his body intently as muscles moved under smooth skin and that expanse of silky black hair that she longed to stroke was revealed. He did not break his stride as he continued towards her,
loosening his sword belt as he came.

She stood up, nervously running her unexpectedly clammy hands down the front of her britches. Her body pulsed with heat and a strange throbbing had begun between her legs.

He hung his sword and scabbard over a chair before moving his hands to the top of his own britches, where that thin trail of silky black hair disappeared into the unknown. She could not tear her eyes away as he grasped the ends of the laces with both hands, tugging, loosening, revealing more smooth skin and thicker, curlier hair. He paused and it was only when he laughed; a deep, satisfied sound of pure male arrogance, and asked her if she liked what she saw, that she realised she was gawking and hurriedly turned away. She needed to do something with her hands, anything to stop herself reaching out and stroking that fine, black hair.

She took the few steps towards the bath and gripped the side, noticing immediately that she was gripping it so hard her knuckles were white.

Although she did not dare look directly at him, out of the corner of her eye she could see that he had discarded his boots and was now sliding his britches down, over slim hips and solid thighs, thickly covered in the same dark hair that she found so irresistible on his chest. As he stood up she saw his manhood, fearsome and erect against the hard plane of his stomach.

She had never seen a man like that before and ‘twas one thing touching him through the thick cloth of his britches and quite another having him naked and expectant before her now. ‘Twas too much and she needed to get away. She felt as if her head was spinning and she couldn’t think straight. She needed to get away from the steam and the heat and him.

“The bath is hardly full. I shall go and have the maids fetch more water.” She muttered as she moved further away from him, around the edge of the bath.

“We have plenty water for our bath.” His voice was husky, deep.

Seven hells. He had said ‘our’ bath. She had not considered that. Not at all.

“Surely you do not mean us to share?” she gasped, but one look at him; his eyes regarding her with that look she now recognised as lust and his erect cock was enough to confirm to her that was exactly what he intended. A tickle of fear danced in her stomach.

He took a step forwards, showing her all the magnificent, naked maleness of him. She took an involuntary step back.

“Come here.”

“Just as there is more food in the kitchen, there is enough hot water for separate baths and I shall have mine later.”

What was she doing? She wanted this. Hadn’t she nearly begged him to take her this afternoon by the river? But that seemed different. It had all happened so quickly and she hadn’t had time to think and now she couldn’t think at all. She did not want to resist, but neither could she make herself take a step towards him. She stood, as if rooted to the spot, beside the bath.

“Come here.”

“What will the maids say?”

She knew he would not take her against her will. If she said no, then he would leave. If she took that
one step towards him, she would be lost.

“Come here.”

No-one had ever told her she was beautiful until he had. No-one had ever kissed her until he had. No-one had ever touched her and made her feel as excited and yet as safe as he had. May the Gods help her. If she was going to lie with anyone, she wanted it to be him.

She took a deep breath and took that first tentative step. He immediately closed the rest of the distance between them, taking her face gently in his hands.

“I want to see you naked” he whispered, his warm breath feathering against her cheek.

He ran his fingers slowly, softly, down the sides of her face, along her jaw and down her neck, finding the button at the top of her tunic. His hands brushed against her throat, unfastening the first button and sending shivers ricocheting all thorough her body. She didn’t dare think what effect he would have as he went lower.

She looked up at him, studying his face, for to look down would have meant she would have had to look at that and the thought of where he intended it to go was too much. So she looked up and tried to study his face as he worked. His eyebrows were pulled together in concentration and she was not going to think on that scar…

Two buttons undone, now…three,

Those long, dark eyelashes would not have looked out of place on a beautiful girl…

Four…as his fingers brushed against the bindings she used to flatten her breasts, she was both excited and terrified.

He stopped as her secret was discovered.

He eased her tunic down over her shoulders and threw it across the floor, exposing her bindings.

“What is this?”

“They…get in the way and I…I do not like…them.” She admitted, stumbling over the words in shame.

“Why would you not like part of yourself?” he asked, concern etched onto his face as he began unravelling the long piece of cloth. “They are such wondrous, beautiful parts of you.” His warm hands touching her skin brought back memories of the feast, when he had stroked his fingers over the edge of her bodice. The same shivers returned now, both hot and cold at the same time. Did he really find her beautiful?

“Lift your arms for me” he murmured.

She did as he asked and he deftly unwrapped the cloth, passing it from hand to hand as layer after layer was peeled away. She had desired his touch on her breasts that night and she ached for it now. He unwound the last length and discarded it on the floor. She stood before him, naked from the waist up, watching him as he saw her unfettered breasts for the first time; breasts that she had wished time and again she never had. She fought the urge to bring her hands up and cover herself, wishing she had not seen herself in Sansa’s mirror, for she knew now how the red welts from the bindings
looked. Like scars.

“What have you done to yourself Arya?” he asked softly.

He gently placed a hand on each breast and rubbed his fingers over the marks left by the bindings. She gasped at the intensity of this new sensation, as blood returned to her skin and his hands, rough themselves, but with such a tender touch, cupped her breasts and stroked. When his thumbs rubbed over her teats, she could feel the tips harden and grow under his touch. He stared, as if transfixed, as his thumbs caressed them again and again. Did he truly like what he saw?

“How can you say you do not like what will nourish our babes, if the Gods will it?” He whispered, dipping his head down to her breast.

She had no time to think on what he said about Gods and babes as he had dropped down onto his knees and his tongue was sweeping slowly over one sensitive, swollen teat, before taking it into his mouth and sucking on it like a new born babe. A soft little cry came from the back of her throat. She swallowed hard. How had she made that noise without knowing? Gods be good. She had no idea it could feel like this.

He had her breasts cradled in his hands and continued to caress them, licking and sucking first one teat, then the other, sending bolts of lightning from there down to that aching, needy place between her legs. She touched his hair, warily at first, fighting the conflicting urges to push him away and press him tighter against her. Then he took one teat between his teeth and tugged gently. Seven hells. Her fingers were in his hair, twisting, pulling him towards her, arching her back, wanting more.

But he denied her, lifting his mouth from her.

“Promise me you will not bind yourself again Arya,” he asked, his eyes dark and serious, his voice husky with desire.

She stared down at him, her skin covered in goosebumps, although the air in the room was positively hot and humid. If she did as he asked, she would need to wear smallclothes like Sansa, her men’s shirts would no longer fit, everyone would know her for a woman. She shook her head.

“‘Tis not right Arya. What are you hiding from?”

She remembered Tyrion’s comments about her “armour” as the silence grew between them.

“What are you afraid of?” he persisted, looking up at her with those fathomless blue eyes of his.

“Nothing.”

“Then promise me.”

“I promise…while I am here,” she said in a voice just above a whisper.

Gendry narrowed his eyes and looked at her sceptically, but eventually nodded a brief acceptance. He rose from his knees, his hands immediately finding the laces of her britches as he planted a hard kiss on her lips.

There was no doubting his intentions now. He intended to take her and she would need to tell him soon if she expected him to stop. The long hardness of his manhood was pressing against her hip and she could feel the heat of him through her britches.

As if reading her mind and anticipating her fears, he murmured, “Trust me Arya. I shall pleasure you
and I shall not take you if you do not wish it.”

Oh, but she did wish it. The thought of him leaving her like this, aching and wanting was worse than the fear of what he intended. She wanted more. She could not describe these feelings he had awoken, but she wanted more of him, on her, around her, inside her. He turned her gently, so that he was behind her, sliding his hands down from her teats, over the curve of her breasts, her waist, to the laces of her britches. He made short work of them, sliding his hands, warm and insistent over her hips and, shockingly, tugging her small clothes down with her britches.

She gasped with surprise. She was suddenly naked, or at least, naked where it mattered and his manhood was hot and hard and insistent against the curve of her back.

“Tell me to stop and I will.”

She did not speak.

“Remove your boots” he ordered, gently but firmly.

As if in a dream, she did what she was told, only realising when she bent over that she was presenting her bare bottom to him. He had never let go of her hips and she felt his grip tighten and heard his involuntary intake of breath as he saw what no man had seen before. Did this sight please him also?

His strong hands steadied her as she wobbled on first one leg and then the other, disposing of her boots and clothes.

As she straightened up, he pulled her to him, so her back was tight against his chest and the back of her legs against his solid thighs. He was so hard and warm and his manhood was trapped between them.

He murmured only one word - “beautiful” as he encircled her in his arms.

Gendry had to concentrate on the here and now in order to believe this was really happening; the girl of his dreams was naked in his arms and he savoured the feeling of her body against his, still tense and nervous, but reacting to his touch. How anyone could mistake her for a boy still was beyond him. Her breasts were soft and full in his hands and there was a wonderful curve from her slim waist to her hip.

He pulled her tighter to him, desperate for some friction on his cock. She surprised him by leaning back against him and he gratefully accepted her weight.

He moved one hand from her waist, stroking over her stomach and lower still, to the mass of soft curls at the top of her legs. She trembled against him as he spread his fingers wide and touched the curls, thrilling as he discovered they were wet with her desire for him. Without thinking, he arched his body against hers, rubbing his straining cock against her bottom and losing himself in the explosion of pleasure even that contact provided.

He had to remind himself there was a long way to go if he was going to pleasure her first as he had planned. He took a deep breath, trying to control his rampaging body. He had to slow things right down or he would embarrass himself like a green boy.

“Our bath grows cold” he murmured, stepping away from her with a great deal of effort of will, lifting his long legs over the side of the bath and standing in the hot water. He extended his hand to her and she hesitated before taking it. She was the most delightful shade of pink he had ever seen. It seemed to extend all the way from her rosy teats, up that graceful neck, to the top of her head.

He must have smiled without realising, as she asked “Does something amuse you my Lord?” in a
hushed, sombre voice.

He knew the ‘my Lord’ that she wasn’t happy and he wanted, no, he needed her to enjoy this. “I am just thinking that you are so very beautiful and I am the luckiest man alive.” He replied sincerely, meaning every word of it. She blushed even more furiously, but still she stepped into the tub with him, and made to sit down at the far end.

That would not do! He wouldn’t let go of her hand, shaking his head. “I had thought we might sit together Arya.”

Without waiting for her answer, he eased himself into the water at the nearest end, never letting go of her hand and opening his arms and his knees for her. He saw her glance warily at his cock, bobbing in the water, but still she didn’t refuse and he guided her to sit down with her back to him.

Water sloshed all over the stone floor as she did, not that either of them cared, being too wrapped up in the newness and excitement of it all.

Gendry braced his arms on the sides of the tub and shifted to accommodate her between his legs. She slowly sat down. The sensation was exquisite and, if he looked over her shoulder, he could see her lovely breasts just floating at the top of the water, the pink teats soft and sweet.

Again, she leant against him, and he was pleased to feel her relax. It was a sure sign she was growing in confidence and if he was tender and did not rush her, he would make this as enjoyable an experience for her as he could. At least he could make sure her memories of her first time would not be tainted by pain or rushed for fear of being discovered as they might have been by the river. Nae, he was glad he had waited to bestow his Lord’s Kiss.

There was soap at the side of the bath and he took it and rubbed it in his hands until they were coated in thick suds and then he began. He started at her neck, stoking and soaping and kissing each part of her as it was cleaned and rinsed; along her shoulders, her back, her breasts. The contented little noises she was making told him he was pleasing her already and there was more, aye much more to come.

He began again at her knees, stroking and soaping up this time, thighs, hips, stomach, then down again through the soft hair, slipping his hands between her legs, parting her, seeking that little nub of pleasure. As his fingers went round and round and she moaned and moaned again he whispered in her ear, “How does this feel?”

“Oh…I…oh” What had he asked? She could not concentrate on anything other than what he was doing with his hand. Tension was building inside her, she could feel it, winding and winding. She could feel it in him too, in the pulsing of his cock behind her, in the tightness of his muscles, in the heart of his skin. She pressed herself against his hand, wanting more from him.

“Stand up Arya.”

“What? Now? Why?” He had stopped. Why had he stopped when she was so close? “Must you stop?”

“Tis time for The Lord’s Kiss.”

Her limbs felt weak and limp. She felt dizzy, with need and the heat and with knowing what he intended to do next. This was not her. Where was her strength, her control? He had robbed her of it all. Robbed her? Nae, she had given it to him willingly and she intended to surrender yet more before the night was up. Resistance was futile. She had already lost the battle when she had let him into her
room, when she had let him undressed her, when she had stepped into that bath with him and he knew it.

Gendry helped her up and out of the bath and dried her with ruthless efficiency. He was not slow and soft and gentle now. Every move had purpose, serious intent and she was lying on the bed, staring up at him as he kneeled above her, before she had time to gather her shredded, scattered thoughts.

He took a pillow from the top of the bed and eased it under her hips, smiling as she helped, lifting up and letting her knees fall apart for him, letting him see how slick and ready she was for him. Gods be good, she wanted this as much as he did.

Kissing the soft skin of her stomach, he trailed kisses down and down further, cradling her hips in his hands, remembering all Jon’s advice, kissing her there, between her legs, grinning as she shrieked. She tried to buck, but he held her firm. Her hands were on his shoulders but she had no will to push him away. He used his tongue on her, circling, teasing, flicking and soon her hands dropped to the covers beneath her, griping handfuls of them in her fists as he bestowed his Lord’s Kiss upon her.

She began to tremble, then shake as her toes curled and her head fell back. She cried out his name before her body exploded with wave after wave of pleasure.

He could still feel the stray shudders of pleasure dancing through her as he pulled away. He had to, for in truth, he could wait no longer.

She felt him move away and opened her eyes. Gendry stood before her in all his magnificence, his cock standing proud, waiting and she instinctively knew what he wanted. She pushed her self up, reaching out and carefully touching it, tracing the ridge of its head, running her fingertip over the drop of fluid oozing from the tip. He drew in a sharp breath and placed his hand firmly over hers, wrapping his fingers around hers, so she had no choice but to move her hand forward and back and again, as he showed her what he wanted. She had never touched anything like it before. It was velvet soft and hard as steel and she knew now why she was wet between her legs; she was wet for him, for this and she was ready.

“I want you inside me now.”

“Are you sure Arya? For this is a serious choice we make here.” His voice was a harsh whisper.

“I am sure.”

He lay down beside her, letting his hand slide between her legs, slowly spreading the wetness from her and from his kisses between every fold, reawakening the fire that had barely subsided. Then he moved between her legs and she tensed, knowing what was coming, knowing it would hurt but wanting him too badly to care. She felt the tip of his cock against her entrance. She was ready, why did he wait? She was trembling with need for him and she gripped his buttocks, trying to draw him in to her, to fill this aching need she had for him.

“Please now Gendry,” she urged.

Still he delayed. “We must be married before the next moon Arya, for I will not risk fathering a bastard.”

She screwed her eyes shut and made an indecipherable sound.

“Say you will marry me Arya.”
Why did he have to ask her now?

“I will drink moon tea. There is no need for you to wed me.”

“I will not take your maidenhead without your promise.”

“Then do not ask me for I will not give it.”

She lifted her hips to him, pleading, but even after The Lord’s Kiss and in the heat of her passion; she would not give him what he wanted most.

His need for her was unbearable, pulsing through every vein in his body. He had been hard for her since he had laid eyes on her in the training yard and a man could only take so much. He closed his eyes and lifted away from her, letting his cock slide over her stomach before he moved against her again and again spilling his seed on her belly as she gripped his buttocks murmuring “I cannot, I cannot” over and over.

As soon as he was finished, he rolled away and onto his back. He lay there for a few moments, devastated, trying to work out what to do next. Why would she not give in and take him as her husband? He felt humiliated, bereft, as if someone had just cut his heart from his chest.

He stood up, unable to look at her, aching with hurt and disappointment. As he pulled on his britches and as she never said a word, the space where his heart had been filled with ice. He pulled on his boots and reached for his shirt, finally standing up to look at her. She had pulled the cover over herself and was staring at him with cold, grey eyes.

Letting her hear the harsh chill in his words, he said “I have made my position clear to you from the beginning Arya. I want a wife, a home and children. If you do not want the same, then there can be nothing between us.”

“I do not want the same.”

“Then I shall bid you farewell.” He ground out through clenched teeth.

Gendry picked up his sword and scabbard from the chair, buckling his belt as he walked to the door.

He left her there and he did not look back.

Chapter End Notes

This one owes a lot to Brazilian Guy. When I wanted it all, he made me wait.

Until next Friday…
As soon as Gendry walked into the hall where Bad Company was breaking their fast, he was greeted by cheers and whoops of congratulations.

What the fuck was this about?

He only had to glance over at his squire to know. Ty was avoiding meeting his gaze and was red as a poppy. His squire had obviously seen fit to tell the rest of Bad Company of Arya’s return to The Red Keep last night in his arms. Fuck. Thinking on that and the opportunity missed, made Gendry angrier still. Even he had believed a bedding to be certain after that.

“Enough!” Lord Baratheon roared. The hall immediately fell silent.

“I want you all out of here now. Your horses need exercised this morn and we train in the bailey yard at noon. Two days hence and we ride for The Stormlands.”

There were assorted groans and moans from his men. Gendry even heard one familiar voice mutter “Bastard never got any last night after all.” He knew before he looked who the biggest malcontent would be.

“Tom O’Sevens. Do you have something you wish to say to me?”

Gendry folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head to the side, waiting.

“Only that I am too old for all this bloody gallivanting about.”

“Do you wish to stay behind with Ty and the women then?”

Gendry deliberately excluded Ty from this task. ‘Twould be a hard lesson for him, but the boy needed to learn to keep his mouth shut. As well as that, Ty was too young to have to witness the punishment Lord Baratheon intended to inflict on those who defied him and defiled his lands.

Tom smirked, “Aye, I’d stay behind for the women easy enough, but that squire of yours is far too pretty for an old bugger like me.”

That brought bursts of laughter from the men and furious yelps of indignation from Ty. Gendry ignored them all.

“Who will ride with me to The Stormlands? Who wants to teach those rats hiding in the Kingswood a lesson the whole of Westeros will never forget?”

Every man in the hall enthusiastically cheered his assent while Ty glowered at Gendry. Aye, the boy would hold his tongue in future.

The prospect of venting his wrath and spilling traitorous blood appeased Gendry’s earlier anger. With a sense of grim satisfied, he turned on his heel. Now he needed to inform Jon and Aegon.
Grey Worm knocked on the door to Lady Arya’s room.

When Arya bad temperedly yelled “Go away!” the eunuch shouted “Your Queen demands you open this door!”

Daenerys had to cover her ears for fear of being deafened while Jon rolled his eyes. King Jon barely tolerated any of Deanery’s entourage and they all knew it. Grey Worm hurriedly apologized for any offence to his Queen’s ears and glared at the door with an even greater sense of outrage.

Jon gave the door an angry rap this time, “Open the bloody door Arya.”

Daenerys sighed. This whole thing was going to have to be handled very delicately indeed.

“You may leave me now Grey Worm. Find the crow Grenn in Jon’s service and have him come here. You take Grenn’s place until I call for you.”

“But my Queen…” Grey Worm started petulantly. Daenerys silenced him with a wave of her hand.

“I will be fine until Grenn arrives. I am with Jon and I will not have one of the unsullied as my guard on this visit.”

“But my Queen…”

This time it took a hard stare to make Grey Worm bow and retreat to stand, rigidly to attention, a short way down the corridor. He nodded to the door, indicating that he would not leave to find Grenn until his Queen was safely inside. That was probably as much of a concession as Daenerys was going to get from him.

Finally the latch was lifted and Arya reluctantly opened the door. Jon impatiently pushed by his sister into the room, leaving Daenerys to follow. She gave Arya what she hoped was a sympathetic smile as she passed. Yes, this was a very delicate situation indeed.

The Queen’s first thought was that Arya looked dishevelled. There were dark circles under her eyes and her hair was askew. She was hardly renowned for her attention to grooming, but she usually managed to drag a comb through her hair. The King and Queen knew Arya’s unkempt state was not as a result of a night spent carousing with Lord Baratheon, hence the reason for their visit.

Daenerys’ second thought was that Arya had grown curves overnight. The swell of breasts was clearly evident beneath Arya’s usual man’s shirt and Daenerys was taken aback by the sudden transformation from a boy’s figure to woman’s, until she remembered Sansa’s description of the cruel bindings Arya wore to flatten her chest.

Arya offered no greeting or any of the usual courteous behaviour extended to guests, instead she resumed her position on the floor, lying with her head resting on Nymeria’s flank. Ghost lay curled around them both. It was both a homely and a rather unsettling sight. Daenerys might be the Mother of Dragons, but Nymeria made her nervous. Unlike the silent, placid Ghost who was so obviously bonded to Jon and had accepted his wife immediately, Nymeria was prone to snarl and snap. Rather like her mistress, Daenerys thought.

“We have been meaning to call upon you for some time Good-sister. I hope now is not too inconvenient a time for you.” Daenerys had to be careful not to let sarcasm drip into her words.

Arya nodded and at least gave a small, forced smile. It was a welcome of sorts, but Arya made no
move to get up from the floor or invite them to sit. Daenerys hurriedly closed the door behind her in case Grey Worm caught sight of the scene took more offence at Arya’s insolent attitude and lack of respect. Daenerys dropped the latch behind her, hoping Grey Worm would now set off on his mission to find Grenn.

Jon pulled a chair out for Daenerys to sit on before sitting down himself and drumming his fingers impatiently on the table. His jaw was set, his expression grim.

Arya had her eyes half shut, almost oblivious to her visitors. “Gendry sent you didn’t he?” she drawled.

“No.” Jon snapped. “In fact he declined to say anything about your outing yesterday, hence the reason for our visit.”

Arya gave Jon a surprised sideways look. She had assumed Gendry would have run straight back to Jon to reveal every humiliating detail of the ‘wooing’ and the bloody Lord’s Kiss. During her sleepless night, Arya had likened them to a couple of scheming, meddlesome old women. Seven buggering hells, she expected the whole of Bad Company to know everything about what had transpired last night and for them all to have a bloody opinion on it too. She was, however, relieved and pleased that Gendry had kept the details of their day and her humiliation, private.

As Jon drummed his fingers more insistently, Daenerys calmly adjusted her skirts and assess her surroundings. The room was very sparsely furnished. There was a bed, the two chairs, a desk cluttered with maps, sharpening stones and other soldier’s thing. The only concession to comfort was a large copper bath. The room had been quite sumptuously laid out before Arya had arrived; Daenerys had ordered it so. The heavy, brocade bed linens and curtains were gone, as were the comfortable chairs and chaise. It seemed Lady Arya preferred plain and sparse accommodation - another unladylike quality to add to Daenerys’ growing list.

When she was settled, Daenerys looked to first Jon and then Arya, studying them both with calm, imperious violet eyes. They were so alike, both glaring at each other, ‘twas as if one was a reflections of the other. Before the conversation had already begun, Daenerys knew there would be no accord reached between them today. She resolved to do all she could to assist both sides. ‘Twould be easier if she could bang their stubborn Stark heads together, she thought with a sigh, although she was sure even that would not work.

Daenerys would play peacemaker and bridge builder for as long as it took, mayhaps the rest of her life. She steeled herself for the conflict ahead and began, “Lord Baratheon advised this morning that he would be leaving us two days hence to deal with those raiders in the Kingswood.”

Jon nodded, adding with an ill disguised snarl, “but he would not be drawn on whether he was coming back or not.”

Arya tried to school her face to betray no emotion, while her heart dropped near into her boots. Gendry was leaving? So soon?

After a sleepless night spent going over what he had said and missing his touch, she still hoped to persuade him that their not marrying was all to the good. Mayhaps she could convince him that they could enjoy the little comfort and happiness they found in each other, however fleeting it may be, for he did not need a wife like her.

Oh, Gendry might think he wanted her, but truly, why would he want someone who could not sew or cook and knew nothing of running a household, who was too tall and looked like a boy? Worse than all of that, he did not know the real Arya, the killer who yearned for still more blood on her
hands. He would not want her at all if he knew her true nature. Why would that when he could have someone who could do all of those wifely things, love him and give him the heirs that he so desired? Someone like Sansa, she thought miserably.

Jon was scowling at her so intensely that his eyes seemed almost black; always a bad sign, Arya knew.

“My position has not changed Arya. I need House Baratheon bound to me. I need this alliance and it pains me you have not done more to acquiesce to my wishes.”

“And you want ‘Ice’” she snapped back, fixing him with a ferocious glare of her own. Arya could tell he was taken aback, but after a moment’s hesitation, he ploughed on.

“Aye, I covet it and I will have it.”

“What if Gendry covets it too? Valyrian steel for House Baratheon.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed, his lip curled. “Has he said such a thing to you?”

“No and anyway, it belongs to Bran!” the words were blurted out before Arya could stop herself.

Jon stopped drumming on the table and leant forwards, fixing her with a dark eyed stare that made her shudder. He took the tip of his black leather glove between his teeth and pulled. Despite herself, Arya grimaced as his hideous, burned hand was revealed. The skin from his finger tips as far up his arm as she could see, consisted entirely of puckered scar tissue, stretched too tightly over bone and tendons that seemed to be missing all of their flesh.

“You have no idea what I have given for the realm Arya. I have fought and I have died for it.”

Seeing the scepticism on her face, he repeated, “Aye, died for it, only to be raised again by a witch’s black magic. Seven years of my life Arya. Seven years of hell. Do you think The Wall saved Westeros from The Others? Do you think Bran saved The North? Nae, ‘twas me and Gendry and Sam and all of my Black Brothers who gave their lives so you could sit in the Braavosi sun and play with your toy swords.”

Jon’s hands gripped the edges of the table and he was leaning so far over the table as to be almost horizontal to it. Never had Arya seen her brother so enraged.

“Bran holds Winterfell for me! The North is mine! All of Westeros is mine! I am your King and your King will have that sword and your King will have you wed Lord Baratheon and you…will…do…as…I …say.”

“I…will…not.” Arya spat back.

Jon thumped the table with his ruined hand.

“Are you deliberately thwarting me Arya? My guards reported that you rode back into The Red Keep with Gendry, sat atop his horse, that he carried you across the Bailey yard and you seemed to like that well enough, that he dismissed the two guards stationed outside your room and yet this morn he announces he is leaving for The Stormlands and I do not know if he will return!”

‘Twas all true and Arya did not know what to say in response. She could not, would not admit to her brother that she had offered Gendry her maidenhead and been rebuked, for Gendry wanted the one thing she could not give him – a future.
Arya had no answer. She had not known Gendry intended to leave so soon, much less when he was
due to return. So, in desperation, she shot Daenerys a pleading look. Help!

The Queen arched her elegant eyebrows and gave a soft little sigh of resignation. ‘Twas all
proceeding just as she had expected.

Daenerys reached across the table and took Jon’s burned hand in hers. At his Queen’s touch, Jon
immediately and visibly calmed; he leaned back and released his rigid hold on table.

The Queen smiled at him as she stood up. Still holding his hand, she walked around the table to him.
She bent down, her straight white blond hair, falling against his dark curls as she whispered
something in his ear that Arya could not catch. In response Jon gave a shrug of resignation and
rubbed his free hand over his face. He looked drained rather than angry now and Arya felt a pang of
guilt for adding to his woes.

King Jon reached up and stroked his Queen’s cheek with his knuckles. With a weary shake of his
head, he said to Arya, “I want you to have what we have,” although his gaze was firmly fixed on
Daenerys.

This time Arya heard The Queen murmur, “Leave this to me my love.”

Jon gave Daenerys a rueful half smile and mouthed “Good luck” before standing up and reluctantly
letting go of her hand.

As Jon stood, Ghost also rose from the floor and stretched. Then Arya felt herself unceremoniously
rolled off Nymeria’s flank as she too got up to follow Jon. Arya no longer bothered to chastise
Nymeria for deserting her. The two Direwolves were now inseparable. Where one went, the other
followed. Arya watched them move languidly to stand beside Jon. The message could not have been
plainer if they had spoken to her - three against one. Pah! They didn’t have to put up with all this
meddlesome interference in their lives. They did what they wanted, when they wanted. Not for the
first time, Arya wished she could swap places with Nymeria.

With Ghost and Nymeria standing by his side, Jon set his gaze on Arya one last time.

“It is a dear wish of mine that I could make you listen to me Arya. You will never find another man
so well suited to you as he, one who is so steadfast in his affections and tolerate your…your…” Jon
looked wearily up and down at her messy hair and her man’s garb, search for the right words, “…
your peculiar behaviour. Think well Arya, for you will rue the day you let him leave.”

Arya set her jaw and turned away. ‘Twas true – she missed Gendry already, but no-one, knew of her
burning need for vengeance. The endgame was underway. Events that had been set in motion seven
years before were drawing to their close. She would have justice for her Father, her Mother, Robb,
Mycah and all the others who had been stolen from her, and for her own stolen childhood. ‘Twas all
within her grasp now and the death of The Hound would end it all. She would not allow herself to
be distracted now, not by Jon and not by Gendry. Not when she had come so far.

Daeneries touching her shoulder broke Arya’s reverie. Jon and the Direwolves were gone. The
Dragon Queen gave her a soft smile, full of genuine concern and affection.

“You know Jon will not force you into a marriage you do not want Arya, but he cannot understand
why you do not want it and he is not used to anyone, even his sister, not immediately hastening to
obey his commands.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “And his wife? Does she obey his commands when they are against her own
wishes?”

With a bright, melodic laugh and a shake of her long silver hair, Daenerys said “Of course not! But you must learn that there are ways to get what you want from men and ‘tis not by saying ‘no’ every time they say ‘yes’.”

Arya grunted sceptically. Another most unladylike trait, Daenerys thought

“I am here to help you Arya. I have no family save Aegon and ‘tis my hope that you and Sansa can become the sisters I never had.”

Arya eyed Daenerys suspiciously. “You want me as a sister?”

“Of course.” Daenerys confirmed with a magnanimous smile.

“Harrumph. Even Sansa doesn’t want me as a sister.” Arya muttered as she picked up her sword belt and began to buckle it.

“I believe you are very much mistaken Arya. I was with Sansa when we received the raven confirming Brienne had found you. I have never seen Sansa so uninhibited and emotional as when she knew you were alive and that you were to be reunited.” And ‘twas true. The usually closed, reserved Sansa had been overwhelmed with relief and joy. She had rushed to the Sept and spent the rest of the day in prayer, alternating between tears of happiness for Arya’s return and tears of sadness for the rest of her family who had been taken from her and who would never return.

Arya did at least look thoughtful as she considered this. Daenerys resolved to try her best to encourage these two sisters to love each other and respect each other’s differences, as sisters should. But right now she had more pressing matters to discuss than the Stark sister’s relationship.

Jon had not asked her to do anything for him before, or at least not out with their bed, so Daenerys did not wish to disappoint him in this.

Her husband was slowly coming to trust her opinions and instincts and Daenerys had been careful to not to push him too far, too fast. ‘Twould have been easy to remind him she had been a Queen for years before he was King, had been married to a great Khal while he was still a boy, but what husband wished to be reminded of that by their new wife? As Jon was wont to remind her, although there had been other men before him, he would be her last. So Daenerys was content to bide her time, confident that her patience would reap its reward.

‘Twas important to her to prove to Jon that she was capable of accomplishing any task he set her. Jon wanted Arya wed to Lord Baratheon, but had almost abandoned hope of making it happen himself, so Daenerys knew it would be a great coup for her if she could make this so.

All she knew of Arya had come from others and ‘twas clear their information was several years out of date. When Daenerys looked at Arya, she did not see the vivacious, wild little girl of Jon’s memory, or the endlessly annoying, over indulged little sister of Sansa’s. Nae, Daenerys saw a stubborn, ruthless warrior who wore her independence like armour.

To convince any Lady that they should marry a stranger, never mind one as intimidating as Lord Baratheon, was never going to be an easy task. In this case, there were added complications; the unfortunate circumstances of Gendry’s birth, his unwavering determination to have Arya in the face of her absolute refusal, and Arya’s unfortunate determination to shun anything resembling conventional behaviour, in fact her lack of any convention at all.

Having been adrift from her family since the age of nine, Daenerys doubted that Arya had any idea
of what she was giving up by rejecting Lord Baratheon’s offer of marriage. Daenerys intended to educate her Good-sister and show her the error of her ways.

Daenerys bustled to the door, leaning out into the corridor. She was obviously satisfied with what she saw as she ordered Arya to “Come with me!” without so much as a backwards glance.

Arya reluctantly trudged out of her chambers, only to see Daenerys and a large crow engaged in a whispered conversation. Arya recognised the Black Brother as ‘Grenn’ – the one who had no idea how to tie the laces on a woman’s dress. He was tall and wide, with a neck like an Aurochs’. He was not old, but neither was he young. His heavy beard and dark hair that hung to his shoulders hid much of his face, but the creases at the corners of his eyes showed he laughed a lot and The Queen obviously trusted him.

Grenn turned towards her as Arya walked into the corridor and gave her a smile that radiated genuine warmth. Unexpectedly, Arya felt a pang of homesickness. The beard, the hair and heavy black clothes marked him out not only as a crow, but as a man of The North. For the first time in years, she thought of Jory and the other Winterfell men who had been such a constant, reassuring presence throughout her childhood; men who had died with her father here in King’s Landing, far from their home and whom she had taken for granted until now.

Grenn was talking to her and she had to drag her thoughts back to the present to realise he was introducing himself. Arya mumbled a greeting in return and followed behind Daenerys and Grenn as they set off down the corridor, with no idea where she was being taken or why.

It seemed that Daenerys and Grenn were familiar with the route, but Arya had no memory of being in this part of The Red Keep before. They walked down staircases and across long corridors where they met only servants, who all startled and bowed almost double when they recognised The Dragon Queen. Grenn walked with his big hands folded behind his back rather than close to the pommel of his sword, which meant he expected no trouble. Arya allowed herself to relax her guard too, as they wove their way down through the bowels of Red Keep.

The corridors became narrower and narrower and darker, before The Queen and Grenn finally stopped. The washing lines strung between columns and hung in front of windows, the cramped conditions and the smells of cooking and general living, marked this out as a living area for servants, who all seemed to make themselves scarce as The Queen approached. Arya remembered the feeling well – keep your head down and try not to draw unwanted attention to yourself. She had no doubt that this Queen would not reward an unwarranted glance with a swift kick, but these servants had toiled under a different master until recently and were no doubt anxious to keep well out of the way.

Daenerys and Grenn could have no idea Arya had lived such a life in Harrenhal or that she had acted as cup bearer for Tywin Lannister. Tyrion had done her a favour by seeing that old bugger off and removing another from her list.

The Dragon Queen knocked quietly on a non-descript door and a woman’s voice bid them enter. Arya did not know what she had expected, but ‘twas not to see a beautiful young girl sitting on a bed with a babe at her breast. The girl’s eyes lit up when she saw Daenerys and The Queen seemed similarly pleased to see the girl. Daenerys hurried over and sat close beside the girl on the bed. The girl finished feeding the bundle and handed it over to The Queen. Ahhh, Arya realised belatedly, Daenerys was here to see the babe.

Arya had been watching Daenerys so closely; she had not been paying any attention to Grenn. ‘Twas only when the girl was re-lacing her bodice and her eyes darted to Grenn that Arya realised the Crow was even in the room. He was hovering at the door and the blush on his own cheeks matched the blush on the girl’s. Daenerys seemed oblivious to the shy glances exchanged by the
crow and the girl, for The Queen was now cradling the gurgling babe and cooing over it as if ‘twas her own.

Belatedly Grenn took his leave and closed the door. Arya was sure some of the light left the girl’s face when he was gone. The crow could not possibly be the father of this babe, as Jon and his army had only arrived at King’s Landing at the beginning of spring and this babe must have been conceived during winter. There was also the fact that Grenn did not know how to lace a woman’s dress. Arya thought it unlikely any man could get a babe on a woman if he could not even unlace her dress. Grenn, despite his size and wild appearance was most likely a maid, Arya realised with a smile. But if Grenn was not the father, who was?

“Where’s the babe’s father?” Arya blurted out.

The girl and Daenerys both turned sharply towards her. The girl looked embarrassed and turned even redder while Daenerys looked exasperated.

“Have a care Arya,” she hissed. “The father is gone with the defeated army, but not before he swore his undying love and used all the other tricks men employ to entice a woman into their bed.”

Arya glowered at Daenerys. She did not know why the Queen was snapping at her, ‘twas hardly Arya’s fault the girl was stupid enough to let a man get a babe on her.

Daenerys turned her attention back to the bundle in her arms. The girl then got up and moved a few of her meagre belongings around the small room, more to keep herself busy and avoid Arya’s judgemental stare, than for any true purpose Arya thought.

After an embarrassing silence, broken only by the babe’s gurgles and Daenerys’ wistful sighs, the girl turned to Arya and asked hesitantly

“Would you like to hold him Lady Arya?”

Arya could think of nothing she would like less, but Daenerys immediately declared it to be an excellent idea and patted the bed, indicating that Arya should sit down beside her.

“Err, no…thanks…really…”

The Queen gave Arya one of her ‘do not dare defy me’ stares and Arya found herself presented with the babe. He, she…it, was thrust into her arms and Arya’s immediate thoughts were “it’s heavier than it looks” and “by the Gods it’s warm”. ‘Twas like holding a heavy, rather wriggly, warming bottle for the bed.

The girl wanted to show The Queen a letter she had received. Of course the girl could not read and Daenerys had to read it for her.

The Queen read it through, without comment, which didn’t take long, or perhaps it did, as Arya was rather too busy wondering how such a small thing, with tiny, chubby hands, could have such a tight grip around her finger to notice. Not only that, it had big brown eyes and smelled wonderful. Arya could not resist bending her head to sniff its head and when she did, her nose brushed against the warmest, softest skin in the whole world. As Arya wiggled her nose against the babe’s forehead, it made a sound that Arya could have sworn was a giggle, or maybe a gurgle. So she did it again and again, just to be sure, before deciding ‘twas definitely more of a happy gurgle.

By the time Arya looked up, The Queen was folding the letter and tucking it carefully into a pocket in her dress, with a serious, troubled expression on her face.
“My dear, ‘tis from his Liege Lord, apologising for your predicament and explaining that this man has a wife and children already. There is no hope of him ever returning, but he will send money for the babe.”

The girl bit her trembling bottom lip, but managed to stutter “‘Tis…’tis fair of him, is in not…in the circumstances?”

Daenerys hugged her and whispered some soothing words in the girl’s ear, which Arya could not catch, but which seemed to comfort the girl. She even managed a weak smile.

The Queen called for Grenn, who instantly opened the door. As Arya anticipated, the shy eye contact and blushing between Grenn and the girl began again. Arya thought them both pathetic. If they wanted each other, then they should declare it openly and to hell with this coy play acting.

When the time came for Arya to hand the babe back to his mother, Arya was surprised how light and cold her arms felt. At least babies were good for something she thought – keeping you warm. And they smelled delicious.

After they had taken their leave, Arya made a point of walking beside Daenerys. The corridors were not wide enough for three, so Grenn walked a few paces behind.

“That is not what the letter said, was it?” Arya whispered conspiratorially.

Daenerys shook her head.

Arya had known it when she saw The Queen place the letter in her own pocket - she intended to hide its true content. If the letter had really been as Daenerys had described, then there would have been no reason for her to remove it.

“And there was no promise of money. That was a promise made by you, was it not?”

Daenerys nodded sadly.

“Let me guess...” Arya mused, “…the letter called her a whore and rejected her claim that the man was the father, leaving the child an unacknowledged bastard.”

“Keep your voice down!” Daenerys hissed, inclining her head slightly towards Grenn, “…but yes.”

Everyone knew that being a bastard was bad enough, but an unacknowledged one was the lowest start in life a child could suffer. As a bastard of The Crownlands, that babe would be given the name ‘Waters’, marking it for life. Seven Hells, Arya thought, why did everything have to remind her of Gendry?

“What is that girl to you that you take so much trouble over her?”

“She was already heavy with child when I took the city. The father fled without her as my army descended. I wrote to his Liege Lord on her behalf, in the hope that the man might accept my offer of safe passage to return to King’s Landing, either to claim the girl and her babe, or to stay here under my protection.”

“And still he refused?”

“Yes. Still he refused.” Daenerys admitted with a deep sigh.

“It must be because of his wife and other family.”
“There is no wife or family Arya. I made that up to spare the pain. The sad truth of it is that he talked a maid into his bed with soft words and empty promises, took his pleasure there and abandoned her when it all became too…complicated.”

“Oh.” Arya said, genuinely surprised.

“Surely you must have seen this happen time and again Arya? ‘Tis often the way.”

Arya had not. The House of Black and White was a place of work and learning. When she was outside of its walls, ‘twas always with a purpose; contracts or revenge. Arya had no experience of such things, but she knew there were of avoiding getting with child.

“Why did the silly girl not drink Moon Tea?”

Daenerys frowned and snapped “Spoken like a true lady Arya!”

Arya was at a loss. Daenerys complained Arya never acted like a lady, but now when she said something that Daenerys apparently considered worthy of a lady, the comment was clearly not welcome. By the Gods, she would rather speak only to soldiers and listen to the clang of steel rather than puzzle over these words with double meanings.

Daenerys, realising Arya was entirely oblivious to her barbed comment sighed and explained in a harsh whisper, “Moon Tea is expensive in cities at the best of times. Perhaps in the countryside, where the ingredients can be freely gathered ‘tis used by small folk, but in cities and especially during a siege, ‘tis hideously hard to come by and only to be afforded by wealthy women, be they ladies or whores.”

“Oh” Arya managed to reply, having had no idea. She had never had cause to seek out or use the stuff herself. Last night, with Gendry, she had assumed ‘twould be simple enough to purchase on the morn. Arya resolved to investigate the purchase of Moon Tea, in the hope Gendry changed his mind, but decided ‘twas not prudent to ask the barren Dragon Queen where it could be bought.

As they walked, a far simpler solution occurred. “If she had no Moon Tea, then the silly girl should simply not have let the man have had his way with her!” Arya declared, confident in her answer this time.

Daenerys sighed again. “If only ‘twas that easy. Have you never had a handsome man tempt you with soft words and kiss you until you were senseless? Has a man ever stroked you and caressed you until you melted against him like warm honey?”

Two days before, Arya’s reaction would have been to vehemently declare she would never be that weak and then to add that any man who came near her, wanting to stick his cock in her, would have intimate knowledge of her blade before her body. But today Arya held her tongue, for was that not what had happened yesterday on a picnic blanket in the sun? Had she not wanted more then and given no thought to the consequences or to Moon Tea?

Arya stopped dead in her tracks. She was as silly as that silly girl with the babe. Arya Stark, the lone wolf, the assassin, who told anyone who would listen that she needed no-one, was no better or wiser than a silly serving girl. Gendry had more sense than her.

Grenn’s hand was suddenly on Arya’s back. Daenerys had not stopped walking and was now several feet ahead. “We must keep up with the Queen!” Grenn grumbled, giving Arya’s back a firm shove. Bloody crow. Arya would bet several gold dragons he would not shove the Queen or Sansa like that. She drew him a filthy look, which he ignored, pressing his hand again to her back, pushing
her after The Queen.

Arya had to trot to catch up. She hoped Daenerys was finished with her talk of men and their soft words, but alas she was not.

“As you profess you have no experience of such things, I feel obliged to tell you that not all men will take their pleasure and leave without a backwards glance. There will always be good and honourable men.”

Arya felt sick. Aye, ’twas true indeed. There were sensible, honourable men like Gendry who would not take her maidenhead without a promise of betrothal and there were silly little girls like her.

Daenerys nodded towards Grenn; the Queen obviously though the crow to be such an honourable man, despite the stolen, heated glances between Grenn and the stupid girl. Ahhh, Arya finally realised why Daenerys had brought Grenn as their escort today and not that stony faced unsullied guard who usually trailed around after her. There was some scheming on The Queen’s part to bring the maid crow and the young mother together.

“When you find a man who is not only interested in his own pleasure, but will attend to yours, who will not flee at the first sign of trouble and who will steadfastly love you and your children, then you would be well advised to not let him go.”

This conversation was beginning to sound uncomfortably familiar to Arya. Did Daenerys not speak as Jon did, only with softer words and no thumping of tables?

“You know I have no desire for a husband.” Arya muttered, drawing her brows down.

“Of course you do not Arya. But you are young and I am only trying to educate you, Good-sister, in case you change your mind some day.”

Arya was not as sure of herself now as to yell “Never, never, never,” – the way she had the first time Daenerys had spoken of the same matter. Once again, Arya found herself holding her tongue.

They walked in silence for a while longer, both lost in their own thoughts until Arya was distracted by The Queen’s sniffing. When Arya shot Daenerys a disapproving sideways look, Arya was horrified to see that The Queen was crying.

Arya avoided close contact with others as much as she could. For five long years she had been a lone wolf and had never sought the touch of another, but something about Daenerys’ distress affected Arya in a way she had not thought possible. To her surprise, Arya found herself holding her arms around The Queen, feeling Daenerys sob against her as hot tears rolled down her neck and dampen her collar.

Arya had no words of comfort to offer Daenerys. All she could do was literally offer a shoulder to cry on. Grenn looked stricken, shuffling nervously from one foot to another, unsure what to say or do. Arya did not know either; she only knew ’twas uncomfortable enough without Grenn watching.

“Fetch the Queen some wine” Arya muttered to Grenn as she looked at him over The Queen’s heaving shoulder. The crow was so grateful to be away that he offered no argument against leaving The Queen unprotected.

For the second time that morning, Arya found herself stroking soft hair and holding another human in her arms. Daenerys seemed no less vulnerable than that babe Arya had held so recently. Arya realised belatedly that she should have sent Grenn to fetch Jon, rather than wine. What was she thinking? She had not been thinking – that was the problem. In the past few days, ’twas as if all her
wits, all her carefully constructed façade of poise and detachment had abandoned her. She had not felt calm as still water since she had laid eyes again on Gendry Waters in Jon’s solar.

‘Twas a considerable time later and Arya’s shirt was well soaked with tears, before Daenerys finally stopped crying and began to try to apologise to her Good-sister, sniffing

“I am so sorry. I never intended this be about me. I do not wish to burden you with my own problems but your brother is such a good man and so desperate to hold his son in his arms. If I am unable to give him what his heart desires, I fear he will take another wife or cast me aside.”

Fearing she was about to start sobbing again, Arya determined to say something that would prevent more tears.

“I do not believe that The Gods would treat you or my brother so ill.”

Daenerys looked up, a glimmer of hope in her watery eyes that encouraged Arya to say more than she ought,

“My brother has been blessed and protected by The Old Gods. I do not believe he could have accomplished all he has without their providence. He was born for what he has become and I do not believe our Gods will fail him now.”

Arya had no idea where the words came from, but they spilled from her with a vehemence and passion that surprised her.

Arya thought Daenerys appeared to be so grateful for the words of support and hope that she might burst into tears, even worse than before. But Daenerys had been a Queen long before she had married Jon and she quickly recovered her regal composure. After she had blown her nose, she stood straight and determined again before Arya.

“I thank you for your support Arya. I am coming to realise that Jon has brought much more to our marriage than I had ever expected. I am blessed with two Good-sisters who I hope to count as my friends and who will provide nieces and nephews for Jon if we are not so blessed ourselves.” Arya could hear the waver in The Queen’s voice, betraying the raw emotions behind her brave words.

The Queen took Arya’s hand as they walked along the corridor again. Arya let herself be led, thinking how small and soft The Queen’s hand was in hers – a proper ladies hand. ‘Twas not long before they met a flustered Grenn with a wineskin under one arm and two rough wooden cups in his shovel hands. He insisted they both sit by a window and take a drink. The sour wine and the rough worked cups made Arya suspect the crow had retrieved this from his own supplies rather than from one of the servants, for they would bring The Dragon Queen only the finest Arbor gold. Wherever the source of the wine, ‘twas very welcome and seemed to fortify The Queen to continue on.

Arya had been too distracted to notice Daenerys leading them back by a different way and was surprised to find that they were near the Bailey yard. As they approached, Arya thrilled to the unmistakable noise of swordplay. Steel rang out against steel, punctuated by good natured swearing and words of encouragement; ‘Block!’ ‘Thrust now!’ and ‘You nearly had him!’

The three of them stopped on a balcony above the yard to watch. There were near a hundred men, all performing sword drills or exercises, but only one caught her eye. ‘Twas Gendry and he was directly below.

Taller than the rest, dressed all in black, he looked at once thrilling and dangerous as he casually twirled that magnificent Valyrian steel sword. It glinted scarlet and black catching the light as it
slowly sliced through the air. He was Lord Baratheon once more, confident and fearless. For a moment, all Arya could do was stand and stare. A surge of heat rushed to her unbound breasts at the memory of his hands there, his palms rough, but his touch gentle as he took her teats in his mouth, one after the other.

She realised she had been holding her breath and she let it out in a rush as she fiddled with the neck of her shirt, still damp with Daenerys’ tears.

He stood apart, smiling as he watched an old man and a boy practising their swordplay with wooden training swords. The golden haired lad she recognised as Ty, enthusiastically but unskilfully, taking swipes at a laughing man with grey in his hair. Another, younger man casually leant on a longbow, shouting encouragement to both.

As if Gendry sensed her eyes on him, he looked up. Arya’s heart leapt as their eyes met, but Gendry’s mouth and even his eyes, that had been smiling moments before, turned hard and cold as steel as his gaze found hers.

It was only Grenn shouting greetings of “Anguy you rogue!” and “Lem! Who’s your boy?” that tore Arya’s attention away from Gendry to the other men below. Her eyes flew open in shock as she saw her old friends from The Brotherhood Without Banners grinning up at her.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, thanks to Brazilian Guy – equal parts distraction and motivation this week though Ser.

So how will that reunion go? You’ll find out on Friday…
Chapter Notes

Hi again folks. Real life interfered with my writing this week and you very nearly never got a chapter at all. However, here it is. It’s short but it’s here.

Once again, I have to thank Brazilian Guy for his help, his patience and for keeping me out of trouble (again).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Well if it isn’t little Arya Stark!” Lem Lemoncloak whooped, dropping his wooden sword at his feet and running towards the stairs. Arya stood for a few seconds, hesitating, watching him run. Seven buggering hells. His enthusiasm was infectious and she found herself mirroring the grin of her old friend. She was pleased to see him too and she could either stand here like a cold fish, waiting for Lem, or she could meet him halfway.

So Arya ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time until she flew into Lem’s outstretched arms. He smelled of horses and stale wine. His hair was turning grey and there were deep lines etched into his face, but his crooked nose was the same and he was delighted to see her.

The two of them stood hugging on the stairs as Anguy and Ty appeared behind Lem. Gendry followed rather reluctantly, making sure he kept well back. He stood at the foot of the stairs watching the others. Arya was laughing and clutching onto Lem. The old goat even planted a kiss on the tip of her nose, while Anguy and Ty gathered around. They were all favoured with smiles so warm they could have melted half The Wall, had it still been standing. ‘Twas a far cry from the surly, begrudged greeting she had given him in Jon’s solar, Gendry thought sourly.

The dark circles under Arya’s eyes told of a sleepless night and her hair was tousled as if she had only just risen from their tumble in her featherbed. She should have woken up beside him this morning. The cause of her sleepless night should have been his taking her every which way, all night long. The blood rushed from his stupid, stubborn head, to his stupid, eager cock at the thought.

When Lem finished hugging her, he stepped back, keeping his big, meaty hands on her shoulders as he chuckled, “Let me get a good look at The Princess.”

Arya blushed as he gave her a long look up and down.

“Aye, I can fair understand what the boy sees in you. I always thought you two would end up together if the Gods were good” Lem said with a sly wink.

Arya’s eyes flew to Gendry who stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking horrified.

Lem continued on, oblivious to Anguy’s raised eyebrows, Ty’s sniggering or Gendry’s very obvious discomfort,

“I remember when you were young that there were a good few times I had to clout him around the ear for being inappropriate with a young Lady. Mind you, I wouldn’t chance clouting him now, not since he got so big and with him being a Lord an’ all. You’ll have to keep him in line yourself now
Arya.” Lem laughed heartily.

Anguy joined in, draping an arm protectively around her shoulder and chuckling as they all looked down at Gendry, scowling up as if he wished to slay the lot of them.

To her surprise, Arya found his jealously thrilling. It sent little pulses of delight dancing through her. He would not take her himself, but woe-betide any other man who touched her.

“Oh, never mind him.” Lem said, nodding to Gendry, “He’s right grumpy today. Something must have happened last night to put him in such a bad mood.”

“Oh, never mind him.” Lem said, nodding to Gendry, “He’s right grumpy today. Something must have happened last night to put him in such a bad mood.”

“Or not happened,” Anguy muttered, with a wink to Lem. Ty looked from one to the other, bewildered, the men’s conversation literally passing over the top of his head.

Arya rolled her eyes. Did they really think she would not notice the wink? But she was too pleased to see them to be annoyed and, anyway, ‘twas all Gendry’s stupid fault. He was the one who had left her wanting last night because of his stupid proposal. How did he expect her to explain, never mind think, at a time like that? Arya could scowl just as well as he, and she sent him down one of her best.

Lem tousled her hair with one big, rough hand, just the way he used to all those years ago. “Wait until the others see you, all grown up and pretty as a picture. Makes me feel old it does, for you were just a slip of a thing back then and sharp as can be.”

“You’re not old!” Arya blurted out, wanting them to be the same as they had been before; when Lem had no grey in his hair and Anguy was taller than her, before she had gone away, when everything seemed simpler.

“Well I amn’t getting any younger, that’s for certain,” Lem laughed as he started back down the stairs towards Gendry. The rest of them followed.

Lem waited until he was well within Gendry’s earshot before he said loudly, “Aye, I know I’m getting old when I look at the two of you; a Lord and a Lady and both of marrying age an’ all.”

Gendry drew Lem a poisonous look that would have sent a lesser man scurrying for cover. Anguy and Ty looked from Arya to Gendry and back again; Anguy trying to stifle his laughter while Ty did not bother and simply sniggered loudly.

“How about you name your first boy after old Lem eh?” He winked at Gendry, who responded with a deep growl of annoyance. Arya was too shocked by Lem’s boldness to reply. Their first boy?!

Anguy was quick to join in the banter, “Don’t be soft! Who ever heard of a lord called Lem? Lem Baratheon just doesn’t sound right, does it? Now Anguy Baratheon on the other hand, has a certain ring to it!” The archer hooked his thumbs into his belt and started down the stairs again with a swagger. “What say you Lord Baratheon? Will it be Lem or Anguy?”

With his teeth set in a grimace, Gendry climbed the stairs to meet Anguy and Lem. Pushing between them, he wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders, in an almost head lock and walked them back down to the foot of the stairs. Once the three of them were safe on the sand of the Bailey Yard, Gendry wheeled the two of them around and pointed them back towards the training yard. With a firm shove, he sent them on their way with a reprimand, “You two talk too much.”

“Have you still got that Needle Arya? Come and join our training!” Lem shouted over his shoulder, cocking his head towards Arya and winking at her behind Gendry’s back.

Ty had stayed beside Arya and they now stood together a few steps from the foot of the stairs. The
boy was chewing the side of his mouth nervously and shifting his weight from foot to foot while trying not to look at her directly.

“What is it Ty?” Arya asked, trying not to laugh as the boy blushed and looked up at her thorough a tangled curtain of golden hair.

“Lord Baratheon says you are a Master Swordsman!” The words came out in a tumble.

“Does he?” Arya mused, looking down again at Gendry. He was leaning against the wall now, regarding her with those blue eyes, waiting and her heart forgot to beat.

“Willyouteachme?”

She turned back to Ty, wondering what in seven hells the boy had said.

“What did you just say?”

He turned even redder and said nothing. She blew out an impatient sigh. Gendry was down there and they had unfinished business to discuss.

Eager to send Ty on his way after Lem and Anguy, Arya reached out and brushed the squire’s golden hair to the side, away from his face so she might see his eyes and have a better chance of understanding what he wanted from her. The boy met her eyes boldly enough, but his voice was shaky with nerves as he asked again, albeit much more slowly this time, “Will you teach me the Braavosi Water Dance please Lady Arya?”

Looking into his keen green eyes, she was reminded of herself; before they killed her father, before all this, when Needle was her sword and Needle had meant everything. When Syrio Forel was her dancing master, before he too had died for her. So much blood was on her hands. No matter what, they could never be clean.

“Of course I will.”

Arya wished she could be happier when she saw the delight in his innocent eyes.

“Can we start now?”

“Well, I only have one sword…” Arya rested her hand on the pommel of her sword and shrugged, glad of the reprieve. She wanted to speak with Gendry now.

A gruff voice from above interrupted, “I will fetch your training swords Lady Arya.”

She had almost forgotten Grenn and Daenerys watching from the balcony above. Arya gave Grenn a small nod of thanks and he was immediately away. The Queen made her way elegantly down the stairs towards them.

“Lady Arya is going to teach me the Braavosi Water Dance!” Ty babbled excitedly to Daenerys, giving no thought of bowing or any other etiquette.

The Queen favoured him with an indulgent smile as Arya coughed, trying to catch Ty’s attention without success.

“Is she?” Daenerys pretended to be surprised, “Do you think Lady Arya might be prevailed upon to teach me too young Ser?”

Arya’s eyes flew open in surprise. Teach The Dragon Queen?
“Oh, I am not a ‘Ser’ yet Milady.” Ty said in all seriousness, “I am just his squire.” The boy gave a backwards nod to where Lord Baratheon stood at the foot of the stairs rolling his eyes in irritation, “but I aim to be the finest Knight in all the realm one day! Meanwhile, I am certain Lady Arya could teach us both.”

Daenerys gave an excited little laugh. “Why do you look so shocked Arya? Do you think you are the only woman who wishes to play the men at their own game?”

“Err, no…of course not…” Arya muttered, desperately wondering how she could extricate herself from this, “…perhaps Jon would prefer the honour of teaching you?”

Jon had been quite happy to offer Arya advice – stick ‘em with the pointy end – but he had never gone so far as to instruct her how to fight and kill. She was not sure Jon would appreciate his little sister, who he insisted was guarded day and night, instructing his delicate new wife in the martial arts.

Daenerys blew out an exasperated little sigh, before admitting, “You are right Arya. I shall content myself to watch for the moment, but I shall speak to Jon. Mayhaps he would prefer to teach me himself.” Daenerys added with a wicked grin. Whatever The Queen was imagining, ‘twas not the hard toil Arya had in mind.

Daenerys slipped her arm through Ty’s. The boy almost swooned with delight,

“Come young Ty, I have always enjoyed watching men engaged in swordplay. Perhaps we shall both learn something today.” With that, The Queen swept down the stairs, with the squire on her arm, past an exasperated Lord Baratheon and into the Bailey Yard, leaving Arya and Gendry alone.

Arya stood rooted to the spot, heart pounding with anticipation. Anticipation of what, she was not sure, as Gendry did not look happy or eager or all the other things she wanted him to be.

He pushed himself slowly away from the wall and walked slowly and purposefully up the stairs towards her. The intensity of his gaze caused her heart to hammer and her body to flood with heat. He stopped a few steps below her, so they were standing eye to eye.

“Are you well today Arya?”

She nodded. Was this how ‘twas going to be between them? He would be cool and formal while she would be hot and flustered and barely able to think.

His eyes dropped to her chest. Her poor, hammering heart missed a beat as she recalled his mouth there. An aching desire for him reawakened.

“While I am please to see that you kept your promise not to bind yourself, you cannot parade around like that.”

Parade around?! What was he talking about? She followed his gaze down.

Her shirt had not yet dried from Daenerys’ tears and ‘twas already pulled tight across her unbound breasts. More of her was covered than would have been in one of those stupid, revealing dresses. He would need to make up his mind. First he wanted her unbound and then he wanted her hidden. She bristled with indignation. His last words to her had been to tell her there could be nothing between them, yet today he wanted to dictate how she dressed! A surge of anger pulsed through her. He was a pig headed horse’s arse.

She angled herself away from him with a scowl; her stiffly held shoulder presented to his face.
speaking louder than any words.

“Here. Put this on.”

He was unlacing his boiled leather jerkin. As if she could wear that. The sleeves would hang to her knees.

“I will not!” she huffed, ‘Tis far too big.” She refrained from adding ‘stupid’ at the end.

He shoved the boiled leather towards her. She automatically grabbed at it before it fell between them.

“Not that. This.” He had his own shirt pulled over his head in one fluid motion. She watched the muscles of his stomach dance under silky skin. Too soon he was taking back the boiled leather and handing his shirt to her.

‘Twas still warm in her hand from his body heat. She resisted the urge to press it against her face and inhale his scent.

He had his jerkin back on, albeit unlaced, while she still stood holding his shirt. The hint of a smile teased at a corner of his mouth.

“Put it on and roll the sleeves up, or would you prefer to stand there gawking at me all day?”

A flush of heat rose up her neck. ‘Twas no point denying she had been gawking. She shivered despite the warmth pooling between her legs. How could one look at him enough to make her blood run hot and cold together?

His twinkling eyes continued to taunt her as he took back his shirt, turned it until he had the collar ready and then dropped it over her head. He took another step nearer, so he was taller than her again, rolling up one, over-long sleeve and then the other, sending little shivers of excitement up her arms. He was dressing her as if she was a child and she liked it, revelling in his nearness and the intimacy of his touch. As he worked, she stood and stared. Let him accuse her of gawking again if he wanted, she could not help herself. Strands of long dark hair framed the hard lines and angles of his face as he concentrated. His features and expressions were becoming so familiar, so beloved.

He stood back to admire his handiwork, “There, ‘tis more decent at least.”

She looked down at his black shirt over her white one. There was a hole where the white could be seen and, even with the sleeves rolled up, it drowned her, but she did not care. ‘Twas his and there was hope.

“You will need to find more suitable attire Arya, for you are not safe from any man dressed as you were.”

She frowned until she realised mayhaps he included himself in that sweeping statement. Was she safe from him? She hoped not. Her stomach tightened and she chewed her bottom lip to stop herself from smiling.

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Bite your lip.” His eyes were lidded, focused on her mouth.

She hoped he would kiss her, but moments passed and still he made no move. She boldly trailed a
finger down the edge of his unfastened leather jerkin and allowed that smile to curve her lips.

“If there can be nothing between us Lord Baratheon, then you had best stop telling me what to do.”

She very deliberately took her bottom lip between her teeth again and tugged.

He raised his eyes from her mouth, his blue eyes meeting her grey, but there was no smile there for
er her, no comfort at all. He gave a small shake of his head.

“A lover I can find anywhere. You know I want more.”

He turned away, and walked back down the stairs without a backwards glance. Despite his cold
words she was sure he still wanted her, but he would not give in easily. Damn, but he was as
stubborn as Jon.

Arya touched the collar of his shirt as she watched him return to his men. This time she could not
resist bending her head and inhaling his scent. He smelled so ridiculously enticing. She took a deep
breath to steady her hammering heart, before she followed him down into the Bailey yard.

Gendry, Lem, Anguy and Ty were all standing in a loose circle, engaged in a heated conversation.
’Twas not difficult to guess the cause of the disagreement between Lord Baratheon and his squire.
Gendry had the tip of his sword planted in the sand in front of him, legs splayed as he gripped the
golden pommel fiercely with both hands. Ty was waiving his wooden practice sword in agitation.
Lem and Anguy were offering their opinions which, from the way Gendry was snarling at them,
were obviously no more to his liking than Ty’s.

Daenerys was waiting for Arya’s by the time she reached the foot of the stairs.

The Queen whispered conspiratorially, “I think we may have caused a rift between the squire and his
Lord.” For some reason, Daenerys seemed quite happy about it.
“Is there a problem Lord Baratheon?” The Queen asked in her most regal, authoritative voice.

Gendry gave the other three a last few sharp words, before he bowed to his Queen and Arya. By
The Gods! This squire of his was turning into more of a handful than Gendry had ever imagined. Ty
wanted to be taught Water Dancing by Arya? Oh how the other Lords would laugh at The Bastard
Knight and his dancing squire.

With a tight, forced smile, he answered The Queen’s question, “No problem Your Grace. I was just
explaining to my squire that he has more important things to do than learn useless Braavosi …
Braavosi … play fighting.”

Arya rounded on him, eyes blazing, radiating furious indignation. The dog! Gendry insulted her to
her face. And to think she had believed his ‘Master swordsman’ compliments!

“Useless?! Play fighting?! You ignorant, big oaf! You do not need to cut a man in half to kill him!”

Arya’s hand flew to the pommel of her sword. Only Daenerys’ hand tugging at her sleeve stayed
Arya from drawing her blade.

Gendry scoffed, “Better a quick death from a real sword, than to die from a thousand little scratches
inflicted by that toy you carry.”

“Toy?! Do you wish me to show you what this toy can do?”

Arya unsheathed her Braavosi sword with a whisper of steel. The narrow blade looked insignificant
beside Gendry’s Valyrian steel longsword, but could kill a man just as easily. Arya had lost count long ago.

Every sense of Arya’s was heightened by the thrill of a sword in her hand. This was when she felt most alive, when energy flowed through her to her sword and back. As she sliced her blade through the air in three precise swipes, Lem, Anguy and The Queen all took instinctive steps back.

Gendry folded his arms over his chest and braced his legs, ready to withstand the force of her anger. ‘Twas hard to resist scooping her up in his arms and kissing her senseless, for she was magnificent when she was angry.

“That…” he nodded dismissively towards the blade in Arya’s hand, “will not defend you in battle.”

“If you won’t even let me ride to The Stormlands with you, I am hardly likely to die in battle am I?” Ty interrupted, glaring at Gendry.

“The boy makes a fair point,” Lem mused, stroking his chin as if he was playing a part in a mummer’s farce. He had already sided with Ty over Gendry’s refusal to let his squire take part in this task and was enjoying this opportunity to further press the boy’s case.

“And we are at peace,” Daenerys pointed out, having taken an instant liking to the bold squire and his blazing green eyes. He reminded her of someone, although she could not quite recall who. “I, for one, pray there will be no more battles. Ever.”

With The Queen taking Ty’s side, Gendry knew this particular battle would not be won today. He was wise enough to know when he was outnumbered and when a tactical retreat was the best option. He took comfort in the fact that many battles needed to be won before you could claim victory in the war.

With an ill temper, he turned to Ty, “Do what you want when I am gone. At least it will be your own time you are wasting with this useless Water Dancing.”

“Call it ‘useless’ one more time and I shall have your head Baratheon!” Arya snarled, whipping her blade through the air directly in front of his chest.

Gendry stood his ground but could not keep from smiling. Every movement she made showed him her strength and passion. He knew she would not kill him, at least not yet.

A choked splutter erupted from Anguy, who was clutching Lem’s shoulder and shaking with mirth.

Arya and Gendry turned as one to face the Archer.

“What amuses you so?” Gendry snapped.

“Listening to the two of you!” Anguy had to wipe away a tear and clear his throat loudly before he could continue, “…Bickering like an old married couple!”

“Arguing over your child!” Lem added, exploding with laughter.

Anguy and Lem both ducked as Ty swung his wooden sword wildly at them. The boy only succeeding in swiping through empty air where the archer’s head had been moments before.

“Pah! Ignore them,” Arya said to Gendry with a dismissive flick of her sword. “But let us decide this here and now.” She dared him, with a smirk, “I propose a duel!” You and me. We agree the winner has the better sword skills.”
With an arrogant grin, Gendry raised ‘Oathbreaker’ before him, holding the Valyrian steel in a salute. The sun glinted off the edges of it. “I accept!”

“I have no wish to be cut in half by that. We use my blades,” Arya challenged, raising one hand to shield her eyes from the sunlight reflecting off black and red steel.

“Ah, but then you have the advantage of a familiar weapon,” he countered.

“However, you are so much bigger and stronger than me,” she taunted with a pout, her grey eyes flashing mischievously. By The Gods she was irresistibly like this.

When he gave no reply, she gently prodded the tip of her sword against the boiled leather covering his heart. “You are afraid I will win!” she declared with a triumphant smile.

He was not certain she would lose, not that he would ever admit it to her. However, he might be able to turn her challenge to his advantage, after all it had worked before,

“What say you to a wager?”

She narrowed her eyes, the mischievous laughter there disappeared and was replaced by a glint as hard as steel as she considered his offer. She lowered her sword and closed the distance between them, standing on her tip toes to whisper in his ear. He had to incline his head in order to hear,

“I will agree to the same wager as before, only this time you bestow your Lord’s Kiss upon me if I win.”

The scent of her, lingering from their shared bath and their lovemaking last night assailed his senses, her warm breath flowing over his cheek made his heartbeat quicken. ‘Twould be so easy to agree and let her win, but a man had his pride.

“And if you loose?” he asked, hoping to appear disinterested, “I have no need of twenty gold Dragons” he lied, with a casual shrug of his shoulders.

She stepped back to regard him coolly. “I do not intend to loose,” she said with a haughty flick of her sword, “…but name your terms.”

“You know what I want.”

She snorted dismissively and screwed up her nose. Seven hells, he even found her beautiful when she was trying to goad him.

“I warn you - you will not beat me.” Arya claimed confidently.

Gendry gave another casual shrug. He had no intention of losing either.

“Then the terms of our wager are agreed.”

He pushed all doubts aside. He would worry about the consequences of tricking her into a marriage later. First he had to win.
Until Friday then, when you will hopefully get a longer chapter, real life allowing...
Daenerys was horrified. Gendry was swishing one of the practice blades Grenn had conveniently fetched through the air, testing its weight and balance. Arya watched nonchalantly, a knowing smirk playing on her lips.

The Queen drew Arya aside.

“You realise you must let him win Arya?”

Lady Arya looked as if she would rather eat worms, but Daenerys was determined to make her see sense. “Look around you Arya…”

Throughout the Bailey yard, the men of Bad Company, who had earlier been engrossed in their own training, were sheathing their swords and making their way over towards their corner of the yard, “…you cannot humiliate him in front of his men!”

“Well, the arrogant pig’s bladder should have thought of that before he challenged me to a duel!”

“If I remember correctly, ‘twas you who challenged him” Daenerys pointed out irritably. Arya was failing to grasp the seriousness of the situation and the wider implications should Lord Baratheon be bested by a girl.

“A minor detail,” Arya huffed dismissively, “and besides, we have a wager. I cannot forfeit for there is too much at stake.”

Daenerys had noticed Arya whispering in Gendry’s ear and seen the satisfied smirk that crossed his face upon hearing her suggestion. The Queen had also heard Lord Baratheon declare to Arya that “she knew what he wanted”. Daenerys could only speculate on the terms of the wager, but she would hazard a guess that it involved Lord Baratheon obtaining what he had failed to get last night.

“Surely no wager can be worth a man’s honour?” The Queen pressed. “Think on it Arya – he will never forgive you if you show him to be inferior in combat to a…a…slip of a girl.”

“This wager is worth it, I assure you. His men will see I am no mere ‘slip of a girl’ with a sword in my hand.”

Arya slashed her blade aggressively at the air to prove her point.

“Then I shall I pray to The Old Gods and The New that you will not come to rue this day and curse your stubborn pride!”

“Have no fear, for I shall not!” Arya declared vehemently, afore stomping off to face Lord Baratheon.
Daenerys watched her go with a heavy heart. The foolish girl had no idea how fragile a man’s ego could be, particularly in front of his men and even more so in Gendry’s case. He had so recently been only a bastard Knight, rather than the great Lord he could claim to be now.

However it ended, ‘twould not end well. Each of them was more pig headed than the other. Arya would never forgive Lord Baratheon if he managed to best her, much bragged about, Braavosi sword skills and Lord Baratheon would be unable to forget the humiliation of a defeat in front of his men.

The Queen called for Grenn. There had to be a better way.

-o-

Gendry smiled as he took a step closer and raised his Braavosi practice sword in salute, the blade gleaming in the afternoon sun.

Arya watched him, poised and still.

“Shall we do this?” he murmured.

Slowly and deliberately, with her eyes never leaving his, Arya unbuckled her own sword belt and handed it to Grenn. Before accepting the practice sword, she began unrolling the sleeves of Gendry’s black shirt.

“What are you doing?” Lord Baratheon hissed as she crossed her arms and gripped the edges of his shirt, ready to pull it over her head. “There are a hundred men in this yard and every one of their beady eyes is going to be upon you already, without you…doing that!”

Arya paused, but only to laugh at him.

“I cannot duel in this! My movements will be restricted and besides, do you think I would not use every advantage I have to beat an opponent who is…” she gave him a long look up and down, her eyes lingering a shade too long on his crotch as a wicked smile curved her lips, “…so big?”

She pulled his shirt over her head, giving him and every other bloody fool in the yard a look at too much smooth, tanned skin, before the white shirt was back in place and her breasts were the only distraction. She proceeded to hand his shirt to a stunned Grenn, before undoing one, two, three of the buttons, leaving a deep ‘V’ ending enticingly in shadow between her breasts.

“You are gawking Lord Baratheon.” She smirked, turning the tables on him. “Do you like what you see?”

He gave himself a shake and stepped towards her. Seven buggering hells, that was worse. Now he was looking down at her and had an unhindered view. A man could loose himself in the deep well between her breasts and never wish to return.

“Aye, I like it too well and so does every other mother’s son here.”

She smiled sweetly up at him, “Really?”

“Aye really and if you didn’t seem so confident of winning, I might even think you were intent on...
cheating!”
She would make him take back that slur. She curled her lip and raised her sword in a final salute.

“Show him what ye got Lady Arya!” some excited wag from the crowd shouted.

With a flash of steel, she lunged at Gendry. Surprised by the suddenness and strength of her attack, he managed to deflect her sword at the last moment, but left himself exposed for her next attack. ‘Twas a good job the blades were blunted as he received a stinging blow on his arm.

“Ah!” she gloated, “First blood to me!”

The next swipe of her blade came perilously close to his throat and he was forced to jump back in retreat. She pressed her advantage, coming aggressively at him again. He parried, but unused to the lighter blade, he put too much force behind his stroke, overreaching and again leaving himself exposed. She took full advantage and this time he let out an involuntary cry of pain he felt the sting of her sword on the same place on his arm. A precision blow. Adrenaline pumped hard through his veins and instinct took over.

She was indeed a master, more disciplined than he, more precise, but he doubted she had ever used her undoubted skills in a fight where there were no rules. Her technique relied on perfected routines, speed and agility. But Gendry had been trained as a soldier. He’d fought for his life with The Others – things not even alive and with desperate men who had nothing to lose. His skill had been earned through survival and he intended to survive this battle and win.

He contemplated just grabbing her, knock her to the ground in a victory of brute strength and force over grace and skill. He could pin her under him. The memory of her writhing under him, naked and wanting came unbidden to his mind. The exhilaration of that image and their fight throbbed in his veins. ‘Twas a dangerous road to tread, as any distraction, however enticing, was going to lose him this duel.

She knew what she was doing, keeping him close so his longer reach was of no advantage. Every time he stepped back, she followed, dancing around him with deadly grace, their swords meeting in the sharp clash of steel. She braced herself against his strength, her chest heaving with the effort. Brute force sent her stumbling backwards.

“I admit it Arya. You are good….For a girl” He smirked as she regained her balance.

“Better than you!” She spat.

Fire flashed in her eyes and her skin glowed with exertion as she came at him again and again searching for an opening. She was, without doubt, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

“Would it really be so bad to give me what I want Arya? You like me and you like my kisses.” He said, his smile widening, “We can name our first boy Jon.”

She kicked out at his knee, catching him unawares. This time ‘twas his turn to stumble. He had been distracted by lust thundering in his veins, too cocky and she had seized her advantage. So she could fight dirty after all.

Her eyes narrowed defiantly, as she stood over him. “Not Jon. Eddard!”

Gendry was almost willing to forfeit there and then! She had considered the name of their son!

But his joy was short lived. She gave him no quarter, no chance to recover, coming at him and
forcing him to defend her blows raining down from above as he struggled back to his feet.

“Stop letting her win! I’ve bet on you!” An angry voice from the crowd yelled at him. He suspected ‘twas Tom O’Sevens.

“I’m not!” he grunted back as he finally dragged himself upright.

“Ready to surrender Lord Baratheon?” she goaded as she came at him again, harder than ever.

“Never! You are so keen for me to lose that I realise my Lord’s Kiss was obviously much to your liking!” he shot back, laughing as her lips parted in shock.

“Do…not…say…that…aloud!” she hissed as he lunged at him. The deep flush of her embarrassment pleased him no end. But she fought even better when she was angry. A good quality in a warrior, but not one he had hoped to find in her.

“Will you agree to name our second boy Jon then?” He grinned, unable to resist pressing her on this.

“You assume too much Lord Baratheon.” Her tone was scathing as she blocked his attack.

She lunged again but Gendry had found his rhythm. The Braavosi blade was becoming more familiar to his hand. He parried and twisted her blade aside, finally breaching her guard.

She tried to sidestep and angle her body away, knowing it was already too late, tensing herself for the strike. But it did not come. He missed. She felt the rush of air as his blade whipped past her neck. She looked at him in shock. He had hesitated and it had cost him the blow.

Did he even realise what he had done? Surely he knew that, in battle, there were no second chances and that a warrior had to be ruthless? But he did not want to hurt her, whereas she had no such qualms about him. Victory would be hers. All she needed to do was wait and watch for another hesitation from him and she would have him.

-o-

King Jon and King Aegon had been pouring over plans for the fresh water canal recently prepared by Tyrion Lannister when they were interrupted by Grenn.

“Begging your pardons, Your Graces, but The Queen has asked King Jon to come to the Bailey yard as soon as possible to deal with Lady Arya.”

King Aegon’s interest was piqued; what was the She-wolf up to now that was so urgent it brought Grenn scurrying, panting for breath?

King Jon did not even look up from his charts, muttering “I am too busy to play nurse maid to my little sister.”

Grenn and Aegon exchanged despairing looks.

“Queen Daenerys said that if you claimed to be too busy...” Grenn turned an unfortunate shade of puce and coughed and averted his eyes in an attempt to cover his embarrassment, “…I had to tell you she would be too busy to attend to your needs for the foreseeable future.”
Aegon rolled his eyes skyward and stifled a snort of laughter as Jon slammed his fist on the table and cursed, “Seven buggering hells! Am I destined to forever be at the beck and call of women?”

Aegon could refrain from laughing no longer. “Brother, I have always done my damndest to attend with all possible haste when a woman declares she wants me!” He was keen to see what Lady Arya was up to, even if Jon was not.

“I doubt this summons has anything to do with satisfying a woman’s carnal desires and will therefore be of little interest to you.” Jon shot back.

Aegon could not resist saying, “But it does sound as if you will be rather lacking in carnal satisfaction if you do not comply with Daenerys’ request.”

“For fuck’s sake will you make haste Jon!?” Grenn finally demanded, losing all pretence at manners. “Weyland and Arya are duelling in the Bailey yard and The Queen wants you to stop it!”

“Why did you not say sooner man!?” Aegon berated the Crow, running for the door as he buckled on his sword belt, “I would pay good money to see this. Are there any wagers being laid?”

“Plenty,” Grenn replied, “although I did not have the opportunity to lay one myself, for The Queen bid me fetch Jon with all possible haste.”

“Then you will take my wager? I favour the She-wolf, for Weyland has all the sword skills of a butcher!”

The two of them were gone before Jon heard whether Grenn accepted Aegon’s wager. As he retrieved his own sword, Jon thought, not for the first time, how relieved he would be when Arya finally married and was no longer his responsibility. As hope of a marriage seemed to diminish with every passing day, he was sure this would not be the last time he would be called upon to extract his sister from some fix or other.

-o-

Jon refused to run, with the result that Aegon and Grenn were on the balcony above the Bailey yard a considerable time before he arrived. Mercifully his brother’s shouted encouragement was drowned out by the cacophony of other yells and curses rising up from the yard below.

Jon took in the scene below him with one sweeping look. The two trouble makers were in the centre of the yard, enthusiastically wilding Braavosi swords, both deep in concentration and completely oblivious to the melee surrounding them.

Next, Jon hunted anxiously for Daenerys and breathed a sigh of relief when he caught sight of her standing back from the crowd, on the stairs below him with Lem and Anguy beside her. At least the two of them had the good sense not to leave her unprotected in this rabble. Her anxiety was obvious to him in the high set of her shoulders and the stiffness of her back. As if sensing his presence, she turned slightly to survey the crowd whereupon he could see she was twisting her skirts in her hands.

Jon had half a mind to remove his wife from this immediately and leave his pig headed friend and his troublesome little sister to fight it out, but there would be no end of recriminations from Daenerys if he did not do as she bid. Jon was left with no choice if he wished to keep his wife happy, and he did. So he dug his elbow into Aegon’s ribs to attract his brother’s attention and launched himself down the stairs to break up this fight.

As he stormed past Daenerys, Jon made sure to catch her eye and give her a hasty, nodded acknowledgement. He was rewarded with a look of relief that would have been reward enough for
his trouble. However, he was confident he could encourage further rewards from Daenerys in the sanctuary of their bedchamber later that night.

King Jon had to push through the first few men, but as they realised who wanted through, the crowd parted and a silence fell upon all those who saw him. By the time Jon reached the inner circle, the crowd had almost all fallen silent. Only Tom O’Sevens was still cursing Lord Baratheon loudly for failing to ‘give her one!’ A firm hand on the old troubadour’s shoulder immediately silenced him too.

Only Arya and Gendry were left oblivious to his presence, both breathing heavily, warily circling each other, swords at the ready.

With a muttered curse aimed at both of them, Jon stepped into the circle and bellowed “Enough!”

Lord Baratheon immediately lowered his sword guilty, but Arya, seeing her chance lunged for her opponent, only to find her blade intercepted by Aegon’s. Subtle as ever, the Targaryen King twisted his broadsword, forcing the lighter Braavosi blade up and Arya’s wrist back until she was forced to drop it in pain.

Jon snarled at his brother under his breath. Aegon deliberately ignored him, laughing as he bent down to retrieve Arya’s sword. He offered it back to her hilt first with a bow.

“You’re next Targaryen!” Lady Arya snarled at him, to Aegon’s obvious delight and Lord Baratheon’s very obvious annoyance.

“Lady Arya! Lord Baratheon!” Jon snapped. “What is the meaning of this?”

To Jon’s surprise, his friend stepped in front of his sister and with more dignity than he had ever seen Gendry muster, his old friend declared “Tis all my fault and I apologise unreservedly for involving Lady Arya in this.”

Arya immediately shoved past him, “’Tis not his fault. ’Tis mine! I challenged him and I would have won if you had not interrupted us!”

“Would not.” Lord Baratheon hissed under his breath, presumably intending only Arya to hear.

Jon rolled his eyes. Was there ever a pair of fools more suited to each other than these two?

“I think we should declare a draw.” Aegon drawled. “What say you Jon?”

A mass groan of disappointment went up from the crowd.

“A draw it is and from now on, duels are banned within the walls of The Red Keep.” Jon declared with an ill temper.

Another, louder groan rose up from the crowd, accompanied by a few muttered complaints. Arya was giving her brother a look poisonous enough to kill an aurochs at fifty paces.

Jon held up both hands and turned to face the crowd. He could deal with the Lord and the Lady later. “I have better things to do than break up fights and you have better things to do than watch them. I believe Bad Company rides for the Stormlands two days hence. Is that correct Lord Baratheon?”

“Aye” Gendry confirmed loudly from behind his shoulder.

“Then I suggest you men get back to your practice, for your lives may well depend upon it!”
With a final collective groan the crowd began to disperse and take up their own swords again.

Satisfied, Jon turned back to the two duelers. “Lady Arya, Lord Baratheon. I shall expect never to see a repeat performance. If you have any grievances to settle in the future, you will settle them in private! Do I make myself clear?”

Gendry nodded, unable to refrain from grinning at Arya’s furious scowl.

Turning on his heel, Jon stomped off to find his Queen.

Aegon was not in so much of a hurry to leave, “If you ever need any help with her…”

“Say nothing more if you want to keep your head!” Gendry warned Aegon with a snarl.

“Fair enough! If you think you can handle her!” Aegon chuckled, walking backwards, sensing his own entertainment was at an end, if he wanted to keep his head.

When Aegon was out of earshot and the two of them were left alone in the centre of the yard, Arya turned to Gendry and snapped, “This is not over Waters. Meet me at midnight and we will settle this once and for all!”

“As you wish,” Gendry smirked with a low bow. He watched Arya stomp away across the yard. A female version of Jon indeed.

A midnight rendezvous with Arya. Perhaps something could be salvaged from this after all.

-o-

’Twas before Midnight. The moon was full and riding high. The spring night air was crisp and clear. Stars littered the sky and The Red Keep, for once, was still and quiet.

He was early, but she was earlier.

Gendry heard the soft, rhythmic swish of steel cutting through air and stopped in the shadows to watch, just as he had done the first time he had seen her.

He studied her intently, determined to commit her to his memory in case…in case what? In case he never saw her again? That was unthinkable.

This time she was a shadow with moonlight flashing off her blade as it whirled through the air. She was silent; no sound of her breathing reached his ears, no noise was made by her footfall, for she moved with all the silent grace of a cat. Her back was towards him and he watched the agile beauty of her in the pale, glowing light; strong, supremely confident and feminine all together. His beautiful warrior girl.

As if sensing his presence, Arya looked up. She gave him a shy, girlish wave and ‘twas as if a blast of heat washed over her as her eyes found his. As was becoming habit as soon as he was near, she no longer felt as calm as still water or anything like it. Awareness, nervousness and anticipation rolled over her like waves in the restless sea. His smile as he walked down the stairs towards her sent a shiver of longing racing through her.

He stopped when he was still some distance away, watching her trace an elaborate pattern in the air before him.

“I see you managed to lose your guards.”
She snorted. “I could have lost those Crows easily when I was a girl, even without…” she stopped herself before she said too much. Seven hells, she had nearly mentioned her training in The House of Black and White. Only Gendry could disarm her without even trying.

He was smiling as he watched her. ‘Twas a knowing sort of smile, with one of the corners of his mouth lifted higher than the other, as if he knew all of her secrets, as if he knew of The House and Black and White and the Kindly Man’s training and as if he did not mind. She presumed too much. No man would want a Faceless assassin in his bed. Gendry would not want her once he knew the truth and she could not keep her secret hidden for ever. Not from him.

Hastily changing the subject, she issued her challenge, as she tossed him a sword.

“Are you ready to lose tonight Lord Baratheon?”

He caught it easily, but let the sword hang carelessly from his hand. “Nae, Arya. I do not wish to fight tonight.”

“Then why are you here?”

He did not answer and the silence stretched between them. Surely she must know? Was she teasing him, the way other women were wont to do? He had not thought her one to indulge in coquettish behaviour or enjoy the meaningless flatteries that rolled off other men’s tongues. He had asked her three times now to marry him and he would not ask again until he was assured of her answer.

“Do all those fancy patterns actually help in a fight?”

“Practice enough and they become instinct, as natural as breathing; your body and your sword in perfect harmony.”

“So teach me.”

She closed the distance between them as gracefully and as silently as a cat. The scent of her drifted to him, mysterious and feminine as she lifted her face towards him, her big grey eyes blinking at him. Once, twice. His heartbeat quickened.

With a sly smile she closed her hand over his and raised his sword between them.

“For a start, your grip is all wrong. Your fingers should be relaxed, for this is not a sword that rewards brute strength. Here, let me show you.”

The two of them watched the sword and their hands as she gently loosened his grip, finger by finger.

Touching his warm, strong fingers Arya could not help but remember them stroking her face. On her breasts. She swallowed and looked up to find he was looking down at her, pale eyes glittering in the moonlight, not even trying to hide that he was reliving the same memories as she was.

She kept her hand on his as she moved the sword in a slow arc. “You have the benefit of strength and reach. You should have held me back where you had the advantage, but you let me come too close to you, where it becomes difficult to strike.”

Close as they were, ‘twas still not close enough for him.

“What if I cannot keep away from you?” he murmured.

“Then you will loose every time,” she teased.
It made no difference in the end. He was already lost. He had lost his heart to her long, long ago.

She moved her arm and he followed, feeling the strength of her wrist, the tension in her arm. With her hand on his, she tested him forwards and then back. Attack and retreat, a sensual rhythm in the darkness. He imagined it would be like this when they finally made love. A dance of give and take as they drove each other on to the very pinnacle of pleasure and the soaring swoop as they surrendered everything to the other.

He stopped and let the sword drop to his side again, before letting the hilt slip through his fingers and land with a soft thud in the sand.

She blinked at him. “Do you not wish to continue?”

“Aye, but not with swords.”

“Very well then. The Water Dance is much the same as any other dance…” she began.

He grunted, “Then I might as well stop now, for you know I cannot dance.”

“But you fight well and move with speed and grace for one so…big.” There it was again, that sly smile he could not resist.

“So you admit I fight well do you Lady Arya?”

The compliment from her made his chest swell with pride. The air around them seemed to warm and swirl, sending his blood pounding. He smiled as he drew her to him.

His hand was on her back, his other hand reaching for hers, entwining their fingers. Her lithe body, at first inflexible, softened just enough to let him know she was not unwilling. He ran his hand down the slender curve of her back, letting his hand linger, savouring the soft curve of her bottom, pulling her to him, smiling as he felt her melt against him, moulding her body to his.

She felt fragile in his arms, but he knew from experience how strong she was. His Arya was no delicate flower. He had always known it and that was what he loved about her; the way she burned through life leaving a fiery trail behind her. A trail he seemed destined to follow.

Arya had never realised how well they fit. Her height complimented his perfectly. ‘Twas a disconcerting thought. For a moment they did nothing but stand close together, breathing softly in the moonlight.

“Is this your idea of a dance?” Arya asked with a laugh, instinctively snaking her other arm around his neck. But she had no complaints. It felt wonderful to be held in his strong arms, to be so near to him. He held her far closer than she would ever be held in any Great Hall. Their thighs met, her breasts brushed the front of his shirt. Gendry began to move them. Slowly. They swayed more than danced, turning together in a small square instead of making the usual elaborate steps that took up the entire floor space.

“It seems more like an excuse for you to touch me.”

Gendry’s breath was warm against her ear. “I cannot deny it. I like holding you.”

There was no mistaking the low tones of want in his voice, as he cupped her bottom with one strong hand and pressed her against the hard thrust of his erection. Arya hated being confined or trapped, but she felt none of that now, in his arms. There was a strange comfort and familiarity in his strength. An undeniable bond had formed between them, mayhaps it had always been there, but he stretched it
to breaking point by insisting on marriage.

“I like holding you too.” She admitted shyly, “Could we not…” she was embarrassed, unsure of how to put this to him, “…enjoy each other, without being married?”

He did not smile and he had that stubborn look in his eye when he replied, “That will never be enough for me. Not from you. I am the type of man who wants a wife, a family. A home.”

She buried her face against his shoulder, her stomach twisted in torment, unable to meet his gaze. She knew it. She had always known it of him. He was not like his father or Tom O’Sevens or Aegon; men who would fall into bed with any pretty girl who caught their eye. Even as long ago as The Peach, he had made that clear.

“I love you Arya, I always have” he murmured against her hair, “but ‘tis all or nothing with me.”
Gendry loved her.

She did not doubt he thought he did, but he did not know what he said. He did not know her. He did not know where she had been or what she had done. Would he still think he loved her when he knew?

“I…I have a confession…”

He kissed the top of her head lightly and squeezed her hand in his. “You do not need to do this…”

“I want to.” She took a deep breath and began, “I did not know it then, but Jaqen H’ghar was a Faceless Man.”

She felt him stiffen and pull back slightly. Would he pull away entirely once he heard it all?

“I knew you were taken with him.” Arya could hear the hard undertone of jealously in Gendry’s voice. “Did you go to Braavos with him?”

“No, no…” she was denying it, but ’twas not the whole truth, “…not with him, but he gave me a coin, which afforded me safe passage to Braavos.”

“And once you were there? Did you take up with him again?” Gendry’s tone was accusing, his voice stretched tight as a drum.

“I was a child. I had nowhere else to go. I was welcomed at the House of Black and White.”

He said nothing, but she could tell by the tension in his shoulders, his arms, in the way he held her, that he was angry and no doubt jealous of Jaqen. She would need to make him understand,

“There is no need to be jealous of him. I do not believe I have met him since…”

Gendry stopped turning them slowly around, narrowed his eyes sceptically and scoffed “You ‘do not believe’? What does that mean? Do not try to fool me Arya.”

“We change faces, we can become anyone…and no-one.”

“We?” he echoed, warily “So ‘tis true? You are one of them?”

She gave an almost imperceptible nod of her head against his shoulder, holding her breath, waiting for him to push her away. But he did not, if anything he pulled her closer and held her tighter.
He needed to know. “Why are you here Arya?”

“Because I want to be. I left the House of Black and White. I left and I have not looked back. I do not want to return there ever. I want to be Arya Stark again, but I have done some terrible things Gendry. My hands are stained with blood.”

“As are mine. As are all of those who have lived through The War. We cannot change the past, we can only live for the future and I want my future to be entwined with yours.”

His heart thundered in his chest and his blood roared through his ears as he waited for her reply. He had hoped to hear her breathless agreement, but again she thwarted him by asking for something from him.

“I have made a confession. Now I will have yours. Tell me of that scar…”

She pulled back from him, so she could look up at his face and run the tip of her finger below his eye, over the raised welt of his scar. When he flinched, she knew ‘twas not through pain, but rather ‘twas at the memory and being asked to tell it.

“I told you The Brotherhood intended to hang Brienne…” he said with a weary sigh. He would not have her tonight. Not after this. He knew it before he started.

She interrupted immediately, “But you did not tell me on whose orders, for I cannot believe ‘twas Beric’s doing.”

“Nae” he shook his head, looking as if the cares of all the world rested upon his shoulders, “Had Dondarrion still been al…” he started to say ‘alive’, before thinking better of it, “Had Beric still been in command, ‘twould never have happened. But he gave his life to another and I fear you will not like what I have to tell you of it.”

The silence grew between them. He looked up to the stars, sending up a silent prayer that this would not end as he suspected it would. She waited. Finally he blew out a long, slow breath.

“Before I tell it, I want you to know I regret with all my heart that I did not do more to keep you safe...before.”

Arya nodded. She was anxious to hear this tale, so she resisted the temptation to tell him she needed no-one to keep her safe. If she mentioned it, he would only protest that she needed someone, as he always did. By ‘someone’ he naturally meant himself. So male. So predictable.

“After The Hound took you, I searched, we all searched. We found traces; a ferry man who had been tricked into transporting a man and his son across a river for no payment, a farmer who had his cart and cargo of salt pork stolen by a man and a boy fitting the description, but then the Red Wedding happened and the River Lands were in chaos.”

The rest had happened. He must have been so close, but, “The Red Wedding?” she repeated, uncertain of the reference.

“The massacre at The Twins. ‘Tis the common name for it now.”

Arya repeated the vile words again, under her breath, softly this time, “The Red Wedding”. Only three little words, but they had stolen so many she held dear; her Mother, Robb, all her father’s Bannermen.

Gendry lifted her face towards his, by way of a gentle finger under her chin. She looked up at him
with wide grey eyes.

“Your mother died that day, her throat slit by Raymund Frey before they tossed her in the Trident.”

Arya felt tears begin to flow. She blinked them back. Why was she crying now? She was older, stronger now and faster, but in so many ways she was still that little orphan girl. She was still alone.

Gendry pressed on. Now he had started, he wanted to unburden himself of it all.

“When we found her by the side of the river she had been dead for days.”

Arya had known that. Somehow she had always known her mother had been dragged, dead, from the river. Perhaps she had seen it in a dream.

“‘Twas a terrible sight Arya. Thoros would not raise her. He said it had been too long, and would not do it, but Beric would not listen and passed his…his life force to her and she rose, Arya, she rose and walked. But she was not like Beric; she was like The Others; cold and dead, with an insatiable hunger for more death. She…it…wanted only revenge.”

Revenge. Yes, of course. Was that not what Arya herself had lived for all these years? Her mother had also wanted revenge. How could she not after what they had done to her? To Robb?

Arya looked up at Gendry. Her eyes cold and hard as steel. “I trust you wanted revenge too?”

He drew in a breath to calm himself before speaking. “It …she….called herself Lady Stoneheart and we gave death to anyone she marked, whether ‘twas justified or not. But I learned this Arya - revenge is a wildfire demon that burns and twists every man it touches. Its thirst cannot be quenched until the last man standing has fallen and so ‘twas with The Brotherhood. I am ashamed now of what we did. Of what I did.”

“Why?” Arya asked flatly. “They murdered my brother, my mother, most everyone I ever cared about.”

He was stunned. Was she listening to him at all?

“Brienne and her squire did not murder your brother, but that thing demanded their death anyway. The squire was a boy like Ty. Just a boy, who had never been to The Twins, had probably never met a Fray and still Lady Stoneheart had him hung.”

Although Gendry thought he might retch at the memory and the guilt of having not acted sooner, Arya was impassive, cold, standing there in the moonlight as if she was made of ice…or stone. Where was her compassion? Could he have been so mistaken about her? Gendry took hold of her shoulders, staring into her eyes, willing her to understand.

“Brienne was to be next. Loyal Brienne. When she shouted for me I could stand it no longer and ‘twas me Arya. I parted Lady Stoneheart’s head from her shoulders, but not before she marked me with this.” He jabbed a finger at the scar under his eye.

As he removed his hand from one of her shoulders, Arya was able to break away. She twisted out of his grasp, clenching her fists, taking a deep breath and then another and another, trying to gain control. She could slit his throat from ear to ear and he would just be another name on her list. Did he think confessing to this made it somehow all right? He had murdered her mother. She hated him.

She had to get away. Now.
She sensed, rather than saw him reaching for her. She twisted away from him again, this time hissing “Leave me alone!”

Gendry’s first inclination was to back away, but he loved her and she needed him. ‘Twas clear she was in pain and, even if she thought him the cause of it, he wanted to be the one to heal her.

“Arya, come here. Please, you must understand…”

She was in no mood for listening.

He had murdered her mother, and still thought to make her ‘understand’. Could he be any more stupid? None of his excuses could ever justify what he had done. Never. Ever.

With tears stinging her eyes she broke into a run, racing towards the balcony, deciding to go over it, rather than waste time on stairs. With a running leap she was on the wall, hauling herself up onto the balcony and over, then flying along the corridor, a sharp turn right and out onto another exterior balcony.

With a dive and roll she landed in a crouch, then was up, running for the shadows across another yard, tears blinding her as she tried in vain to swipe them away.

Swift as a deer. Quiet as a shadow. Fear cuts deeper than swords. She wished her mother’s blade had cut Gendry deeper still. Quick as a snake. He was the snake and she had trusted him. She was a fool. All anyone ever did was let her down. How could she be calm as still water when all she could see through her tears was the image of Gendry slicing her mother’s throat with Valyrian steel?

So Arya did the only thing she could. She ran with his calling after her ringing in her ears.

Gendry cursed himself for not being ready, for not holding her tighter, for letting her go.

He stood at the top of the stairs, straining to hear anything that would indicate which way she had gone. There was only an empty corridor and silence.

“Arya!” he called out again, hearing the desperation in his own voice.

There was no reply, save the echo of her name reflected back to him by the walls of The Red Keep. He had no idea which way she had fled, but he had to try. He turned left, breaking into a run as he gave chase. But in his heart, he already knew ‘twas in vain.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed that. Next Friday we’re off to Stormlands, or at least Gendry is.
The first grey light of dawn was filtering through the windows of the Red Keep as Arya stole along the corridor to Sansa’s room. The Castle was beginning to wake and she was anxious to avoid being seen or caught, for they would only march her back to Jon, or worse, to him.

She tried Sansa’s door, but as expected the latch had been dropped on the other side. Arya knocked softly at first and then with increasing urgency as she received no answer. Her fist was drawn back with the intention of thumping the door when it suddenly opened just enough to reveal a tousled Sansa, squinting out into the brightening dawn,

“By the Seven, what do you want at this ungodly hour?”

“I need to talk to you. Can I come in?” Arya took a step forwards, only to find the door closed further against her.

“No you may not!” Sansa hissed. “Wait there while I fetch my cloak.”

The door was unceremoniously shut in Arya’s face.

Sansa rested her back against the door for a moment, willing herself into full wakefulness. While she would never refuse her sister, Arya’s timing left much to be desired, as was usual. Although she loved her sister, Sansa had always thought Arya the most selfish person alive and had she not proved it once again? What time was this to knock on a person’s door, demanding entrance? Particularly when the person to whom you wished to speak had company.

Sansa made her way carefully towards the armoire. The drapes were heavy and inside the room ‘twas still dark as night. She did not want to make any careless, unnecessary noise and wake the man sleeping in her bed.

By touch, she found her cloak hanging where she had left it. Not wanting to risk knocking anything over, Sansa bundled it in her arms before searching for her embroidered slippers. She was sure she had left them at the side of her bed last night. She bent to retrieve them and in the stillness heard his
deep, peaceful breathing above her. She had watched him sleep often enough to know how he would look; carefree and boyish with his long, dark lashes fanning his cheeks. Why had the Gods seen fit to make men look as if they were merely angelic boys while they slept? And made them even harder to resist? 'Twas hardly fair on womankind.

Clutching her robe and slippers, she padded softly to the door, opening it as little as possible and sliding around the edge to meet her sister.

As Sansa pulled on her cloak and slid her feet into her dancing slippers, she shivered in the chill morning air. Only when she was as tightly wrapped as could be, did Sansa direct her attention to her sister, sitting on the cold flagstones, her head resting on crossed arms.

“I trust this is important little sister, for ‘tis too early and too cold to be out of bed for any trivial reason.”

Arya looked up. Her face was pale, her eyes, bloodshot and red rimmed with crying. The dark shadows beneath them confirmed that Arya had not slept at all. ‘Twas plain the matter that kept them both out of bed now was anything but trivial.

“Come, let us talk in your room and hope there is a fire lit there” Sansa urged, holding out her hand.

Arya took it gratefully, unfolding her long legs to stand taller than her older sister. With a wry smile, Sansa wondered if she would ever become used to looking up at little Arya who was no longer either very little or even horse-faced anymore.

Her young sister had grown into a strikingly beautiful woman. For the first time, Sansa began to understand why a war could be fought for Arya, the way it had been waged over Lyanna. Their father had always claimed a resemblance between his sister and Arya in looks and spirit. What Lord would stand by and see their Lady suffer like this? Sansa wondered if Lord Baratheon was the cause of this misery or if he would be the one to save her from it.

“Why must we go to my rooms? You know they are watched.” Arya sniffed, rubbing her nose on the sleeve of her shirt.

Sansa resisted pointing out that was not good for the material and instead blew out an impatient sigh, “I have company sister and I do not think we would be wise to sit down in any hall, with you looking…as you do and me dressed like this, or rather undressed.”

“You have company? At this hour?”

Sansa gave her sister a disbelieving sideways glance. Surely Arya was not so naive as to think a visitor had called upon her at dawn? No-one but Arya would do such an inconsiderate thing.

Arya had been too wrapped up in her own troubles to pay attention to Sansa or what she was doing, but now Sansa mentioned her state of undress, Arya had to concede ‘twas unusual. The shift Sansa wore as she answered the door was gossamer fine and almost transparent. Hardly what Arya would have expected on a cold spring night. However, it had not occurred to her that the reason for such inappropriate attire was that she had company in her room. Male company.

“You have a man in your bed?” Arya gasped, finally realising what Sansa had meant by ‘company’.

Sansa raised her chin and drew her sister a defiant look.

“Yes. There is a man in my bed. I am a widow and a high born lady. There are no rules to prevent me from taking a lover, I should think it even expected of one in my position.”
“A lover?” Arya repeated, with even more astonishment than before.

Her prim, boring, holy sister had a lover? ‘Twas almost beyond Arya’s comprehension. Had Sansa a man between her legs while Arya was knocking at her door? Arya looked at her sister anew, taking in her tousled, still abed hair, her flushed skin, the fancy dancing slippers and that flimsy thing she wore to bed. ‘Twas one thing to hear that Sansa had been forced into an arranged marriage with Tyrion Lannister, but ‘twas quite another to see the evidence of Sansa’s lovemaking writ large in front of her face.

“Yes, a lover.” Sansa confirmed impatiently, “But you did not come here to enquire into my affairs, so tell me what ails you while we walk.”

Arya gave her head a shake. All of a sudden, she felt very, very tired. Sansa had a lover. Jon had Daenerys. Everyone had someone except her. Arya wanted someone to hold her and tell her everything would be all right. She wanted Winterfell’s walls to protect her; she wanted her father’s strong arms and her mother’s wise words. But she would never hold or hear or see her parents again.

Instead, she was alone. After fleeing from Gendry, Arya had clutched her knees to her chest in a corner in the dark and sobbed silently until she thought that no more tears could be wrung out of her. And then she had sobbed some more. At some point during the night, through her haze of tears, it had occurred to Arya that she was making up for all the grief she had denied before. There could be no denying it now, for she was drenched in it.

Arya gripped Sansa’s hand as if she feared her sister would leave her too. Sansa’s hand was so smooth and soft compared to her own, but Arya was coming to realise her sister was strong in other ways.

Despite the loss of their parents, House Stark endured. Arya was determined they would lose no more. Any thoughts she had entertained of going back to Braavos had evaporated last night, like morning mist clearing from the land below. Sansa, Jon and Bran were all she had left and she would hold onto them with all of her might.

The sisters walked towards Arya’s chambers hand in hand. Arya opened her mouth a few times to begin, but every time the words got caught in her throat and ‘twas all she could do to swallow them down and keep from crying again.

“Is your upset anything to do with Lord Baratheon?” Sansa asked before they had gone very far.

Arya nodded, feeling the hate and the anger rising again in her chest. ‘Twas enough to force the words from her,

“He murdered our mother and I hate him!”

Sansa stopped dead in her tracks, jerking Arya’s arm backwards as she spun her sister around to face her.

“The Freys murdered our mother, not Lord Baratheon. Never let me hear you say otherwise!”

The fury in Sansa’s reply was shocking; the fire in her eyes matching the fire in her hair.

“Do you not know what Jon and his army did to the Freys at the battle for the Twins? Do you know ‘twas your Lord Baratheon who led the van there? Do you know that Frey heads, preserved in tar, sit on spikes lining the bridge still? That Walder Frey’s head sits on the very top, as a warning to all?”

Arya’s eyes were wide as she shook her head again. Gendry had never mentioned this. She had
never given him a chance to.

“I thought you were supposed to be trained in the House of Black and White?” Sansa jabbed a bejewelled finger at Arya’s breast bone to emphasise her point, “Did they not teach you that death is a gift? Never was it truer than for Lady Stoneheart. Our mother would never have hung innocent boys or dear Brienne! Brienne had sworn fealty to her. How could Robb be avenged by killing innocents? That thing was not our mother and your Lord did what no-one else was brave enough to do!”

“How do you know all this?” Arya asked quietly.

“Because I listen and I ask and I am not too wrapped up in myself to notice everyone else around me!”

Arya received another hard poke in the chest as Sansa raged against her,

“You are the most selfish person I have ever met! You know that man loves you, although the Gods only know why. I wager you never gave a thought for his carrying this burden, bearing that scar for all these years. Did you think on his feelings at all? Even once? Well did you Arya?”

She could only shake her head again.

“You had best tread carefully Arya. Very carefully. There is a long line behind you eager for Lord Baratheon’s favour and even he will eventually tire of your selfishness!”

Arya shook her hand free of Sansa’s surprisingly strong grip. “Good! Then he will be free to pick another from that long line!”

Even as she said the words, Arya knew them to be lies. The thought of Gendry with another woman made her blood run cold or boil or mayhaps both.

It appeared Sansa was not fooled either, for she said in a serious, low voice, “Promise me you shall think upon him and think well Arya, for I believe you will rue a decision made in haste.”

With a scowl Arya turned her back on her sister and began walking. When she heard no footsteps behind, she turned back,

“I promise I will think on him. Now are you coming or not?”

With a satisfied smile, Sansa started towards her sister.

-o-

Gendry had no idea where Arya would have gone after she left him in the training yard. He could find no trace of her. With nowhere else to try, he made his way to her room.

Ignoring the two Crows wrapped in their cloaks, fast asleep on either side of her door, he knocked. Hard. The knocking soon became a hammering as he received no answer from inside,

“Are you in there Arya? Gods help me, I’ll break that door down if you don’t let me in!” he yelled, his frustration growing with every passing moment.
“And why would she not be in there?” Halder the Crow asked sleepily, looking up at Gendry as if he were mad. “She’s definitely not left since that duel of yours. She’s most likely fast asleep like all sensible folk.”

“Think she could sleep through that?” Albett asked as he sat upright and stretched. “He’s yellin’ loud enough to wake The Others. She’s awake alright, she’s just ignorin’ him, likely ‘cos he never let her win.”

Without even bothering to reply to the Crows, Gendry put his shoulder to the door. Seven hells, this was going to hurt, but the door was barred against him and this was the only way in. He took a few steps back and charged. The hinges gave way with a satisfying shriek of metal and wood. The door fell into the room with a ground shaking thump. There was no way she could ignore that; half the castle probably heard it.

The Crows were at his back as he stepped onto the fallen door and into the room. It was still in darkness, but one of the crows had enough sense to light a tightly bound bundle of Hawthorn; such things served as torches in The Red Keep. The flame flickered in the breeze from the open window. ‘Twas obvious Arya was not there and that the window had been her means of escape.

Gendry peered out of the window and, even in the dark, he could tell ’twas a long, long way down to the ground. He twisted around to take a look above; that was the route she must have taken. There was a narrow outcrop of stone not too far above and a balcony some way above that. By the Gods, she would have to be either mad or desperate to try that. Then he recalled the effortless way she had scaled the wall in the training yard and leapt over the balcony, all while he had barely put one foot in front of the other. Mayhaps Faceless Men performed such feats of daring without a second thought.

Cursing her and them under his breath, he pulled his head back into the room. His only option was to wait for her return. Striding back across the room, he addressed the Crows,

“Your shift is over boys. Go and tell whoever is due to relieve you that Lady Arya is to be guarded no longer.”

They looked at one another and Halder, who was either the bravest or the more stupid, saw fit to question Lord Baratheon instruction,

“But Jon said we must…”

“King Jon will agree with my orders once I have time to tell him my reasons.” Gendry snarled, “Now off with you. My patience has already been sorely tested tonight.”

With a shrug to each other, the two crows wandered off, back through the gap where the door had been, no doubt quite happy to sleep in their own beds tonight, rather than on hard flagstones.

Not wishing to alert Arya to his presence when she eventually returned and being unwilling to risk her fleeing from him again, Gendry hefted the door up. He set it back upon the lower hinge, which was still almost intact and rested the top against the door frame. It would do as the room was once again shrouded in darkness.

He knew he might be in for a long wait and he would as well be comfortable, so he settled himself atop the bed. He was careful to adjust his sword so ’twas easily unsheathed, in case Arya decided that his death might be fitting vengeance for what he had done to her mother. Aye, he had always known ’twould be a shock to her, hearing his part in it, but surely she would see sense once she calmed down? Unfortunately Arya had always been inclined towards hasty action before fully thinking a thing through. He hoped The Faceless Men had at least trained that out of her.
Hours later, when the first grey morning light began to appear through the window, Gendry’s patience had worn through. This time tomorrow he would be leading Bad Company out to the Stormlands and he had much to attend to before then. Tobho Mott was expecting him and he would be damned if he would let the old man down because Arya was too pig headed to listen to him.

While he did not wish to depart without making his peace with Arya, she would need to meet him halfway on this. He could not regret what he did and he would not apologize for it. She must accept that before there could be peace between them.

When a frustrated grunt, he swung his boots off the bed, stood up and stretched. Seven hells, his shoulder still hurt from that bloody door.

If there was to be reconciliation before he left on the morrow, Arya would need to come to him, for he could wait no longer.

-o-

“The coast is clear” Sansa confirmed in a loud whisper.

Arya stepped out of the shadows and took her place by her sister’s side. Sure enough, there were no Crows, but Arya could tell immediately there was something wrong with her door.

“What did you do to that?” Sansa hissed as they drew closer.

“Nothing. I dropped the latch inside and I climbed out the window. The door was fine and there were two Crows sat out here last night.”

Arya gripped the handle and the door nearly swung out on top of them. It took both of Arya’s hands, pressed flat against the door to push it open wide enough for them to pass through.

Someone had burst the top hinge and, when she looked more closely, Arya could see the wood was compressed in an almost perfect circle at the same height as her head. It did not take someone with the brains of Tyrion Lannister to work out that a very tall man had put his shoulder to the door. Even Moon Boy would have guessed that man was Lord Baratheon.

Arya’s hands stilled on the half open door as she realised Gendry might still be inside.

“What are you waiting for?!” Sansa berated her sister, slipping under Arya’s arms and into the room.

“Seven hells!” Sansa swore on the other side of the door.

“What is it?” Arya hissed feeling her stomach drop as if to the floor. Was he still in there? Instead of readying itself for a fight, as it has always done before, her body seemed to want nothing more than to curl up into a ball and sleep.

“You left the window open; there is no fire and ‘tis cold as winter in here!”

Sagging with relief, Arya pushed the door back and joined her sister in the room.

Sansa was already crouched before the grate, lighting the fire that had been set earlier. Arya had left the window open so she could climb back in. Now she walked over to shut it and, on the way, noticed that her bed was not the way the servants usual left it, with the covers pulled tight and flat.
As she stepped closer, she saw the dent in the pillow. Someone had lain in her bed. Arya stooped to examine the bedcovers. A single black hair on the white linen pillowcase confirmed 'twas him and Gendry had not even taken his boots off, for there were dirty marks on the cover at the far end. She slid her hand under the heavy woollen blankets and felt residual body heat, rather than cold linen. He had waited here all night for her and, judging by the heat still in the blankets, had only recently left. She could imagine him, with his arms folded behind his head, ankles crossed and dirty great boots atop her covers. She wished she had come sooner. Then she could have slipped under the covers with him and let him tell her about the battle of the Twins. He had led the van. She would have liked hearing about that.

“Will you shut that window before I catch my death?” Sansa asked over her shoulder, having finally got the fire to catch. There was no answer. Giving the logs one last stir with the poker, Sansa straightened up with a sigh. Must she do everything for Arya?

At first, she thought her sister had fled out of the window again as there was no sign of her. But as Sansa hurried over, intending to lean out the window and berate her sister for risking her life again, her attention was drawn to the mop of dark hair peeking out from under the blankets. The covers were drawn up so high they covered all but the top of Arya’s head. Sansa leaned over the bed and was surprised to hear soft, deep breathing. Truly, Arya must have fallen asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Sansa pressed her fingers to her lips and transferred the kiss from her fingertips to Arya’s wild hair. ‘Twas not only men who managed to look like angels while they slept.

Smiling down at her little sister, Sansa offered up a silent prayer to The Mother. If the God’s were good, Arya would waste no more time in claiming Lord Baratheon as her own.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks to Brazilian Guy for keeping me on the straight and narrow, away from the flames and for keeping me rockin’. It wouldn’t be as good (or as much fun) without you Ser.

See you all in 2 weeks.
Well, last Friday was a strange one. I missed you all, but having more time was very welcome.

As always, thanks to Brazilian Guy who saves my sorry arse time after time.

When Arya woke up, she felt more rested than she had in days. There had been no dreams of Direwolves or anything else, just a deep, contented sleep. She hugged the pillow in her arms a little tighter before she realised with a start that it still smelled of him. She immediately shoved it away across the bed, but then her arms only felt cold and empty. With a sigh she pulled it back again and closed her eyes. She had imagined it to be him while she slept.

What was she to do?

First, she would need to apologize for claiming he had done nothing to avenge her mother and Robb. Then...then she did not know, for she wanted him more and more with each passing day. But could she agree to his terms?

The bells ringing for midday interrupted her reverie. Never before had she lain abed so late. With a groan she released the pillow and got up.

When Arya started manoeuvring the door open, she was not surprised to find a man on the otherside, ready to take the door from her, but the fact that he was not a Crow was unexpected.

“Let me Milady...”

The white haired man did not wait for her answer. He took the weight of the door, allowing her to slip past. From his apron and box of tools, she assumed him to be a carpenter. After he laid the door against the wall, he ran his hands over the dent in the wood and gave a low whistle.

“If Lord Baratheon hadn’t told me his-self he’d put his shoulder to this, I’d have assumed ‘twas a battering ram. He must have been mighty keen to get into this room last night.” The old man said with an exaggerated wink at Arya.

“What Lord Baratheon does is no concern of yours!” Arya snapped, giving the carpenter a haughty, Queen Daenerys-type stare. The old man dipped his head and offered a grovelling apology. All the same, Arya made a mental note not to bother trying to bar a door against Gendry in the future.

As quickly as she could, without seeming to be running, Arya made her way along the corridor. She did not understand why it had happened, but she intended to take full advantage of having no Crows watching over her.

Her growling stomach was demanding attention. She could join the rest of The Red Keep in the Great Hall for the mid day meal or she could go directly to the kitchens. Neither prospect appealed. She did not want to deliver her apology to Gendry in front of everyone, nor did she want to bump into Jon or any Crows in case they decided ‘twas a mistake to leave her unguarded. She wanted out
of oppressive walls of The Red Keep and time to think on Gendry. He was leaving in less than a
day, and she did not want him to leave without receiving her apology. That she was sure of, however
the rest of what she would say to him was not nearly so clear in her mind.

Without conscious thought, her feet followed the old escape route she had found through the
dungeons and out to Flea Bottom as a girl. She had hoped to see that old one-eared black devil of a
tomcat on her way, but there was no sign of him, nor any other cats, only rats aplenty.

Flea Bottom had not changed. Lannister, Baratheon, Targaryen; she doubted it mattered much, if at
all, to the people down here which Great House controlled the Iron Throne. The commerce of
everyday life continued, no doubt as it always had. The business of simply surviving was more than
enough to occupy most folks.

Unlike before, Arya had coin in her pocket and she purchased a hot pie from a street vendor to
appease her grumbling stomach. When she bit into it and tasted some unfamiliar meat, she wondered
anew where all the cats that had once patrolled The Red Keep had gone. Spitting out that mouthful,
she threw the rest to a filthy street urchin, who grabbed the pie and made off, with several of his
companions at his heels, squawking their demands that he share his prize. Arya decided an apple was
a far safer choice.

She was used to blending in, to attracting no interest at all, to being no-one. But here, unlike
Braavos, she was receiving unwanted attention wherever she went. Women she passed were giving
her a second, surprised glance. Old men, young men and every age in between were not so subtle in
their appraisal and were blatantly staring. Arya self consciously fingered her hair and then the
straining button in the centre of her shirt. Damn Gendry and Sansa for making her change. She had
been perfectly happy as she was before.

As soon as the thought entered her head, she knew ‘twas a lie. She had not been happy in Braavos.
She had been anything but. She had got used to it—that was all. It had become second nature; the
hiding in plain sight, the killing, the loneliness. No matter how difficult and confusing life here was,
she did not want to go back there.

Once she had killed The Hound, once she had removed the last name on her list, she would decide
what to do. If she survived.

The Hound was a different proposition entirely than the wretched Tickler or even Raff the
Sweetling. She would be a fool to forget that Beric and his flaming blade had been unable to best
The Hound. Her dual with Gendry had been a timely reminder that all her skill was no match for a
man’s strength in a fair fight. She was well aware ‘twas only Gendry’s being unwilling to hurt her
that had prevented him from winning their duel. The Hound would not be weakened by such emotion
and she would not stoop to poison him. Nay, she wanted to look him in the eye as he breathed his
last so he would know by whose hand he died and that Mycah would be avenged.

As Arya wandered through the maze of filthy streets, a sixth sense, cultivated by years of being the
hunter, jangled. She was too clever to make any sudden movements. That would only alert whoever
was following that she was aware of their presence. Instead, she stopped at a barrow pilled high with
ragged clothes and picked up the nearest piece, shaking it before turning and holding it up to the
light, as if inspecting it for holes.

There were two of them; one dead ahead, pretending to examine another merchant’s wares; the other
working around through the crowd. Arya’s heart beat faster with anticipation and the thrill of it.
There had been no satisfactory end to her dual with Gendry. A good fight was just what she needed
to clear her mind and settle her thoughts. She dropped the rag back down on the cart. Ignoring the
vendor’s desperate offers to tempt her back, she strolled towards the nearest alley. No reason to
delay. They would follow her until they saw their chance. She would give it to them now. On her terms.

As soon as she turned into the alley, she was aware of them running towards her, anxious to take advantage of what they perceived as her stupidity. There was no-one else in sight. Perfect. She did not want anyone else involved in this.

She walked quickly down the alley, allowing herself a smile as she heard two sets of footsteps pounding behind her. They would expect her to run, so she did; not nearly fast enough to escape, but enough so as not to alert them to her true intentions. Now was the time to change her face. ‘Twould not be Lady Arya Stark killing two men in an alley in Flea Bottom.

The pinched faced girl with the hooked nose looked over her shoulder, judging how long she had before they caught up to her. Arya almost laughed aloud as she saw the expectation of easy pickings in her attacker’s eyes. She gave a high pitched shriek to encourage them on.

When they were almost upon her, with a sudden burst of speed, Arya ran straight at the wall; her first foot hitting it at chest height, her second at head height. She had practiced this so often, ‘twas instinct to lean back, push up and off with all her strength, to tuck and summersault above them and land behind them in a crouch, silent as a cat. They stumbled to a stop and turned sharply to face her, coming at her again. The fools still had no idea they were about to die; too stupid to realise that no helpless maid could have executed such a move. All they saw was a scared girl with coin. Their blindness would be their undoing.

In one fluid motion, Arya flicked a blade from her sleeve and sent it flying deep into the left eye of her nearest attacker. He clutched at his face, falling to his knees, screaming in pain. His companion lunged at her, a curved blade in his hand. Perhaps amongst the thieves of Flea Bottom he was considered fast, but she was quick as a snake. Needle was in her hand, driving up, twisting, disarming him then at his throat before he realised this was not some helpless girl after all.

“Valar morghulis” she whispered as she pressed Needle against the pulsing vein in his neck, as she had so many times before. Too many times. The familiar reek of piss assaulted her as he finally grasped what was about to happen. Too late.

“Please, please…”

She forced him to his knees. Why was she hesitating? He deserved to die. One push and it would be over; another gift for the Many-Faced God. But she had bestowed the gift on so many already. Was it ever going to end? There was only one more death she wanted, one more she had promised herself in the House of Black and White; The Hound and this piece of shit was not him.

Arya straightened up, looking down contemptuously at the man whimpering below her.

“On your stomach!”

“Why…”

She kicked him between the legs. With a silent scream he curled into a ball. That would do. Bending down, she sliced Needle across the back of his leg; hard and deep, severing the muscle midway between his buttock and the back of his knee. This time the scream was not silent. The wound might still kill him. Slowly. It would at least ensure he never chased down another woman.

The first assailant was rolling on the ground moaning incoherently, blood pouring from between the fingers he had clamped over his eye socket. She rolled him onto his side and, with her boot on his
hip, delivered the same punishment as she had to his companion, this time wiping the blood from Needle onto his britches.

After relieving them of their weapons and coin, 'twas as Lady Arya Stark she walked from the darkness of the alley into the light.

-o-

The horse caught her eye first. There could be few horses in all of Westeros as big and as black as his. Ty sitting on a wall close by confirmed 'twas indeed Thunder. Arya slunk into the shadow of a doorway, hoping they had not seen her before she spied them.

Ty was busy; his mouth full to bursting and his attention was single-mindedly focused on a tray of cakes sat upon his lap. Thunder and a smaller horse, little more than a pony, were hitched to a post outside a well appointed shop. The anvil hanging on thick chains above the entrance told Arya everything she needed to know about the place; this must be where Gendry had served as an armourer’s apprentice. A smile flitted across her lips as she remembered how proud he had been of his knowledge of Smithing when he was a boy and that bull helmet he had made.

Arya stood watching for a few moments; long enough to make sure Gendry was not around, for she wanted to meet him on her own terms. She wanted to apologize – she owed him that much, but every time they met ‘twas as if he managed to weakened her resolve against him and if it weakened much further then she would be lost entirely. No matter how much she wanted him to kiss her and more, and she wanted it a lot, she would never be any man’s bride. The problem was how to ensure she could have one without the other, for he seemed equally determined she could not.

As she strolled over to Ty, she had to admit, she had seldom seen anyone eat with as much gusto. His mouth was still full and he had another cake in his hand, ready to go as soon as he made some space for it. The squire did not even look up as she approached and it was not until she stood before him and called his name that he lifted his head. Upon seeing her, his eyes flew open in surprise, as did his mouth, causing him spray bits of yellow cake towards her and over himself.

“HmmmMmmm” he mumbled, before choking on his mouthful of cake.

Arya stood a safe distance back and waited for him to regain his composure and empty his mouth.

“My Lady Arya!” he finally managed to say as he slid off the wall and gave her a very dramatic bow, sweeping his arm far up and behind him. Arya suppressed a grin, wondering how long he had been practicing that.

“Ty.” Arya nodded an acknowledgement, “I presume your Lord is inside.”

The squire nodded, before turning that unique shade of poppy red he seemed to favour whenever Arya spoke to him.

“Umm. Yes Milady, but there’s a sick man in there with a cough that would only please The Stranger and I was always told to keep away from such things, for it might be you next if you linger near that!”

Ty had been well advised. ‘Twas foolhardy to keep company with such illness, yet Gendry was obviously prepared to take such a risk. From her place beside Ty, Arya could see into the front of the shop and there was no sign of Gendry or an ill man, but there were plenty of swords and pieces of armour on display. She wondered if this was where Gendry had obtained that fascinating black lamellar armour he had worn the first day she had met him again in Jon’s solar. Arya’s curiosity got
the better of her and she decided there would be no harm in taking a look around the front shop and if she happened to meet Gendry, then she would simply apologize for the misunderstanding last night and that would be that.

“I shall have a look.” Arya declared to Ty.

The squire nodded, transfixed. Arya fought the urge to cross her arms and hide her breasts. “Has no-one ever told you ’tis rude to stare at a woman’s figure?”

“No Milady! I mean Yes Milady!”

Arya had not thought it possible for Ty to turn any redder, but he did and although he averted his gaze momentarily, his eyes wandered quickly back to her breasts. Arya rolled her eyes and ’twas all she could do to refrain from slapping him. Men.

As Arya strolled into the shop a bell rung above her head, signalling her presence. She cursed quietly under her breath. There would be no opportunity for an uninterrupted look around. But to Arya’s relief, no-one came to answer the bell for a considerable time, allowing Arya the opportunity to wander around admiring the quality of the wares on display. She had never seen any finer; Tobho Mott was undoubtedly a master of his craft.

When the bell was finally answered, ’twas by a plump, older lady, drying her hands on her apron. Arya presumed this would be the armourer’s wife.

“What can I do for your Ser?” she asked. When she looked up to see Arya, her eyes flew open in surprise and she gave a hasty, well intentioned apology, “I beg your pardon Miss. I saw the height and the short hair and I assumed…”

Arya offered a smile in acceptance of the apology; in truth she was only surprised the woman had realised her mistake. Arya was not used to anyone realising she was a girl. She self consciously ran her hand through her hair. Whatever Sansa had done to it had made her appear less like a boy. There was also the matter of her not binding her breasts down since Gendry had made her promise not to. Ty had certainly taken good notice of that, she thought with a sigh.

“We don’t often get women in here, in fact I can’t rightly think of the last time…” Mrs Mott furrowed her brow, trying hard to think of the last time, “Anyhow, are you lost young lady?”

Arya suppressed her irritation. The woman was not deliberately trying to vex her. In truth, she had an open, welcoming expression and would be about the same age as Arya’s own mother, had she lived. The thought made Arya more kindly disposed towards the older lady.

“I am not lost, but I am interested in armour.”

Tobho’s wife nodded, but her confusion was obvious, “You wish to enquire about armour for your Lord?”

“Amy like that,” Arya muttered, “I am interested in a specific type I saw recently; lamellar plate and not tied with leather - riveted.”

Tobho’s wife pursed her lips and regarded Arya with even more interest than before. The girl in front of her was striking and carried herself with the grace and confidence of a high-born lady, yet she had shorn hair and wore ill-fitting men’s clothes. Was it coincidence that she happened into the shop enquiring about the very armour Gendry had brought in with him to show Tobho?

“Was this armour a particular colour?”
“Black.” Arya replied without hesitation.

“I believe the man you seek is with Tobho now.”

The girl was obviously taken aback that she had been found out so easily. She was really very striking, even when she scowled, Mrs Mott thought approvingly. If she was indeed a high born lady, then Gendry would be a lucky man. He would never have been content with some meek maid who agreed with everything he said and had no opinions of her own.

“Are you acquainted with Lord Baratheon?”

From the girl’s look of obvious discomfort, she was.

“They are in the Smithy, through there” Mrs Mott gestured to the far end of the shop, where a bead curtain hung across an open doorway. “Tobho would love to meet a…friend of Gendry’s.”

There appeared to be nothing else for it, but to go. Arya gave a grudging nod of agreement.

Tobho’s wife could not contain her delight, “On you go Milady while I fetch us some tea for those lemon cakes” she nodded at a few still sitting on the counter, “if you want one, best be quick about it, for that squire has been trying his best to empty my cake tin.”

Lemon cakes used to be Sansa’s favourite. Arya wondered if they still were. As Tobho’s wife bustled away to make tea, Arya wrapped a lemon cake in a napkin and eased it carefully into her pocket as a gift for Sansa.

Arya made her way to the entrance to the Smithy and stopped behind the beaded curtain to watch. She could see in, but she was confident they could not see her, for Gendry was indeed there. He was standing beside a withered old man who gave a wet, wheezing cough as he leant on the stone wall of the forge. The man’s shoulders were broad and his hands as big as shovels, but he was now so stooped that he appeared less than half Gendry’s height. ’Twas not how Arya had imagined the Master Armourer would be. The two men were examining something resting on the rim of the cold, unlit forge, but ’twas hidden from Arya’s view by Gendry’s broad form.

They were close enough for Arya to hear their conversation, as it echoed in the unusual stillness of the Smithy.

"’Tis plentiful north of The Wall.” Gendry handed Tobho a lump of something black. “We picked plenty up, thinking at first ’twas the precious Dragonglass we sought to kill The Others.”

“Obsidian eh? The Valyrians sought that too, only they named it Frozen Fire.” Tobho rasped.

Gendry chuckled, “An apt name then as fire – dragon fire was what finally defeated The Others.”

The two men looked again at the lump Tobho held in his hand.

“’Tis too soft for Obsidian, but in the dark and the snow we collected much of it ‘afore we realised.” Gendry explained. “A fair supply was accumulated at The Wall and dumped as useless. We called it black lead.”

“And black lead made this.” Tobho lifted up the thing that had been resting on the wall of the forge, staggering under its weight. Gendry immediately grabbed the edge of the black armoured breast plate, relieving Tobho of his load. Arya had to stifle a gasp of surprise. Gendry had made that.

“You taught me well Tobho.” Gendry laughed, “molten ‘tis is matte black but I’ll not pretend I got
the mix right the first time or even the twentieth.”

Tobho looked up at Gendry with obvious respect, “‘Tis armour any Lord would be proud of…or even a King.”

Gendry stopped and gave Tobho a sideways look, before shaking his head and saying “Nay.”

The old man’s eyes sparkled in the gloom. “There are many who mistrust these Targaryen foreigners and who would welcome a Baratheon back on the Iron Throne.”

Arya was immediately reminded of all Jon’s reasons for wanting her to wed Gendry. She heard Jon’s words again, as if he was standing right beside her, “I need you to bind this Baratheon Lord to me. We must have no more rebellions.”

Arya had to strain to catch Gendry’s reply, for his voice was low and solemn, “You know I have sworn allegiance to King Jon and we shall not discuss this again Tobho.”

The old man began to cough, turning away from Gendry. Arya had an unobstructed view of the white cloth he held up to his mouth and the scarlet flecks of blood that appeared there. More and more came with every wracking cough, until the centre was a circle of blood and the old man was convulsing with the effort.

Gendry wrapped an arm around the man’s scrawny shoulders and half carried Tobho over to a bench set against the wall. “Twas painful to watch and Arya feared the old man might expire in front of her eyes. Gendry helped him sit, before kneeling and holding Tobho’s shoulders until the coughing fit finally subsided.

“Who would have thought a Baratheon Lord would one day bend the knee to old Tobho Mott.” The armourer wheezed breathlessly.

Gendry grinned as he released Tobho’s shoulders and rocked back on his heels. “I was as much surprised by that as you.”

“Ach, I always knew it,” Tobho chuckled; an awful wet sound. Blood bubbled from the side of his mouth and began to trickle down his chin.

“You did?” Gendry asked softly as he took the old man’s cloth from his limp fingers and wiped away the bloody spittle.

‘Twas Tobho’s turn to rest his hands on Gendry’s shoulders. “Some of my ‘prentices had steel in them, but only one had Valyrian steel; I saw it in you when you refused to sell Lord Stark that damn bull helmet of yours, although I could have throttled you for it that day.”

“I was very proud of that helmet.” Gendry admitted with a laugh.

“And rightly so. I thought you’d be needing a new one, now you have a family name to be proud of.”

Tobho pointed a thin, arm towards a high shelf, “under that sheet.”

Gendry got up from his knees and strode over to the shelf. Arya heard his sharp intake of breath and saw the gleam of gold as he removed the cover.

“Bring it here.” Tobho rasped.
When Gendry turned around he held the most magnificent helmet Arya had ever seen. The burnished gold shone in the gloom, but ’twas not the excellence of the design or the craftsmanship of the sweeping curves that took Arya’s breath away, but the two, towering golden antlers that crowned it.

Gendry handed the helmet to Tobho, his face serious and tense.

“Will you kneel for me again?” The armourer asked his former apprentice.

Without hesitation Gendry fell to one knee.

“I made a similar one for your father many years ago.” Tobho placed the helmet on Gendry’s bowed head with quivering hands, “I started this when they told me there was a bastard Knight outside the city gates, who had his father’s black hair and blue eyes and who used to be an armourer’s apprentice.”

As Gendry raised his stag’s head for the first time, Tobho placed his hands on the younger man’s shoulders.

“I know I am giving this to a better man than Robert was.”

“Aye.” Gendry vowed. To Arya’s eyes he looked far more regal than his father ever had; even though he was kneeling before an old man in a darkened Smithy.

“In truth, I am glad my father never claimed me…” Gendry continued slowly, as if he was measuring every word carefully “…for it gave me freedom – freedom to watch other men and learn from them. Men like you Tobho. That freedom let me become the man I wanted to be.”

“A great man.” Tobho finished for him with a look of pride that Arya recognised from her own father when he congratulated Rob or Sansa for accomplishing some task. Or even Jon.

“I intend to try…”

“You will succeed in whatever you strive for. That Valyrian steel in you will stand you in good stead son. Think on old Tobho ever time you wear that helm and know he was as proud of you as any father could ever be. The Gods were good in allowing me time to finish it afore The Stranger claims me…”

When Gendry started to object, Tobho silenced him with a weary shake of his head, “…but I have something more for you. Something I have kept hidden, waiting for the right time and the right man to claim it. If the Gods are good I’ll live to see you make it your own. You’ll know it when you see it – over there in that box of swords.”

Gendry rose again, this time to go to what looked to Arya like a box of scrap metal. To Arya’s surprise, after considering them all, Gendry lifted a filthy, curved blade. When he turned back to Tobho, with the old sword in his hand, the expression on Gendry’s face was akin to awe.

“It cannot be, yet it looks…”

“It is. A Valyrian steel Arakh.”

Gendry turned the strange sword this way and that, as if testing its weight.

“I bought it from one of those Ironborn pirates, who no doubt stole it himself. He had no idea what it was of course, otherwise there is no-one in the whole of Westeros who could have afforded it, except
perhaps the Lannisters.”

“I cannot take this Tobho.” Gendry gasped, but ‘twas obvious even to Arya, he would be extremely reluctant to part with it now he held it in his hand.

“Aye you can. House Baratheon has no Valyrian steel. Take this as a gift to you and your sons. Make me the finest sword since Lightbringer.”

Gendry’s eyes flew open and he laughed, but ‘twas an uncertain sort of laugh. “Lightbringer is but an old women’s tale, for you and I know we cannot spend fifty days forging a blade, much less a hundred and you cannot temper a blade like that.”

“Ahhh, but if we had Dragon’s blood…” Tobho said with a gleam in his eye.

“Dragon’s blood…” Gendry echoed thoughtfully. “Aye” he agreed as a grin spread across his face.

“Mayhaps you know where me might acquire some of that magic substance?”

“Aye, I know, but obtaining it will not be easy, unless Jon could be persuaded that Ice would be re-forged better than before…”

“It would…undoubtedly it would.” Tobho gave another wet chuckle before leaning slowly backwards to rest his head against the Smithy wall. The only sound in the Smithy was the slow, laboured gurgle of Tobho’s breathing.

“I don’t have long left…”

“Away…” Gendry replied too quickly and too loudly, “we still have to re-forge Ice and make this new sword. I cannot do it myself Tobho.”

The old man smiled and another trickle of blood escaped from the side of his mouth.

“Then you’d best not linger too long in those Stormlands of yours.”

“I will return as soon as I can, but you understand why I must go?”

“Aye, but will you make me a promise afore you leave?”


“That wife of mine…”

“I’ll make sure she wants for nothing Tobho.”

The old man sighed, “’Tis not that. I’ve left her well provided for, but she always longed for the one thing I could never give her…sons.”

Gendry kneeled again before Tobho and the two men stayed like that, silent as time seemed to stretch. Arya was suddenly, uncomfortably aware she was holding her breath.

“Now I am at the end, ‘tis the only regret of my life. We were offered a babe more than once, but I was too proud to raise another man’s child though she begged me for it. Now I’m leaving her alone. I’m asking you as the son I never had to let her help raise yours. I could die happy if I knew she would be surrounded by the babes she should have had.”

“Aye” Gendry replied softly, “I will.”
Arya could stand it no more. She turned abruptly away. Tobho’s wife was returning from the opposite side bearing a tray with tea things. Instead of a tray, Arya imagined her cradling a black haired child to her chest.

“I have to leave,” Arya blurted out, not able to look the woman in the eye.

“But our tea. Did you talk to Tobho?”

Arya hurried past and out the door as quickly as she could, not even stopping to talk to Ty.

“Where are you going? Gendry is a good man!” the old woman shouted after her.

Aye he was, but was he too good for her? He wanted more. Gendry had steadfastly maintained it, but Arya had hoped to persuade him otherwise. ‘Twas clear to her now; Gendry would not break his promise to Tobho. He would bring his sons here. Tyrion’s advice to her echoed in her head, “‘Tis all or nothing.”

If Arya would not give Gendry what he wanted, he would find what his heart desired elsewhere. There was no doubt of that now. Was she prepared to loose him all over again? Arya did not know if she was.

“When are we to start my Water Dancing lessons?” Ty yelled.

“Not today.” She muttered with a shake of her head as she disappeared into the shadows again. “Not today.”

-o-

The coin she had taken from those two bandits weight heavily in Arya’s pocket. She did not want it, but she could hardly throw it away without causing a riot.

As she made her way back through the dungeons (which were much emptier now than they used to be) and the lower levels of The Red Keep, inspiration struck, ‘Twas not far to the room of that girl with the babe that Daenerys visited.

At the third knock, the young girl answered. She certainly recognised Arya as her eyes flew open in shock and apparently panic. Arya stood and waited as the girl struggled to find her words. Eventually and somewhat reluctantly, Arya was invited in.

To her utter amazement the big Crow Grenn was sitting on the bed, with the gurgling babe in his arms. ‘Twas hard to say which of them was more surprised – the Crow or Arya. No wonder the girl had been reluctant to admit her.

Arya and Grenn both spoke at once. “I was just passing…” ‘Twas obvious neither of them were ‘just passing’, although their motives for visiting were different. Arya presumed the purpose of Grenn’s visit was to see the girl rather than the babe.

“I shall not stay. I wanted to leave something for the babe.” Arya pulled out the two bags of coin she had taken from the men in the alley and laid them down on the bed.

The girl flushed with embarrassment, “‘Tis very kind of you Lady Arya and I can’t say it won’t be useful as my father is prepared to have me back now I have a…I have a….”

Arya cocked her head to the side. Now the girl had a what? And why had Grenn suddenly turned so red under that big beard of his?
Grenn and the girl looked at each other and smiled.

“Her uncle has a piece of land near Silverhill…” Grenn started to explain,

“And no men to work it ‘cos of the war.” The girl finished Grenn’s sentence, her words spilling out of her in an excited tumble, “Now I am to have a husband, my uncle has offered us a place to live in return for help on the land.”

“A husband…?” Arya wondered. Did the girl mean Grenn?

The delighted smiles on each of their faces confirmed she did.

“May the Gods be good to you both…I mean the three of you.” Arya said, struggling for something appropriate to say. She was tempted to ask Grenn if he was going to claim the babe as his own or raise him as a bastard like Jon, but Arya imagined Daenerys drawing her a disapproving look and said nothing. Perhaps ‘twas not really any of her business.

“We intend to leave as soon as King Jon releases Grenn from his vows. You must have a last hold of the babe afore we go.”

Unlike last time, Arya did not object and accepted the babe happily. He was as warm as she remembered. His skin was surely the softest in Westeros and he smelled even better than before, although Arya would have sworn that was not possible.

“Do you remember me little one?” Arya asked softly and was rewarded with a blissful, toothless smile of recognition. Surely such a smile could melt even the most frozen heart.

‘Twas with great reluctance that Arya eventually handed the smiling babe back to Grenn.

“If you are ever near Silverhill Lady Arya, you will be most welcome to visit.”

Arya was surprised, nay shocked, to find herself promising to drop by if she was ever near. While the girl and Grenn’s attention was focused on the babe, Arya added the coin from her own pocket to the purses already sitting on the bed. She had no idea if Crows were paid or by whom, but Grenn and the girl surely needed the money more than she.

‘Twas with a spring in her step that Arya made her way up from the bowels of The Red Keep to Sansa’s room. Had Daenerys told Sansa about the babe? Probably. Daenerys would enjoy sharing such news. Mayhaps Sansa had visited him too. Arya wondered if Sansa yearned for a babe as much as The Queen. There was probably no woman in the whole of Westeros who hungered for a babe as much as Daenerys, but ‘twas surprising really that Sansa had been married – twice! - and yet had no children. Arya had never asked, but surely Sansa would have told her if there had been any? Arya resolved to ask her sister what had happened to her in the years since they parted. She would ask Sansa after she gave her Mrs Mott’s lemon cake, which was still carefully wrapped in Arya’s pocket.

Once she had spoken to Sansa, Arya would find Gendry and offer him her apology. If he accepted with good grace, mayhaps she would offer him more she thought with a smile. After all, everyone got married eventually did they not? She only had to think on Grenn. Who would have thought that ugly, big Crow would have married and looked so pleased about it?

Aye, marriage and babes might not be so bad one day…in the future, after The Hound. But she would not think on her revenge now – Brienne had not returned and mayhaps the damned Hound might already be dead. If Gendry accepted her promise then there would be no reason to deny themselves happiness now. Tonight. The thought of spending the night with him gave her goosebumps and turned that smile on her lips to a broad grin. She would seek him out after her visit
with Sansa and notify him of her decision.

Arya whistled contently as she made her way to Sansa’s room. She had not whistled in Braavos, indeed she could not remember whistling since leaving Winterfell. The words of the song were lost to her – if she had ever known them. She vaguely recalled ‘twas something about a Dornishman’s wife. Mayhaps the words had not been appropriate for a child.

The last thing, the very last thing, Arya expected to see as she approached Sansa’s room was Gendry leaving it.

The door had opened as Arya was still a distance away. As Gendry walked out, Arya stopped in surprise. He turned back towards the person standing in the door. From the soft, breathless woman’s laugh, ‘twas clearly Sansa. The grin on Gendry’s face confirmed he was as happy as Sansa appeared to be. Arya slunk into the shadows of an alcove.

“You know I never expected this Lady Sansa and I do not know how to express my gratitude.” The tone of Gendry’s voice was playful rather than serious. What in seven hells made him so grateful to Sansa?

“I assure you Lord Baratheon, ‘twas no chore.”

The two of them laughed together again.

Arya cursed under her breath. What was going on? Why would Gendry be in Sansa’s room and what had Sansa being doing for him that was apparently ‘no chore’?

“And we are agreed; we say nothing of this to Arya.” Gendry’s voice was a conspiratorial whisper. Arya’s heart dropped to the floor.

“She will never know.” Sansa giggled.

Blood was thundering so loudly in her ears with the shock of it, that Arya could hardly hear. She risked another look. Gendry had raised Sansa’s hand to his lips, pressing a kiss there, his lips curved in a very contented smile. Sansa was blushing as red as her hair.

“I must take my leave Sansa but can I come to you as soon as I return from The Stormlands?”

“Of course and may The Seven watch over you until then.” Sansa whispered, her voice trembling with emotion.

Arya watched as her sister flung her arms around Gendry’s neck and pulled him down into her embrace. He was certainly willing to receive it.

Arya could stand no more and pressed herself back into the alcove. Gendry and her sister? Arya’s stomach heaved and she thought she might actually throw up then and there. She had to press a hand to her chest and another over her mouth to stop from yelling and screaming and charging out to confront them. But had Sansa not tried to warn her? “There is a long line behind you eager for Lord Baratheon’s favour” Never for a moment had Arya considered that her own sister was waiting at the head of that line.

Arya’s mind was racing as fast as her hammering heart. Mayhaps ‘twas not Sansa’s fault. Mayhaps Jon had forced this on her. Did he desire a marriage to House Baratheon so much that it did not matter to him which one of his sisters wed Gendry? Did he really consider them to be interchangeable? Like gold or land, to be traded according to his will?
And what about Gendry? He had said that he loved her. Had he grown tired of her so quickly? But of course he had. Sansa was the most beautiful woman in all of Westeros and much better marriage material than Arya horseface. What man would take Arya if they could have Sansa? Oh, she had been such a blind fool.

Arya was only vaguely aware of Gendry’s footsteps receding in the opposite direction and of Sansa shutting the door.

Arya shoved her hand in her pocket and squeezed that lemon cake into a thousand pieces.

Chapter End Notes

AArgh! Another cliff hanger I hear you say. But with two weeks to do it, I wrote so much I had to split it. I’ll not make you wait another 2 weeks though. I’ll post the rest on Sunday…
Aegon could not resist stopping to look. The distinctive hair of the two women standing by the window gave their identities away at first glance.

Daenerys’ white blonde locks tumbled down her back in complete contrast to Lady Sansa’s tight auburn braids. Oh what he wouldn’t give to loosen those braids and run his fingers through that unbound curtain of red silk. There was not much excited him these days, but he was finding the prim Lady Sansa with her tightly bound hair, her tightly laced bodices and her even more tightly guarded emotions harder and harder to resist.

Jon and Sam could wait. He had found a much more stimulating way to pass the time until the evening meal.

“Ladies…” He bowed low before them both, kissing Daenerys’ hand first and having to refrain from drawing his tongue across the back of Sansa’s. The truth was, he wanted to taste every luscious part of Sansa Stark and touching his tongue to the back of her hand, when he could not have the rest of her was a bad idea. A very bad idea.

He forced his mind from such enticingly lascivious thoughts and instead gave the two ladies his usual casual, lazy smile.

“I have never seen two such beautiful women look so miserable. Thank the Gods I am here to cheer you up. What can I do to put a smile on your lips? You only have to name it and it shall be done.” He made sure he caught Sansa’s eye as he spoke those last words, hoping she understood all that they implied. He bowed low before the two of them again with an exaggerated flourish.

Daenerys and Sansa exchanged glances and he was delighted to see the most enticing blush creep up Sansa’s graceful neck. Mayhaps she was thinking along the same lines he was. A roll in a featherbed with him would surely keep her smiling until summer.

“If you really must know, we are lamenting our lack of success in matchmaking” Daenerys sighed.

“Ahhh…” he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the window, giving the two women nowhere to look but at him, “Lord Baratheon leaves for the Stormlands with the sunrise and Lady Arya’s maidenhead is still intact.”

“Aegon!” Daenerys scolded him sharply, “That is not our concern…”

“But I’ll wager ‘tis his” Aegon chuckled heartily.

Daenerys rolled her eyes skyward and inhaled deeply as if beseeching The Gods for the strength and patience to continue.

“I spoke with Lord Baratheon but an hour ago and Arya has still not made her peace with him. Jon is concerned he will continue on to Storm’s End and not return.” Sansa offered quietly.

Aye, there was that. They could not risk a Baratheon challenge to the fragile rule of the Three Headed Dragon. Not now or in the future. Aegon had been set against granting Weyland the Lordship of The Stormlands from the beginning, but Jon had done it anyway on the morning he
broke the siege of King’s Landing. Jon claimed it had long been promised and he was honour bound to see the debt he owed the Bastard Knight repaid.

His brother’s blind adherence to his precious honour still rankled with Aegon and Weyland had been the cause of the fiercest disagreement the two of them had ever had.

Aye, there was no love lost between Aegon and the new Baratheon Lord, but the deed was done and Aegon needed to see House Baratheon bound to Three Headed Dragon as much as anyone. If Weyland holed up in Storm’s End or worse, bound House Baratheon in marriage to one of the other Great Houses that still chaffed under Targaryen rule, they would all pay dearly for Jon’s short sightedness. Aye, there was no doubt wedding Lady Arya to the Baratheon bastard was the best way to ensure there would be no future rebellions from the Stormlands.

Daenerys shook her head wearily. “Jon has pleaded with her and even ordered her - to no avail. I have shown her the blessing that babes would bring and still she resists.”

‘Twas Aegon’s turn to roll his eyes in exasperation. Daenerys could think of little else these days and while a babe was no doubt the solution to all of her problems, ‘twas hardly likely to entice a girl like Arya into a marriage. Not only was Arya still young, but Aegon had never encountered a woman so sorely lacking in any sort of femininity or nurturing temperament as Arya Stark.

“And I have tried to impress upon her Lord Baratheon’s steadfast nature and his desirability to other women.” Sansa added sincerely.

Seven buggering hells. What woman’s heart would be sent pounding by the promise of babes or a man’s ‘steadfast nature’? Telling a girl like Arya that the twittering idiots at court found Weyland desirable was hardly likely to entice her either. With advice such as this, ‘twas no wonder Arya was not rushing into Lord Baratheon’s overly muscled arms.

If there was one thing Aegon knew about, ‘twas woman and under that severe haircut, those ridiculous clothes and that permanent scowl, Arya Stark was still a woman. Aegon knew exactly what to do. He allowed himself a smug smile of satisfaction. The rest of them could thank him later. In particular, he could think of several very pleasing ways in which Lady Sansa could express her gratitude.

-o-

Gendry drummed his fingers on the table. Where the hell was she? Tobho’s wife had been all in a flap when Arya had appeared at the Smithy and then left without even making her presence known to him or Tobho.

Gendry had gone to her himself after meeting with Sansa and he was sure she was not inside. He had refrained from breaking the door down again, for that had accomplished nothing last time. Surely she did not intend to let him leave for The Stormlands without even saying goodbye? Mayhaps she did, for time was running out and there was no sign of her anywhere.

Gendry looked down the table at his men. ‘Twas kind of Sam to offer to feast them on their last night in the hall of the Tower of The Hand, but he would have preferred to have more time to attend to the final preparations. He knew he fretted overmuch and that Lem was as capable at seeing to their supplies and provisions as he was, but his men’s lives were ultimately his responsibility. The tension and excitement he always felt before riding out was compounded tonight by his burning desire for Arya and his inability to have her. He would be gone for ten days at least and mayhaps a score, depending upon how quickly they could find these damn raiders. The thought of that time without her, not knowing if he would ever have her, turned his already foul mood even blacker.
Only watered ale was being served tonight, but seldom had he felt a greater urge to drown himself in wine. Every nerve was twitching and he suspect only wine or a woman would settle him enough to afford him sleep tonight. He could not drink wine in front of his men and there was only one woman he wanted. Damn her, but it seemed as if she was deliberately hiding herself from him.

As he was contemplating leaving Sam’s feast to loose himself in the company of a full wineskin, Ty returned, scuttling over to Gendry’s place at one end of the great table.

“There is still no sign of her anywhere.”

Gendry cursed under his breath. He had let Ty’s over-familiarity pass before, but he was in no mood for leniency of any kind tonight.

“Address me properly boy.”

“There is still no sign of her anywhere, Ser.”

He shook his head and growled at his page.

“There is still no sign of her anywhere Gendry.”

He gave another growl, only louder this time. Was the boy deliberately trying to vex him for not relenting on his decision to ban Ty from riding with the rest of Bad Company on the morn?

“There is still no sign of her anywhere Weyland.”

This time he snarled and grabbed hold of the front of the boy’s shirt, jerking him forwards and almost lifting him off his feet. The look of panic in the boy’s eyes gave him a perverse sense of pleasure tonight. Damn, but he was stretched tight as a drum.

“There is still no sign of her anywhere My Lord.”

He released Ty’s shirt, fighting the urge to shove him away, instead he muttered, “And don’t forget that again boy.”

“I won’t!” Ty promised hastily.

By the Gods this was going to be a long night.

-o-

“Lady Arya Stark!”

Aegon grabbed her hand and held it fast, even as she tried to pull it away. They wrestled like that for a moment; Arya not wishing to make it blatantly obvious that she did not want The King holding her hand and Aegon not prepared to let it go.

He had been aware of being watched while they ate their evening meal. Lady Arya was again absent and ’twas probable that she was the watcher. He neither knew, nor cared why she was spying on them. He had other plans for her.

It had taken him until the last course to spot her; hiding, watching from behind a pillar on a high balcony. Once Aegon had her in his sights, he was determined to make his move. She was not the only one who could sneak around The Red Keep un-noticed.
“While you are considering how to extract your hand from mine Lady Arya, may I remind you that I am your King and to strike me is treason – punishable by death no less.” He spoke calmly, finding it hard not to laugh aloud at her very obvious discomfort.

She stopped struggling but gave a bad tempered little snort to let him know she was only tolerating this under duress. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it, using his tongue and making sure she felt it.

She grimaced and turned her head away from him, her nose in the air.

“Don’t be like that Arya. You and I should talk.”

“I’d rather not.”

“I’d rather we did.”

There was one chair against a pillar. He sat down on it and jerked her onto his lap. She was not expecting that.

Aegon had been counting on taking her by surprise. He had his arm around her waist and both her hands pinned in his before she could get away or get that damned knife of hers out of her boot.

“King or no, if you do not let me up this minute I swear I’ll cut off your balls.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Five minutes – that is all I ask. If I have not released you in five minutes, then I shall let you do anything you like to my balls” he smirked, finding the way she was struggling against him rather arousing.

Arya eyed him warily. He was deliberately trying to goad her and he was succeeding, damn him. She took a deep breath. She did not want to make so much noise that she alerted those down below to their presence and neither did she want to fall into his trap, whatever it was.

“Five minutes?” she repeated sceptically.

“Only five minutes and then I’ll let you go. Promise.” He confirmed, a smile curving his mouth.

Surely she could put up with him for five minutes? It would undoubtedly be wiser to just get this over with than to get into a fight with him. Jon would not be best pleased if she deprived his brother and a King of Westeros of the ability to father sons.

“Agreed.”

“I understand you do not wish to marry Lord Baratheon.” He tone was mild enough, but there was an unmistakable wicked glint in his damn purple eyes. After seeing Gendry and Sansa that afternoon, there was no prospect of Lord Baratheon marrying her. It seemed no-one had told Aegon yet. Still, she had the very definite impression this was a trap and that she was walking straight into it.

“I do not wish to marry anyone. Least of all him.”

“So I hear. However, you are not stupid Arya.”

The smirk on his far too handsome face suggested he thought she was just that; stupid. A stupid little girl. By the Gods he was the most irritating man in the whole of Westeros and she had agreed to sit here and listen to him for another four and a half minutes. Seven hells, mayhaps she was stupid after all.
“You are not just a lady now Arya, you are a Princess. An unwed sister is a very valuable asset to a King. Jon must make use of every asset available to him to secure his reign and in so doing, secure the peace.”

“I am not an asset!” Arya spat indignantly. Appalling as the idea was, she knew that was exactly how Aegon and Jon thought of her.

King Aegon continued on, unperturbed, “If House Baratheon is not to your liking, then mayhaps you would prefer House Lannister? Tyrion had no success with your sister, but you are so unlike Sansa that…”

“Never!” Arya ground out through gritted teeth. ‘Twas the mention of her sister rather than marriage to Tyrion Lannister making her blood boil.

“House Tyrell then? I’m sure that pathetic limp of Willas’ would not bother you over much in time.”

Giving him a contemptuous snarl, she tried to stand up, but his arms were around her, holding her down. He was much stronger than he appeared. Arya was beginning to realise that the languid, bored manner he affected was, in part at least, an act. There was an impressive strength and determination lurking underneath those fancy clothes and behind those lilac eyes.

“You promised me five minutes and they are not yet done,” he whispered softly, pulling her body closer to his, so close she could feel his hot breath on her neck “…and remember, ‘tis treason to harm The King.”

This vile, arrogant man was obviously enjoying himself. “Release me and I’ll stand for the rest of the time.”

“I could. But I’m not going to.” He sounded so damned amused she was determined not to give him any more cause for satisfaction. She would say nothing and sit perfectly still until the bloody time was up and he had to let her go.

“So not House Baratheon, not House Lannister, nor Tyrell. You are not leaving yourself many options unless we go down the route of the lesser houses or the bastards and I know you are keen to avoid bastards…” he mused.

She would not rise to the bait and bit back a cutting response. She would say silent, but where was he going with this? She had no doubt he had this carefully planned and all this talk of Great Houses and bastards was merely a distraction from his true purpose.

“Ah well, you leave me no choice,” he said with a dramatic sigh, “it shall have to be me.”

“You?!” she cried in disgust as he pressed his cool lips to the side of her neck. That was too much, King or no.

She drove the heel of her boot as hard as she could into his shin. Treason be damned, no man was kissing her except Gendry. As Aegon jerked and grunted in pain, she took advantage of his momentary lapse of concentration and drove an elbow into his ribs. Another grunt of pain and she stomped on his toes, bolting up and away from him as he cursed her loudly, while rubbing his ribs and shaking his throbbing leg.

“Ah, ‘tis a good job I like a bit of spirit in my women. I’ll enjoying bedding you after you fight me She-wolf!”

“I’d have any low born bastard before I’d have you Targaryen!” Arya spat.
“So you say, yet you’ll not have that Baratheon bastard. He’d be too soft on you anyway. No doubt he would continue to let you wear those ridiculous britches and carry a sword after you wed him. I’ll keep you naked and chained to my bed until you are so fat and waddling with my babe in your belly that you could not outrun Tyrion Lannister! And as soon as you birth me an heir I’ll chain you to my bed again until I get another babe on you!”

Seven buggering hells, surely he did not really mean to wed her? What would a King who could have any woman in Westeros possibly want with her? As he said himself, she was ridiculous. Somehow, despite the fact that she hated him, knowing that Aegon thought her ridiculous was of no comfort at all.

“I’ll kill you first!”

“Oh, I think you will rather enjoy being chained to my bed once I get rid of that damned maidenhead of yours. I really am rather good at bringing woman pleasure as you will find out.” His voice was soft and low and dripping with sexual intent.

Arya picked up the nearest thing, which was a piece of loose masonry, and threw it at his head. Unfortunately he ducked just in time. Damn him, he had the reactions of a snake.

“Never!” she spat and turned for the door. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her run; all the same, she wanted to get as far away from him as quickly as possible.

He yelled after her, “I only have to say the word to Jon and you know it will happen my wild She-wolf!”

Damn him to the seven hells and beyond. She had not thought this day could get any worse, yet it had.

-o-

Arya could not ignore the hammering on her door; particularly when it was accompanied by a fierce order to open up in the name of The Dragon Queen.

Daenerys’ pet - Greyworm and another of her Unsullied guards stood grimly to attention, scowling at Arya as she reluctantly opened her door.

“Your Queen demands your presence in the Bailey Yard. If you do not come quietly we have orders to…”

“Save your threats eunuch,” Arya groaned, “I’ll come.” She had hoped to avoid this, but obviously Daenerys had other plans.

The Unsullied marched behind her. She deliberately dragged her feet, forcing Greyworm to prod and curse her repeatedly, but she knew she was only delaying the inevitable.

To Arya’s intense irritation, half of The Red Keep appeared to have gathered to see Bad Company leave for the Stormlands. ‘Twas barely light and the Bailey Yard thronged with men, horses and women saying tear filled goodbyes. Arya could not bear to look at them, for, despite everything, she was plagued by the notion that she should be down there saying a farewell to Gendry. Her discomfort was not helped by Daenerys sighing bedside her, “I thought you must have overslept, for you would not want to miss this. ‘Tis a terrible thing to send your man away to battle is it not?”
Arya was so irritated by Daenerys having summoned her here that she could not resist saying, “But Jon has never left you to go to war.”

Daenerys gave her a disdainful look.

“I have never sent a man away to war without telling him I loved him and leaving him with the promise of something worth returning to. I presume you said your goodbyes to Gendry last night?”

“Humph” Arya snorted angrily. Mayhaps she should have gone to Gendry’s room last night and stuck a blade in his heart, for she felt as if he had done that to hers.

In truth she had been too upset by seeing Sansa and Gendry and then Aegon’s threat to think clearly, but another sleepless night had given her plenty of time to think on Gendry and that damned Targaryen.

“I thought Sansa would be here to see…” Arya could not bring herself to say Gendry’s name aloud, “…them off.”

“She is in the Sept praying for their safe return.”

Arya sighed. She supposed that made sense. Bloody, holy, perfect Sansa. To loose the man she wanted to her sister who had always been better than her, more beautiful than her, more loved than her, hurt more than if he had chosen any other woman. Why, oh why, did it have to be Sansa?

If Gendry really wanted Sansa then mayhaps she should try and be happy for him. That would be what a friend would do and no matter what she had hoped, there would be nothing more between them now. But did Sansa want Gendry? Arya could not convince herself her sister did. Sansa already had a lover and had not given any previous indication of interest in Gendry. Nae, Arya was sure Jon was to blame for this.

Cursing Jon under her breath, her eyes flicked to where he stood with Gendry, Aegon and Sam. As if her gaze had burned him, Gendry immediately turned around and their eyes locked across the Bailey Yard. ‘Twas as if wildfire crackled between them. Why was she destined to lose everyone she had ever loved? Gendry started towards her, but she very deliberately turned her head and her shoulders away. Nay, she could not face his humiliating admission that he had chosen Sansa or his pity here. She feared she would try to kill him or worse – cry.

Daenerys’ hand was upon her arm, “Do not grieve Arya. He will return to you.”

“He will return…” she agreed, adding to herself, “but not to me…”

Gendry stopped dead in his tracks. Arya was making it perfectly clear she did not wish to speak with him.

What in seven buggering hells did she want from him? Sansa had thought she had got through to her pig headed sister, but it appeared Arya was still unwilling to forgive him for his part in her mother’s second death. If Arya would not even speak with him, there was little he could do to change her low opinion of him. She obviously considered even speaking to him beneath her.

With a low growl of frustration Gendry turned back towards his comrades. A good fight in the Stormlands might take his mind off her. He would take his pent up frustration out on those fucking rats hiding in the Kingswood and mayhaps she would have come to her senses by the time he returned. By the Gods, he would need to resolve this one way or another for he could not continue
on like this.

“As there is obviously no reason for me to linger here, I'll take my leave of you now.” Gendry snapped at Jon, Aegon and Sam. The three of them exchanged surprised glances while Nymeria came from behind Jon to rub her flank along Gendry’s armoured hip.

“Ahh, the course of true love is not running smoothly there,” Aegon chuckled, “Tis a good job I have an understanding nature otherwise I would have his head for that.”

“You could try.” Jon snorted. “All the same, I cannot believe she did not even bid him Godspeed.”

“Aye. I have never seen him so miserable, but who knows what goes on in women’s heads.” Sam offered.

“I suspect there are few gentle thoughts in Lady Arya’s head. I needed a Maester to sew the gash she left on my shin afore ’twould stop bleeding. I suspect I have a cracked rib and she broke two of my toes.” Aegon muttered, before turning to Jon with a sly smile on his lips, “Wave at her to attract her attention.”

Jon duly waved. It took an elbow in the ribs from Daenerys before Arya turned towards them.

Aegon grinned and blew her a kiss. The look on Arya’s face would have frozen wildfire.

Jon sighed, “She looks as if she wants to gut you first and me second.”

“Good. I shall pray that she decides to wed Lord Baratheon soon, for I do not think I will survive many more attempts to woo your sister,” Aegon said with a heartfelt groan.

“Weyland shall have his hands full. No doubt about that. I intend to pray he keeps her and does not send her back to me.”

“Then we must make haste brother. I shall go to the Sept while you go to the Godswood. Surely one set of Gods will take pity on us and answer our prayers!”

The two Kings shared a rare laugh as Arya glowered at them both before turning her attention to the column of men mounting their horses in the middle of the yard. She recognised Lem’s grey head and battered yellow cloak. Surely that could not still be the same one he had worn when she had known him last? Yet, his cloak appeared to be in exactly the same disreputable state as she remembered.

Anguy was also easy to spot with his full quiver of arrows. She also spied Jack-be-lucky, Notch, Mudge, Dennett and Tom O’Sevens with his head buried in the ample bosom of a girl who looked as if she was young enough to be his daughter. Some things had not changed at all.

Ty was dutifully standing holding Thunder’s reins, but his head was down and his shoulders were slumped. He looking every bit as miserable as Arya felt and she had seldom felt more miserable.

She had missed her opportunity. Just when she had almost convinced herself that marriage and babes
might be a price worth paying to have him, he had slipped through her fingers. And to rub salt into her wounds, Gendry had never looked more desirable – his black armour made him look invincible and that golden helm of Tobho’s did make him look like a King. She could not help but wonder what Jon and Aegon thought of that.

As Gendry mounted his horse, she was surprised to see Nymeria and Ghost take position on either side of Thunder. The destrier skittered nervously in their presence, but Gendry and Ty managed to calm the horse. The Direwolves stood perfectly still, facing ahead, ignoring all around them. Gendry leaned over and rubbed his hand through the thick fur on Nymeria’s back. The Direwolf looked briefly up at him and then ahead again, as if waiting for the off. Even Nymeria wanted to be with him. Misery heaped upon misery.

“He is magnificent is he not?” Daenerys asked Arya, as if reading her thoughts.

“Aye. He and Sansa will have beautiful children.” Arya nearly choked on the words.

Daenerys turned sharply towards her. “What are you talking about?!”

Gendry lifted his arm skywards. A sudden silence fell over the yard.

“I saw Gendry and Sansa together at her room yesterday.” Arya hissed, feeling her chest tighten and her throat constrict as she admitted, “She is a better match for him anyway.”

“Bad Company!” Gendry roared, his voice filling the Bailey Yard.

“Bad Company!” his men returned the salute with gusto, their voices deafening in the yard.

Daenerys had Arya by the shoulders and was yelling in her face, “He asked Sansa to order clothes for him and for you while he is gone you fool! Sansa had your measurements from that red dress, but not his. Please tell me you are not letting him leave for battle thinking you care nothing for him!”

Arya turned just in time to see Gendry ride through the Bailey Gate. As he left The Red Keep, the first rays of the morning sun caught his golden helmet; sending beams of light around the shadowed Bailey Yard as if he was Azor Ahai come again.

Daenerys was right. She was a fool.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know about you, but I’m thinking it’s time we had some lovin’. What do you think Brazilian Guy? You know it’s so much better and more fun with you, so are you ready to help me take a tumble in the Stormlands Ser? (I’m trying to make him blush – maybe he’ll tell us if I succeeded!)

See you in two weeks!
“Lady Arya!” Aegon shouted up to the balcony where Daenerys and the woman he wanted to speak to seemed to be engrossed in a heated exchange of words.

“What now?” Arya snapped as she turned away from The Queen to look down at him, making no effort to disguise her irritation.

“’Tis sure to be a beautiful day. What say you to a picnic and the opportunity to get to know each other better?” He kept his voice low and seductive, making sure she was in no doubt as to what he meant by “getting to know each other better”.

“Not if you were the last man in Westeros!” she snarled, before stomping away, shaking off Daenerys’ attempt to catch her hand and have her stay.

“By The Gods Aegon, what do you think you are doing?” Daenerys hissed, leaning over the balcony to chastise him, her long hair flowing down so far he could have reached up and stroked it. Had it been another lady’s auburn hair, he surely would have.

He shrugged, giving her that helpless little boy smile he knew she could not resist.

“Just trying to help auntie.”

The Queen huffed and shook her head, but he knew she would not stay angry with him for long.

“You are playing with fire nephew. If Lord Baratheon finds out…”

“Then he will thank me, as should you. She will be chasing after him by noon – mark my words. Jon is sending word now to the guards on the gate not to prevent her departure.”

As Aegon expected, Daenerys’ frown turned into an indulgent smile, “Ah, your capacity for scheming never ceases to amaze and shock me Aegon. I am glad we are friends and not enemies.”

He bowed low, hiding his satisfied smirk from her.

Aye ‘twas true and The Dragon Queen would do well to remember it.

Arya was livid with Aegon. How dare he! Gendry was barely out of the Bailey Gate and already he wanted them to “get to know each other better”. By going with him on a picnic no less! As if she would sully the wonderful memories she had of her picnic with Gendry by accepting that Targaryen toad’s offer. She would rather stick sewing pins in her eyes. ‘Twas another reason she had to leave.

She had to find Gendry and apologize and she had to get away from that Targaryen or she would do more than stomp on his toes. One of them would die before she would submit to him and ‘twould not be her!

There was no time to waste. As she had no intention of returning to The Red Keep until Bad Company did, she would need blankets, weapons, clothes and food.

All of that took longer than she would have liked and ‘twas mid morning afore she was able to make her way to the stables with her bundles, hoping no-one would ask what she was about. Mercifully,
after its early start, The Red Keep seemed to have settled down into languid silence and she barely saw a soul as she made her way through its corridors.

A good number of the horses were gone and Lightning was easy to find in the rows of stalls. The white horse welcomed her with an eager whinny.

Arya rubbed the mare’s nose. “Are you ready for an adventure?”

“Yes!” an eager voice from behind answered. Arya turned, already knowing who was so keen, before she saw Gendry’s squire. Ty was standing at the entrance to the stall with Lightning’s saddle in his hands.

Arya sighed, “I was not talking to you. Lord Baratheon wanted you to stay here for a reason.”

“Aye, to look after you!” Ty huffed as he lifted the saddle onto Lightning’s back.

“He did not mean that.” Arya replied, knowing full well that Gendry may indeed have given his squire that order to make Ty feel important, or at least useful, but the thought of a squire looking after her was ridiculous.

“If you go - I go,” Ty said stubbornly, his green eyes blazing and his pointed chin raised defiantly.

“No.”

“Yes. Otherwise I shall run straight to King Aegon and tell him where you have gone.” Ty said, looking far too pleased with himself.

“You would not dare!” Arya spluttered, shocked that Ty was already keenly aware of the interest Aegon had shown in her. Those sharp green eyes of Ty’s seemed to miss nothing.

“I would, for I think King Aegon would be very keen to fetch you back…”

Arya thought that too. Seven buggering hells. How did a squire who was still too young to shave manage to outwit her? She glared at Ty though narrowed eyes, while he began tightening the saddle’s leather straps.

Arya contemplated tying Ty up and gagging him. Mayhaps she would be too far gone by the time he was discovered. Mayhaps not. She could not risk that snake Aegon coming after her.

Or she could hit Ty over the head and render him unconscious while she made good her escape. Damn, even though he was trying to blackmail her, he was just a child and did not deserve that level of violence. There seemed to be nothing else for it. She would have to give in to his demand and take him with her.

“Agreed,” she conceded reluctantly, “but we are leaving now, whether you are ready or not.”

Without looking up from fastening the girth strap, he replied “I am ready. I saddled my horse as soon as I saw you coming.”

“You have a horse?”

For the first time Ty looked less than sure of himself, “Umm…well…I am borrowing one, but I shall bring her back.”

Arya blew out a resigned sigh. She would need to add stealing a horse to the growing list of reasons for Jon to berate her upon her return.
“Let us make haste, for I would prefer to catch up to them before nightfall, otherwise we shall be camping alone in the Kingswood,” a thought Arya did not relish given the reason for Bad Company’s mission.

“We shall not be alone. We shall have each other.” Ty said happily.

“How very reassuring” Arya muttered sarcastically under her breath.

Not only had Ty saddled his horse, a small but spirited chestnut mare, he had his bedroll and what Arya took to be provisions strapped to the saddle. He had obviously been anticipating this. She decided that Gendry’s squire was too clever by half.

-0-

After losing the race with Gendry and Thunder, Arya had learned her lesson. She made sure they kept up a steady pace and did not overtire their horses. But they had ridden as far and as fast as she dared since they had left The Red Keep and still ‘twas no sign of Bad Company.

“Are you sure we have taken the right road?” Ty asked for the umpteenth time.

“There is only one road.” Arya replied again.

“Mayhaps we are going in the wrong direction?”

Arya did not even dignify that question with an answer.

After a few moments of blessed silence, Ty asked “Do you think Lord Baratheon will be very angry with us?”

Arya opened her mouth to say “Nay!” but shut it again before she spoke. It had not occurred to her that Gendry might be angry with her. She had assumed he would be delighted to see her and to hear her apology. While they rode she had daydreamed of him scooping her up in his arms and pressing eager, grateful kisses all over her face and neck and…other places.

They were well in the Kingswood now and the sun was sinking low. There were climbing a small rise and Arya knew this was their last hope of sighting Bad Company before dusk. If there was still no sign, she would need to get Ty off the road and set up camp before nightfall. Arya had not considered the possibility that they would not have caught up with Gendry by now.

With only two of them and outlaws in the Kingswood, not to mention the usual wolves, boars and bears, one of them should remain awake at all times to stand watch. She looked across at Ty drooping in his saddle. Even if she took the first watch, he would not manage to stay awake for the second. She was tired from the day’s ride too and doubted she would last a whole night without sleep. Suddenly the flaws in her plan to flee The Red Keep were becoming all too obvious.

At the crest of the rise she pulled Lightning to a stop and stood up in her stirrups, straining to catch a glimpse of Bad Company on the road ahead. She could not see them at all. How could so many men and horses simply disappear?
Although the road snaked ahead of them through the forest, the trees on either side were tall and dense, stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction. Now she stopped to think about it, thousands of men could easily hide themselves in the Kingswood. Arya felt a rare surge of fear. If Bad Company could so easily vanish from view, the outlaws they sought could be hidden anywhere. If she and Ty were murdered as they slept, no-one would ever know.

Suddenly, four riders burst out of the trees on either side of them. Ty shrieked as the riders charged towards them, the swords they were brandishing glinted in the evening light. Arya’s first instinct was to kick her heels to her horse and flee for her life, but she could not leave Ty. His horse screamed and reared, leaving Ty hanging on for his life, his eyes wild with panic. Arya wheeled her horse around, intent on grabbing the reins of Ty’s mount, but his horse shied away even from Lightning and her outstretched hand grabbed only empty air.

Heart pounding, Arya wheeled Lightening around again and unsheathed her sword. Four against one and she must also protect Ty. She did not like the odds.

At the last moment the nearest rider pulled his horse up yelling “Hold!”

The other three riders obeyed the command, their horses sidestepping and whinnying in frustration that their charge had been halted.

“Ty?” the nearest rider gasped in surprise, his eyes wide.

“And Lady Arya Stark!” yelled another.

When Arya recognised Tom O’Sevens she thought she might throw her arms around him and kiss him with relief.

Tom and the other three men did not look nearly as pleased to see her. In truth they looked as if they would like to murder her still.

“Are you mad?” Tom shouted at her. “If Ty had not screamed like a girl we might have run you through!”

Arya expected Ty to respond fiercely to that insult, but he looked far too shaken to say anything. T’was left to Arya to reply.

“Do you usually attack innocent travellers on the Kingsroad?” She hoped her haughty tone hid the thundering of her heart.

Tom snorted. “Innocent? Did you not think we would notice we were being followed? We thought you were those bloody outlaws, sent to spy on us.”

“Where is…” Arya was about to ask desperately for Gendry, but thought better of it, “…are the rest of Bad Company?”

“Setting up camp by now I should think. We’re the rear guard. We’ve been waiting here, watching you approach for a long while.” Tom explained with a smirk.

“He won’t be happy,” Another man Arya did not recognise added.

“Aye, you can say that again, but we’ll need to take her to him.” Tom grumbled.

“And Ty too. He might whip the boy,” another said. Arya was not sure if that was said in jest or not.
“With a bit of luck he might whip them both!” Tom O’Sevens chuckled wickedly, obviously relishing the prospect.

Seeing the panic on Ty’s face at the threat of a whipping, Arya quickly said, “No-one will be whipping anyone! Take us to Lord Baratheon and I shall speak to him.”

“You’d better do a lot more than speak to him girl if you expect him to forgive you for this.” Tom cackled.

Damnation. She knew from before that Gendry was not easily riled, but he had a ferocious temper on him when he was. Arya suspected that temper would not have mellowed with age. ‘Twas a good job she had every intention of doing more than speaking to him when she found him.

-o-

“Are you mad? Possessed?” Gendry shouted at her as she stood before him.

Arya had never seen him like this. He was the man possessed. Anger poured off him in waves, his fists were clenched and his chest was heaving. In the gathering dusk his eyes seemed to flash black with rage. He looked so dark and dangerous, yet he had never looked more handsome to her than he did now.

“Have you any idea how foolish you were in coming here?”

Arya resisted the urge to shake her head and instead raised her chin defiantly. She would not regret this. She did, however, regret bringing Ty. The hard day’s ride, the ambush and now Gendry’s wrath had been too much for the boy. He was exhausted and stood with his head down, swaying on his feet. Had it not been for Lem’s firm grip on his upper arm, Arya suspected Ty would have already collapsed in a heap on the ground.

T’was not the time and place to explain to Gendry why she had to come to him, not while he was surrounded by his men and seething with anger. Once his temper had cooled, she would go to him and explain all. She longed to apologise for her behaviour two nights ago, under the moonlight, to tell him about Aegon and the misunderstanding with Sansa. She needed to feel his arms around her again.

While he paced back and forwards in the gathering dusk, fists clenching and unclenching in his rage, she clung onto the knowledge that he loved her. The first time he had kissed her, he had told her that no other man would ever love her as he did. She had to hold on to that, to believe ‘twas still true, despite his acting now as if he wanted her banished from his sight.

“And I cannot even send you back! I cannot spare the men to escort you,” Gendry said between his teeth.

Arya resisted the urge to point out that she and Ty had got here safely and they could return just as well, but she did not want to go back. She wanted to remain here. With him.

Gendry had given up all pretence of trying to keep his voice even. He was so furious he felt as if his head would explode. How could she put herself in danger like this? Did she not know what these bloody bandits would do to her if they caught a woman out here in the woods? And he was under no illusions they would not do the same to a pretty youth like Ty. He stopped pacing and turned to face Arya again.

"And before you say that you arrived here without mishap, let me remind you that if it had been anyone other than my men who ambushed you on the Kingsroad, you would have been raped and
killed by now!”

If he were to send her back, he would need to send men with her and he could not afford their loss. Already his forces were stretched. In this dense forest he had to post more guards than he liked without losing another ten on some fool errand to escort her back to The Red Keep.

“How do you expect me to carry out my duty when I will be constantly looking over my shoulder worrying about you?” Gendry jabbed a finger angrily in her direction, his pulse racing. Seven hells, his fury knew no bounds. Did she not know how precious she was to him? How could she risk her very life by coming here?

As she stood defiantly in front of him, her grey eyes sparked with fire. He spoke as if she was a useless, defenceless little girl and not the trained assassin he knew her to be. Arya could suffer his condescension no longer.

“If you do not want me here and cannot send me back, then send a raven to Aegon. He will gladly come and take me off your hands!”

Blood pounded in his ears. “Aegon? Aegon!” Gendry shouted. “By The Gods what has he got to do with this?”

If he was angry before, he was livid now. Aegon would gladly come and take her? How could she say such a thing?

“I don’t want to hear you talk like that about any man, least of all that…that…” he searched for an appropriate word to describe the arrogant, preening horse’s arse who suddenly seemed to be his rival for her affections. Gendry was all too aware of his men standing around them, watching and listening for his description of their King. He settled for snarling “…that Targaryen” through gritted teeth.

Arya turned to stomp away, but he grabbed her arm. “At least Aegon wants me!” she hissed, softly enough so only Gendry could hear. He immediately dropped her arm as if she had scaled him. She wasted no time in striding away.

“We shall talk about this later!” he yelled after her, as much to save face with his men as for her benefit. Aegon? Fucking Aegon wanted his Arya! How in seven hells had that happened? And more importantly what was he going to do about it?

-o-

After a very welcome bowl of hot stew and a cup of cold water from the nearby stream, Arya, Ty and the men of Bad Company settled down around their various camp fires. Night had descended and the rota for the watches had been set. Arya had volunteered to take a turn, only to be hurriedly told “Not tonight” by Lem. She had accepted his dismissal without argument. She felt every muscle ache and protest from the long ride and, yet again, she had not slept much the night before. A full night’s sleep would be a welcome blessing.

Ty had rolled himself in his blankets as soon as he had finished his stew and was already snoring softly beside her. He looked like a sleeping babe and she was responsible for his being here, suffering Gendry’s wrath. Mayhaps ‘twas guilt made her do it, but she had been unable to resist gently stroking his unruly blonde hair where it poked out of his blankets.
A circle of light was thrown out by their camp fire. Beyond that, the dense blackness of the forest was broken only by the glow from other fires scattered between the trees. Arya could see a face in profile lit by flames here, a hunched back there, but it seemed as if only what was within her little circle of light was truly real. Some of the men smoked pipes and the little red glowing orbs suspended in the air only added to the strangeness of her surroundings.

Tom O’Sevens sat across the fire from her and, as soon as one of the men asked for a tune, he produced his harp with a flourish.

“My first tune shall be the Lady’s choice,” he proclaimed with a sly wink at Arya.

“Give up Tom! No matter how sweet ye sing tonight, she’ll no be warming your furs in the mornin’!” some deep voice shouted out from the darkness. The comment was met with a chorus of loud, male guffaws, coming from the darkness all around them.

Arya rolled her eyes. Tom O’Sevens must be old enough to be her father, nay, her grandfather. It had not been like this when she had camped with The Brotherhood before. She had been a child then and stayed well away from the men at night. Being out here was stirring long suppressed memories. She had always slept beside Gendry she remembered with a sigh. She had never admitted it before, even to herself, but she had always felt safe with him.

Tom waited expectantly for her choice. She shook herself out of her reminisces and tried to think of a song for Tom to play.

“I do not know the name, but do you know the one about the Dornishman and his wife?”

“Do bears shit in the woods?!” Tom laughed and immediately started playing the tune Arya had been whistling only the day before. Tom obviously knew the words too.

Trying to ignore the thought of bears in the woods around them, Arya listened intently as Tom’s voice rang out loud and clear in the night.

The Dornishman's wife was as fair as the sun, and her kisses were warmer than spring.

But the Dornishman's blade was made of black steel, and its kiss was a terrible thing.

The Dornishman's wife would sing as she bathed, in a voice that was sweet as a peach, But the Dornishman's blade had a song of its own, and a bite sharp and cold as a leech.

As he lay on the ground with the darkness around, and the taste of his blood on his tongue,

His brothers knelt by him and prayed him a prayer, and he smiled and he laughed and he sung,

"Brothers, oh brothers, my days here are done, the Dornishman's taken my life,

But what does it matter, for all men must die, and I've tasted the Dornishman's wife!"
As soon as Tom finished her song, bawdy laughter erupted from all around. With a start, Arya realised that “tasting the Dornishman’s wife” might not only mean kissing the woman, at least not on the mouth. She hoped that the men around her would think the blush on her cheeks was caused by the heat from the fire and not the memories of Gendry’s tasting her there with his Lord’s kiss. She shifted uncomfortably, wishing she had chosen a different song.

Where was Gendry anyway? She had not seen him since yelling at him to send a raven to Aegon. Now her blood had cooled, she recognised that was not a wise move, but she had been annoyed by Gendry claiming she needed soldiers to act as nursemaids to see her safely back to The Red Keep. Worse than that, she had hoped, nay, expected him to be delighted to see her and she had been sorely disappointed by his less than enthusiastic greeting. Truth be told, he had hurt her and she had tried to hurt him back. Judging by the shock on his face when she had mentioned Aegon, she had succeeded all too well.

Tom started another coarse song, the first few lines of which made Arya’s toes curl with embarrassment. Mercifully Tom was interrupted by a large shape looming out of the darkness and placing a heavy hand on his shoulder. Arya recognised Gendry’s stance and deep, gruff voice immediately.

“Not in front of M’lady”.

He was looking out for her, protecting her, just as he had that night in The Peach when he had claimed she was his sister. ‘Twas a happy memory. Smiling, Arya breathed a sigh of relief. At least he still regarded her as his Lady.

For a second, their eyes met across the fire and ‘twas as if heat pulsed between them, fanned hotter by his anger. His jaw muscles clenched and unclenched, his gaze upon her brought to mind that of a starving animal. But he turned away and disappeared again into the darkness before she could say anything.

She started to rise, to follow him, only to realise that, if he did not wish to speak to her, she could stumble about in this darkness for hours looking for him, tripping over sleeping men all the while. He had told her they would talk later. She could only hope he intended to keep his word.

Heeding Gendry’s warning, Tom’s songs from then on were chaste and mellow. Men began to settle into their furs as the fires died down. Arya lay on the ground beside Ty and wrapped herself in the blankets she had brought from her bed in The Red Keep. ‘Twas plain already this would be a cold, uncomfortable night. Arya murmured a silent prayer that ‘twould not be a lonely one too.

She had not slept outdoors since she was a child and had thought nothing of it then. Her years in Braavos might have hardened her in some ways, but they had softened her in others. She had become used to the constant heat and a soft bed. It pained her, as a Northerner, to admit she missed the warmth of the Braavosi sun. Never had she missed it as much as she did now. Already the cold and damp of the earth was seeping into her bones. In an effort to convince her shivering body that she would not freeze tonight, she tried to imagine she was once again lying under the hot Braavosi sun and not a cold, starlit Westeros sky, but that only made her shiver more.

Her misery was compounded by every man in Bad Company possessing a thick roll of sleeping furs. She imagined Gendry and his men enduring the cold at The Wall, protecting the realm from The Others while she stalked the dusty Braavosi streets. Her thoughts strayed to what might have been had she and Gendry never separated. He had just been a bastard ‘prentice smith then, even if he thought he was a Knight of the Hollow Hill. Jon would not have been so keen on wedding her to Gendry then, nay; Jon would have undoubtedly tried to forbid it!
The thought of her arguing with Jon, demanding he allow her to marry a nameless bastard smith made her smile, but smiling only made her teeth chatter more, so she made do with a little smirk.

Despite the aching in her limbs and back from the long ride, sleep would not come. She tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable, trying not to let her eyes or her mind linger on that empty space beside her. All around men snored contently while she could not sleep. All Arya could do was think on the mistakes she had made with Gendry and the opportunities she had missed. Would he really send her back, or worse, send a raven to Aegon? Oh, t’was not working out how she had hoped at all.

-o-

Lem sat down wearily beside Gendry. Both men had taken a final tour of the perimeter, walking in opposite directions before meeting half way around. As was their habit, they had spoken to the soldiers taking the first watch, making sure everyone knew their place and the drill if trouble came.

In truth, Bad Company had been through so much together for so long that Gendry knew every man would do his duty, but it did not hurt to remind them of what was at stake. An army of Bad Company’s size would not go un-noticed for long; indeed Gendry did not want them to. He intended to deliver a clear message to these bandits that would reverberate around the whole of the Stormlands – defy me and you will pay with your life. He did, however hope to find the fuckers before they found him.

“What are you doin’ here, while Arya is over there?” Lem asked softly, in order that their conversation would not be overheard by the guards on watch or by any of the men who might still be awake.

“’Tis exactly why I am over here. You heard her asking me to send for bloody Aegon.”

“If you think Arya wants him, you’re more o’ a fool than I thought possible.”

Gendry snorted. “She made it very plain that he wants her.”

“Ach, that’s not the same thing at all. Aegon wants everything and every woman he cannot have. You should know that by now.”

Gendry just grunted and continued gazing into dancing flames of the fire.

Lem sighed deeply. Despite all Lem had taught him, Gendry still had a great deal to learn about women.

“Did it never occur to you that she might be a little…disappointed by the manner o’ your greeting?” Lem asked, watching carefully for Lord Baratheon’s reaction.

Gendry looked at his old friend as if he had no idea what Lem was talking about.

“Disappointed? She could have been raped or killed on the way here and you expect me to be happy about it?”

“I know you think you are protecting her, but Arya is...not like other women and you have not considered what she risked by coming here. To see you.”

Gendry shrugged noncommittally.

“Aside from her own safety, she’s risked Jon’s wrath, Aegon’s too by the sounds of it and she has
doubtless earned the disapproval of every high born woman at court by running off after a horde of unwashed soldiers with a bastard squire. Her reputation will be ruined.”

“I doubt Lady Arya cares much for her reputation.” Gendry muttered sarcastically.

“Aye, but you do. You can’t send her back in disgrace to face all o’ that alone. Whether you see it or not, ’twas an act of love to follow you here.”

“Love?!” Gendry yelped indignant.

“Shh, or you’ll wake the whole camp man. Aye, love and you’re a fool if you don’t go to her now and make your peace with her. At least tell her you’re glad she came.”

“You want me to lie?”

“’Tis a wee white one.” Lem said, elbowing Gendry in the ribs and winking, “and if she likes what she hears you may well be very pleased she came. Very pleased indeed.”

As if in agreement with Lem, a lone wolf’s howl sounded long and plaintively through the trees. Both men sat silently, listening. It had to be Nymeria. As Ghost was silent, ’twas the first time either of them had heard a Direwolf howl; instinct and experience told them that keening lament was made by no ordinary wolf. Gendry felt the hairs prickle on the back of his neck. He gave himself a shake.

“Aye, well I have certainly had enough of sitting here listening to an old man’s ramblings.” Gendry stood up to go.

“I do not want to see you again until the morn!” Lem hissed, giving him another exaggerated wink.

With a shake of his head Gendry stalked off, leaving Lem alone by the fire. He knew he needed to talk to Arya, for he could not risk her doing something equally foolish, tomorrow. ’Twould be just like her to disappear again. But he had to admit that Lem was right in one respect – he would need to hold his tongue, for to say everything he wanted about her coming here would only lead to another fight, and he was far too weary of fighting with her already.

-o-

Arya had resigned herself to a cold, uncomfortable, sleepless night listening to men snore. To add to her misery, ’twas likely Gendry would send her back to The Red Keep with the dawn. Buggering hell, Aegon would love that.

She was debating with herself whether ’twas better to try and sneak out of camp in the night than face the humiliation of Gendry packing her off like a naughty child in the morn when a black shape loomed above her, blocking out the stars overhead.

“We do not travel with ravens.” Gendry’s voice drifted down from above, gruff and low in the darkness.

“What?” she hissed as he dropped a heavy bundle of furs on the damp earth. It landed near her with a dull thump.

“I cannot send a raven to Aegon for you Arya.” She could hear regret dragging at his words and wished she could see his face.
She sat up, trying to keep the blankets about her shoulders and failing, causing her to shiver even more. He kneeled down and began rolling out his sleeping furs without looking in her direction.

Taking a deep breath she told him, “I do not want Aegon to come for me.”

“Good. For I do not want you to leave.”

“You don’t? But I thought...”

“Aye, well I spoke in anger earlier.”

“So I can stay?”

“As long as you do not cause me any more trouble.” Damn, that did not sound as he meant it.

“I will try not to.” She said in a small voice as she lay down again and tried to bury herself in her meagre blankets. The hurt in her eyes cut him to the quick.

“I did not mean...” he started to say, but she cut him off.

“’Twas not my intention to cause you trouble by coming here.”

He sighed. “I know.” How had this conversation gone so awry?

He took off his boiled leather jerkin and rolled it up, placing it under his head for a pillow, before wrapping himself in his furs.

The two of them lay silently listening to the sounds of the night; the occasionally faint creak of a branch high over head and the myriad grunts and snores from the men around them.

“I want to...” they both said at once.

“Can I go first?” Arya asked, her voice barely above a whisper. She saw the black outline of his head nod in the darkness.

“I came here to apologize for not listening to you about...about...Lady Stoneheart...” Arya had found that by using that name, she could separate that creature from her memories of her mother, “…and for not apologizing sooner.”

She waited for his reply. He paused for a while, as if carefully considering what to say.

“I was disappointed not to see you yesterday...or last night. Very disappointed.” He added.

She felt terrible and embarrassed. Should she tell him about seeing him with Sansa? It seemed so petty and childish now. She decided not to. By keeping quiet she could still pretend to be surprised if he presented her with the new clothes Daenerys said he had asked Sansa to pick for her. ‘Twas a kind thought, although Arya very much doubted she would ever like anything Sansa chose for her.

Arya still had another apology to make. Daenerys had been disbelieving and then angry that Arya had sent Gendry off to battle without “giving him something to come back for” as The Queen put it. Arya also wanted to right that wrong somehow.

“I am sorry for sending you off to battle without...without...” she trailed off, uncertain as to how to say what she wanted and unsure if he had fully forgiven her for coming here.

There was another long pause before he said “I will not be able to sleep for your teeth chattering
Together.”

“‘Tis cold.”

“Not over here.”

“Hmmph.”

“I could keep you warm...like I used to.” He said, his voice a low rumble.

“I had almost forgotten, until tonight.” She admitted. Her voice sounded high and squeaky, even to her.

He took in a deep breath and blew out a long sigh. “I never have.”

He lifted up the top layer of his furs and held out his arm to her in an invitation. The temptation of a warm bed and him was too much to resist. She abandoned her useless blankets and scrambled over to him as fast as she could, shaking with the cold and perhaps anticipation too. Her teeth chattered together louder than ever as he fitted his big body behind hers and tucked the furs around them both. He wrapped her in his arms and pulled her firmly against him.

“Do you remember now?” he asked, with a low chuckle that reverberated through her chest.

“Yes.”

He was warm, wonderfully warm. He smelled of outdoors and leather and that unique scent she loved so much and that she could only describe as being his. ‘Twas a comforting smell that made her close her eyes and sink against him, enjoying the feel of his breath feathering the back of her neck. His slow and even breathing and his hand smoothing her hair comforted her. Had he stroked her hair before, when they were children? She thought not. If he had, ’twas certainly never like this.

She felt the rhythm of his heart against her back, seeming to beat in time with hers and for once she enjoyed the feeling of being enclosed and protected. It had been so long since they had lain like this under the stars and, of course ‘twas all so different now. But he made no move to make this anything other an innocent embrace.

Gendry was wary of assuming too much from her agreeing to share his furs. She had made it plain she was cold and he did not want to send her scurrying back to her blankets by pressing his rapidly hardening cock against her bottom, no matter how much he wanted to. The muscles of his stomach were tight and his throat was dry as she shivered against him. Why had he said there could be nothing between them until she agreed to wed him? He was finding it hard to remember. His body was certainly in no mood for waiting, but Arya’s was obviously not of the same mind. He felt her breathing become slower and more regular, her body heavier in his arms until soon he knew she was fast asleep. There would be no such relief for him, as holding Arya close was a temptation that chased the sleep from his mind and his body.

-o-

The sky was no longer black and the stars no longer visible. Soon the birds would begin their dawn chorus. Surely she would wake soon? He had been unable to resist brushing his lips against her neck several times during the night, hoping she would wake up, but despite giving little sighs and moans
that had only increased his frustration, she had remained stubbornly asleep.

He propped himself up on one elbow and watched her sleep; her dark eyelashes fluttering against tanned skin, the Braavosi freckles that dusted her nose. Oh how he longed to kiss every single one of them. Soon the whole camp would be awake. He could not wait any longer. He gently brushed her hair away so he could kiss that sweet spot between her ear and neck.

“Mmmmm.” The sound reminded him of the contented noise her Direwolf made when he scratched Nymeria in the same spot. He smiled against the soft, warm skin of Arya’s neck as he breathed her in. She snuggled back against him, making that contented “Mmmmm” sound again and sending a new surge of desire through him. Emboldened by her reaction, he nuzzled her neck and slowly, very slowly drew his hand up her arm.

Arya awoke feeling deliciously warm and content. She did not want to open her eyes for fear of chasing that feeling away. Was it another dream? She felt the thud of a heart against her back, beating in time with her own, the warm tickle of fur and something scratchy nuzzling against her neck. Was it something or was it someone?

She lay perfectly still, wondering if she was Nymeria in a dream again or if this was real and ‘twas Gendry’s unshaven jaw she felt against her ear. With her eyes still closed, she was unable to resist arching her back and pressing her bottom against whatever or whoever was behind her.

That caused the steady breathing behind her to pause for a moment and then came a gentle, tentative touch on her arm. Sure now this was Gendry, she felt him stroke her arm through the wool of her sleeve, his hand trailing up to her shoulder and then down to her hand. His fingertips, so rough and warm brushed against hers. The effect was so unexpectedly erotic that she heard herself gasp aloud.

“Does this feel good?” He asked, his voice soft and his breath hot against her ear.

“Yes” she answered in a choked whisper.

He slowly drew his hand higher, caressing the curve of her hip and up to the concave slope of her waist. It was an exquisite torture, lying still with her eyes closed as he tentatively explored her body. He trailed his hand up higher, stopping just beneath her breasts. Her nipples hardened with anticipation, but he made no other move, as if waiting for her acceptance of him.

“Please do not stop,” she whispered breathlessly.

He moved his hand upwards again to cup her breast. The heavy softness of her breast felt wondrous in his hand as it seemed to swell beneath his touch. When his hand grazed her nipple he felt it harden against his palm. She drew in a deep breath that sent desire surging through him and testing his will. He made himself take deep, slow breaths as blood pounded in his ears. With a growing urgency, his body was demanding he take her now, now, now. But he forced his hand to move slowly lower, down her flat stomach to the top of her legs. He heard and felt her hold her breath as his fingers explored the hot place between her thighs. Even though she was fully clothed, she quivered and arched against him. Sliding his other arm under her waist he started working on the laces of her britches and was gratified to find her hands tugging at the laces with as much urgency as his own.

Arya felt the soft tickle of fur against the sensitized skin of her naked hip. It felt gloriously wicked to be lying surrounded by sleeping men as Gendry explored her body. His slow stokes had made her feverish with longing. At last she felt his fingers push into her britches and brush through the soft hair, seeking the little knot of tension that was winding tighter and tighter with every intimate touch he gave her. When his fingers finally touched her there, she heard a whimper of desire. She only
realised it came from her own throat when he pressed his other hand over her mouth and whispered
“bite my hand,” hot against her ear. As she tasted his rough skin in her mouth, the fingers of his other
hand went round and round, winding her ever tighter.

“Do not stop” she mumbled against his hand. He did not and she pressed harder against him, only
vaguely aware of his cock pressing with increasing urgency against her back. She bit down on his
hand as a sudden, convulsive rapture tore through her; wave after wave of pleasure shaking her to
her core.

As she floated down slowly, she felt his hands behind her tugging at the laces of his own britches.
Thinking he would want her on her back, she tried to turn, but he whispered urgently against her ear,
“Nay, stay as you are,”

He throbbed and ached with the need to possess her; if he had ever been more aroused than at this
moment then he could not remember it. He tore at his laces, desperate to rid himself of the barrier
between his cock and her bare arse. The breath went out of him in a rush as he was finally able to
feel skin against skin. Lust roared through him like wildfire and his breath came in ragged gasps. She
was hot and wet for him. “Twould be so easy to grab her hips and slide into her. All he wanted in the
world was to be buried inside of her. He had to force himself back from the edge, taking deep,
calming breaths. This was the woman he wanted to marry, to bear his children. She was a virgin and
he had been about to take her from behind, still in her clothes and on the ground as if she was a
common whore.

Murmuring her name over and over, he came shuddering against her back like some overexcited
youth.

“Mornin’! I see you two made up.”

Gendry looked up to see Ty standing above them in the grey light of dawn, hands on his hips and a
broad grin on his face. Seven buggering hells, how much had he seen or heard?

“Morning Ty.” Arya answered overly cheerily. Her hand reaching back to squeeze his thigh
somehow reassured Gendry.

Arya started to explain to Ty, “I was cold and Gendry…”

“Warmed her up.” Gendry interrupted gruffly. “Not that ‘tis any of your damn business. Seeing as
you are here Ty, go and help cook breakfast.”

Gendry felt Arya tugging her britches back up over her hips. He tried to ignore her wriggling against
him under the furs and concentrate on glaring at Ty.

His squire seemed oblivious to the urgency with which his Lord wanted him gone, stretching and
chattering “I must admit I slept mightily well. Did you two?”

Gendry was not sure whether the boy was attempting to jest with him or not. “Breakfast!” he snarled,
rising up from the furs and sending Ty scurrying off, tripping over Tom in his haste. The minstrel
cursed Ty loudly and colourfully for it. The whole camp would have been woken by that.

Gendry added his own muttered cursed about his squire under his breath, but Arya put her arms
around his neck and pulled him down, silencing him with a passionate kiss.

He did not resist when she buried her fingers in his hair and urged him closer, or when her tongue
sought his, but when he felt her hand sliding into his unlaced britches he pulled away, telling her
firmly, albeit it reluctantly and in a choked whisper, “Not here, not now.”
“Tonight then?” she asked, her eyes glistening with desire and her lips swollen from his kisses.

As he looked down at her, he was unable to resist giving her a wide grin. Gods help him. With her flushed cheeks and hair in disarray, she was the very image of his dreams. But he was not going to make the same mistake again. He was a wiser man and would not ask her to marry him in the heat of passion, only to have his offer rejected once more. Still, her longing for him was a good sign. A very good sign.

“You know my terms.”

He felt well pleased by the disappointment that clouded her face. Ha! She wanted him so badly he doubted she would last one night without crawling back into his furs. He rolled onto his back and began tying the laces on his britches.

“Terms?” She huffed. “You make it sound as if we are enemies negotiating a ceasefire.”

“You always were perceptive.” He smiled, keeping his voice smooth. “So, you shall let me know tonight what you decide?”

Arya did not look happy at the prospect, but he had learned his lesson well and he was going to win this battle.

When he was standing above her, he asked again, “Tonight?”

She looked up at him, her eyes dark, her expression unfathomable and nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhh, at last we’re getting there! I know you hate waiting and I can’t wait another fortnight to find out what happens either, so I’m going to pull out all the stops to give you another chapter a week today.

As always, my thanks go to Brazilian Guy for his time, suggestions and inspirational e-mails. You guys would have a very different story if it was not for his steadfast championing of Gendry’s cause!

Until next Friday...
Every man in Bad Company moved as one, with a quiet, practiced efficiency that told of the years of toil and war these men had endured together.

Their Camp was broken and the horses saddled before Arya would normally have woken. A deep, unbroken sleep had left her refreshed, but the morning’s passion with Gendry had left her feeling needy and aching for more.

She had not seen him since he had left her in his furs. Now, all around her, men were collecting their bed rolls and making their way through the trees in the direction of the road. She had no idea where Lightning was and saw no other option but to follow the men when she heard Lem’s gruff,

“Good mornin’ Lady Arya. I trust you had a good night’s sleep?”

From the twinkle in his eyes, Lem was referring to rather more than sleep. Despite trying to maintain an air of cool indifference, Arya felt the heat of embarrassment rising up her neck.

“I slept well enough thank you.” Her reply sounded rather sharper than she had intended. Cursing herself under her breath, she apologised, “Good morning to you too Lem. I am sorry for being so brusque, but I have a lot on my mind.”

He raised his eyebrows and gave her a knowing smile that made his eyes crinkle at the sides.

“At least you needn’t worry about being sent back to King Aegon. He might no have made it plain when you arrived, but our Lord was right pleased to see you”

“Really?” Arya asked sarcastically, “Well, in that case he is a better actor than I have seen in many a mummer’s farce.”

“Och, he was just surprised by your arrival, what with you refusing to speak to him in the Bailey Yard ‘afore we left…”

Arya gasped, shame making her cheeks burn hotter, “You noticed that?”

“‘T’m no blind yet.”

“Oh.” She wasn’t about to start explaining how or why that had happened to Lem.

“This is his first time in The Stormlands,” Lem continued, giving Arya a meaningful look; only she wasn’t sure what the meaning was.

“And…” she asked

“He’s Lord o’ all this now,” Lem nodded to the side, indicating the forest and, Arya supposed, the whole of The Stormlands “And he takes his responsibility right serious.”

Arya nodded. She had not thought about it before, but now Lem mention it, she supposed Gendry would always strive to do what he saw as his duty. He was like her father; honourable and honest. The comparison she had just drawn between her father and Gendry was not reassuring. Had her father been less honourable and more like the Lannisters or that snake Aegon, mayhaps he might still
be alive today. She shivered and this time ‘twas not the cold making her do it.

If Lem noticed her discomfort, he did not mention it. “This is what he has toiled for all these years. What we all have. A place to call home.”

Arya had not thought on that either. No matter how far she travelled or how long she was away, Winterfell was her home, would always be her home. But Gendry…he had nothing.

“Do you not have a home either Lem?”

He sighed wearily and seemed to shrink a little before her eyes. For the first time Arya saw him as a man well past his youth. The grey that peppered his hair and his beard made her think Lem must be about the same age her father was when…when he died. Thinking on her father’s death again made her stomach roil. So many things, so many memories she had buried were returning to her now she was back in Westeros. Her father had a wife and six children by the time he was Lem’s age. What did Lem have?

“We’d best get to our horses, else we’ll be left behind.” Lem started walking in the direction of the road and Arya hurried after him.

“So you and Gendry intend to make a home in the Stormlands now the war is won?”

Lem snorted. “It may seem to you as if the war is won, but I fear ‘twill be a long time afore we can rest easy.”

Arya had to walk as fast as she could to keep up with his long strides. “I know there are these raiders to bring to justice first…”

“Justice” Lem repeated with a derisory snort, “Aye, we’ll give ‘em justice alright. After that we’ll have to deal with the starving folk, the rebuilding, the collecting ‘o the taxes, the land disputes and on and on and by then I’ll be missing the days when the only fighting I did was with a sword in my hand.”

Arya thought about her father and Jory and all the other men he had called friends; good men, trusted men. She supposed her father had needed help to do all the things Lem had just mentioned in order to maintain peace in The North.

“I am glad Gendry has you Lem,” she said and she truly was. So she was surprised when Lem stopped and gave her that look again.

“It’s no me he wants by his side Arya.”

A quiet “Oh” was all she could manage.

Why was she so surprised? Of course that was what Gendry wanted. Had he not said it often enough? She had foolishly never looked past sharing his bed and bearing his sons. Gendry wanted her to share the burden of Lordship with him, as her father had with her mother.

Arya had only been a child, but she well remembered her mother, quietly overseeing the smooth running of Winterfell. There had always been work to do and someone needing her attention, and ‘twas not just Winterfell and the children her mother had seen to. Arya remembered how her mother would fuss around her father when he returned weary from some journey and there were the times when she would quietly bringing him a cup of wine and speak to him in soothing tones. Those were the difficult times when the children knew to leave him well alone. Gendry wanted that from her. Could she do all of that for him? Did she want to?
By now they were through the trees and at the horses waiting patiently on the Kingsroad. The men stood beside their mounts. Waiting, but for what Arya did not know.

“That fancy white mare ‘o yours is up front. I thought it best if you stay up there. Out o’ trouble if you know what I mean.” Lem smiled at her, adding a knowing wink.

Arya could see Ty holding Lightning’s reigns at the front of the column. As she got closer, she could see he was also holding Thunder’s. She was to ride beside Gendry at the head of Bad Company.

“The scouts left a while ago. We’re just waiting on you…and his Lordship of course.” Ty said, as if reading her thoughts.

With a feeling of trepidation, Arya accepted the reins. The thought of another day in the saddle was not a pleasing one. Her stiff muscles protested at the very thought. A hot bath would have released the tension in her limbs at least, however she suspected ‘twould be a long while ‘afore she had the luxury of a bath again.

Even before she had accepted Gendry’s offer of marriage, she had been given the honour of riding alongside him. She had wanted to come here, to be with him. But this was something else. Arya felt as if she was being pushed down a path she was not sure she was ready to tread.

Arya looked anxiously around for Gendry, but saw no sign. Lem, Anguy and a man she did not recognise stood beside their horses in the row behind. The third man had long, shaggy red hair and a beard so bushy Arya thought it looked like a shaggy, red ball of wool sitting on his shoulders instead of a head.

“This is Harlan Fell. He comes from these parts and will be our guide these next few days.” Lem explained, in response to her questioning look.

“I left with my uncle’s men when Renly Baratheon called his banners. I have not returned home since.” Harlan said with a grin. “Today we cross into the Stormlands and will reach Fellwood Keep. Gods be good I will see my family again this day.”

“Your father and your uncle? Do they await your return?” Arya asked

“Nae.” Harlan replied with a sad shake of his shaggy, red head. “My own father died years ago and Lord Harwood Fell died as we marched north towards Winterfell with Stannis’ army. My cousin holds The Keep now.”

“Then I look forward to meeting him today.” Arya said, genuinely looking forward to meeting Harlan’s cousin and seeing his Keep. Mayhaps they would have hot water and a bath there.

The red haired man laughed, “My cousin is a she not a he. Dorethea was betrothed when I left, but I expect her to be married now with children a ‘plenty hanging around her skirts!”

“All the better then.” Arya grinned, for she was feeling severely outnumbered by all these men. Another thing that had not bothered her before.

As they talked, her eye was drawn to the glimmer of gold further down the line of horses, flashing in the first rays of the morning sun. The antlers of Gendry’s golden helmet caught the light as he strode down the line, greeting all of his men as he passed. Arya’s heart thudded in her chest. Earlier she had thought only of tonight, now the prospect of a whole day in the saddle riding beside Gendry at the head of an army both thrilled her and made her inexplicably nervous. Butterflies seemed to flutter in
her belly. What was wrong with her that the mere sight of him could affect her so?

Gendry seemed to be surprised to see her, but he gave her a nod as he took his destrier’s reigns from Ty, muttering something under his breath that sent Ty running full pelt back down the line. With another nod, this time to Lem, Gendry swung himself up into the saddle.

Lem bellowed “Mount!”

Altogether the men of Bad Company did as ordered. With a start Arya realised she was to ‘mount’ too and she hurried to put her foot in the stirrup, her muscles protesting with every horse related movement.

“Bad Company!” Gendry’s voice rung out amongst the trees as it had in the Bailey Yard the day before. Once again his men answered with another “Bad Company!” The only difference this day was that a woman’s voice was added to their war cry.

“So you fancied riding with me did you?” Gendry smirked as soon as they had moved off. “You cannot keep away from me now, is that it?”

Arya turned in the saddle to glare at Lem, who was studiously looking the other way.

“I thought you would have wanted me to ride beside you.” she huffed at Gendry.

He snorted. “So every man behind me can watch your arse sway all day long? I think not.”

Arya heard stifled laughter from behind. She turned again but Lem immediately found something very interesting to look at over his shoulder. So she glared at Anguy instead. He just shrugged and tried his best to look innocent.

Pah! They were men and would never rat out on their brothers. She would need to try a different approach if she was going to win this battle. Urging Lightening into a trot she overtook Gendry before reining her horse in once she was directly in front of him.

“Is this better my Lord?” she teased, looking over her shoulder and deliberately wriggling enthusiastically in the saddle.

Gendry kicked his heels to Thunder’s flanks and caught up with her in a couple of the big warhorse’s strides. “By the Gods Arya, you cannot ride in front of me!” he hissed.

Although there was now a greater distance between them, Arya could still hear Lem, Anguy and Harlan laughing.

“But I thought you wanted to be the one to see my bottom” she pouted, deliberately misunderstanding him.

“Aye” he grunted, adding under his breath, “but I did not mean like that!”

“Oh, I see. You mean to wait until tonight to see it then?” She batted her eyelashes at him.

He raised his eyebrows and smirked, leaning closer. “I am a very patient man Arya. I have waited this long for you, what are another few years?”

“Another few years!” she yelped, immediately annoyed at herself for rising so easily to his teasing. But the thought of waiting a whole day before she could lie with him again was bad enough; never mind having to wait years.
“You would not! You could not!”

Surely he was jesting? Based on this morning’s performance, she had assumed he was as eager for their joining as she was, but he was having none of it.

“Oh I would and I could Milady. Did I not tell you about the time we laid siege to Castle Pyke?”
“No and I do not wish to hear of it now.” The tale of the siege and how it ended the Greyjoy rebellion had been told many, many times at Winterfell. She assumed ‘twould be little different the second time around, except that the victors were not the Lords of Storm’s End and Winterfell, but their bastard sons.

“Ah well, then you shall just have to accept my word on it. I am a very patient man and I have laid siege to your heart.” he grinned.

Seven hells, but ‘twas hard to stay mad at him when he grinned at her like that. Those butterflies in her stomach made their presence know again and besides, she rather liked the sound of that kind of siege. Arya found herself grinning right back at him.

The first part of the morning passed in a haze of sunshine and laughter for Arya, but by mid morn they passed the first abandoned cottage. By mid day they had passed a dozen more. With each cottage that they found empty, Arya’s feeling of foreboding increased.

As they made their way further along the Kingsroad, the spring sunshine seemed to be at odds with the pall that had descended upon them.

Harlan explained that the patches of land cleared of trees should have been ploughed and seeded by now. But they were invariably untended. Although Gendry sent men in to each cottage to search for signs of recent occupation, none was found. Harlan became more agitated with each abandoned cottage they passed, for he seemed to have known the occupants by name.

“Where is everyone?” he asked again as the men came out of yet another cottage shaking their heads.

“Mayhaps when we get to your uncle’s keep we shall have our answer.” Anguy offered grimly.

Arya felt a shiver of apprehension when Fellwoood Keep was spotted on a hill in the distance. The outline silhouetted against the sky appeared to be unbroken. Whatever other ills had befallen the keep, its walls appeared to be intact.

As Bad Company approached they saw a tattered green and black flag flapped from the top. Harlan seemed cheered to see that that the banner of House Fell was still flying, although the drawbridge was raised against them.

“I think someone is home” Lem observed.

“And is expecting us.” Gendry added dryly.

“If they have longbows, we will be in range shortly.” Anguy advised, causing Lord Baratheon to immediately raise his hand. Lem bellowed “Halt!” and Bad Company drew to a standstill. Gendry turned in his saddle to speak to Harlan,

“Do you wish to approach the keep first and ascertain whether ‘tis occupied by friend or foe?”

“House Fell has sworn fealty to House Baratheon and ‘twill be no different now!” Harlan said, kicking his heels eagerly to his horse’s flanks.
“If you see archers, turn and ride like the wind!” Anguy yelled after Harlan’s retreating form.

The red haired man stopped half way between Bad Company and The Keep. Everyone watched as a black figure appeared between the crenulations.

“House Fell!” Harlan yelled up at the battlements.

“Who is asking?” came the reply. Arya realised with a start that the voice was that of a woman.

“Dorethea! Is that you?” All of Bad Company could hear the hope in Harlan’s voice. Arya offered up a silent prayer that the woman atop the battlements was the cousin of whom he had spoken so fondly.

The lady neither confirmed nor denied it, simply asking “And who might you be?”

“Tis your cousin Harlan and I travel with Lord Baratheon of Storm’s End!”

Beside her, Gendry dipped his golden helm in acknowledgement. The figure on the battlements disappeared and for a long while no-one moved or said anything.

“Maybe she didn’t like him that much after all” Anguy eventually said.

As if to prove him wrong, a terrific shriek of metal staining against metal broke the silence and the drawbridge began to inch slowly down.

Harlan urged his horse towards the keep, closing the distance at a fast gallop.

“I hope he knows what he is doing,” Arya said, finally giving voice to all of their fears.

“They’d gain nothing by killing him now,” Lem observed, as if ‘twas the weather he spoke of and not Harlan’s life, “We outnumber them and they’d be fools to think we wouldn’t kill them all in return.” Arya was not sure if Lem meant that to be of reassurance to her or not.

In the end she need not have worried, for as Harlan dropped from his horse and ran across the drawbridge, a figure appeared in the entrance to the keep and ran to meet him.

“Let us go and introduce ourselves.” Gendry grinned. “Bring a dozen men” he instructed Lem, “and tell the rest to wait here for our return.”

Lem wheeled his horse around and began bellowing orders as Gendry urged Thunder into a trot. Arya and Anguy followed.

Once she had caught up, Gendry leaned towards Arya and whispered, “I think it best if I introduce you as my betrothed to these Fells.”

“Why? ‘Tis not true.” Arya shot back, regretting speaking without thinking when she saw first surprise and then a frown of irritation on his face.

“Then tell me how you intend to explain your presence with an army of men?” he said, his eyes blazing, “You certainly do not look like a Lady and the only other sort of women who follow soldiers around are whores!”

“Oh.” While Arya did not care overmuch what others thought of her, she did not wish to be assumed to be one of those sorts of women. “Fine then.” She conceded with bad grace, “Say what you want.”

“And by the Gods try and act like a woman in love.” He hissed as he kicked his heels to Thunder’s
“What do you mean by that?!” Arya yelled after him, but he was already galloping away towards Harlan and Fellwood Keep.

Anguy’s guffaws of laughter only enraged her more.

“And what do you find so funny?”

“The thought of you trying to act like a woman in love, sighing and fluttering your eyelashes and gazing wistfully the way ladies in love do.” Anguy spluttered.

“I could flutter my eyelashes and sigh as well as any woman if I wanted!”

Anguy nearly choked with laughter at her declaration.

“Why do you find this so funny?” she demanded, but Anguy galloped off without answering, the sound of his laughter drifting back to her over the sound of his horse’s hooves.

She would show them. She could be as in love as anyone.

Arya decided ladies did not gallop their horses, so she kept Lightning to a trot as she followed Gendry and Anguy towards Fellwood Keep. Lem and the dozen other soldiers Gendry ordered caught up with her by the time she reached the drawbridge. All to the good, she thought. They looked like her escort.

To make sure no-one mistook her for a man or a whore, she unfastened the first button at the neck of her shirt. Looking down, she thought it made little difference, so she unfastened another. Whores no doubt would unfasten them all.

Lem gave her a puzzled sideways look. Arya just stuck her nose in the air. She was a Lady and she was in love.

Once they were inside the keep, Arya dismounted as gracefully as she could and instead of keeping hold of the reins and her horse as she usually did, she handed them to a surprised Lem and walked off towards Gendry, or rather she tried to glide, as Sansa and Daenerys seemed to do.

The occupants of Fellwood Keep were lined up and being introduced to Gendry by a tall woman with a pinched face and hair as red as Harlan’s. Arya would never think of Sansa’s hair as being red again, for the hair of the Fell’s was the colour of the poppy.

Beyond noticing the colour of their hair, Arya paid them no mind, gliding instead to Gendry’s side, attaching herself to him like a limpet and purring up at him “My Lord.”

When he looked down at her in surprise, she made sure to flutter her eyelashes and sigh deeply, giving him what she hoped was the dopey look of love she had ‘oft seen on stupid girl’s faces.

Gendry was literally lost for words. What in seven hells was she doing?

“Are you not going to introduce me My Lord?”

“I…err…yes of course. Lady Fell, this is my betrothed, Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell.”

Arya sighed wistfully as she slowly unwrapped her arms from Gendry’s waist, before sinking into a deep curtsy. She was sure Septa Mordane had told her once ‘twas always necessary to curtsy to the Lady of the house. Arya wondered if that still held true when you were supposed to be betrothed to flanks.
the Liege Lord, but she thought it best to err on the side of caution and curtsey as low as she could. "Twas a lot easier in britches than in a stupid dress at least. As Lady Fell returned her curtsey, Arya shot a glance at Gendry who was standing with his mouth hanging open.

Curtesys exchanged, Arya said in her sweetest voice, "Forgive my attire Lady Fell. I am dressed for riding with My Lord’s men. My dresses and jewels are all packed away."

By now Gendry had at least closed his mouth, but instead had resorted to glaring at her. She gave him a shy smile from beneath her lashes accompanied by a little shrug of her shoulders. "Twas his idea! Let him try and reprimand her now.

Gendry coughed to cover his discomfort, before asking Lady Fell to continue with her introductions.

As Arya clung to Gendry, she had ample opportunity to study the occupants of Fellwood Keep as they each bowed or curtseyed to Gendry. They all shared the same pinched look Lady Fell had. Arya decided these Fells looked like an ill tempered, sullen lot and even the babe in his mother’s arms would not cease wailing.

"Twas almost all women being introduced. Mayhaps all the Fell men were away hunting or the like, for there was not a boy over ten, or a man under seventy amongst them. Once the introductions were finished, Arya asked Lady Fell sweetly, "And the men of Fellwood Keep, where are they this fine day?"

Lady Fell regarded her stonily. "All our men stand before you Lady Stark."

Arya was too shocked to answer. Harlan expressed what she was thinking, as he gasped, "You cannot mean this is all that is left? Why, there is not a man of fighting or working age amongst you! What of my cousins, my uncles, that Grandison Lord you were betrothed too?"

"They all answered when Lord Renly called his banners. None of those who rode with either Lord Renly or Stannis Baratheon returned and we lost those few who remained here during the incessant raids." Lady Fell’s chin was held high and her voice stiff with pride, but her eyes shone with unshed tears as she told her cousin of the fate of their House.

"And what of the women? How did they fare during these incessant raids?" Harlan asked, his voice little more than a whisper.

Lady Fell’s eyes flicked to her people before she answered. Arya realised the Lady was reluctant to admit the extent of their suffering while young years could hear. She answered Harlan’s question as quietly as she could and with a quiver in her voice,

"We suffered the way women ever suffer when evil men can take what they want."

Arya’s throat tightened as bile rose from her stomach, threatening to make her gag.

The shocking truth was laid bare. Harlan was the only man from House Fell to survive the war and, with no men left to protect them, the women had been raped by these raiders.

As Harlan raked his hands through his wild red hair, the anguish that consumed him was clear for all to see. Arya knew how it was to feel so alone. She reached out and touched his arm. Although Harlan turned towards her, his eyes were flat and unseeing.

"Do you have a cup of wine Lady Fell? For I fear Harlan is in shock."

"Nae my Lady. We have neither wine nor ale. All I can offer is water." Even Lady Fell’s proud
voice wavered at such an admission. To have no wine to offer guests broke the most sacrosanct rule of Westerosi hospitality.

Arya felt Gendry stiffen beside her, “We will leave you what supplies we can Lady Fell, although I fear ‘tis nowhere near sufficient. I was concerned to see your fields unploughed this far into spring. Do you have seed?"

At last, Lady Fell was able to salvage some dignity for her House by declaring “Aye, we have seed saved from the last harvest.” An almost smile appeared on her lips as she spoke, but ‘twas gone as soon as it appeared, as she was then forced to admit, “But we have no beasts to pull our ploughs. We have ploughed and planted what we can by hand, but ‘tis heavy work for us few who are left.”

Arya looked along the line of old men, boys and skinny woman. She no longer saw them as she first had, when she had thought their faces pinched with ill temper. Instead she saw them as they really were; hollow cheeked and starving. ‘Twas plain to her now that the babe in his mother’s arms was crying only in hunger. There was not one of them, not even Lady Fell herself, who looked as if they had the strength left to plough a field.

“Then we shall also leave you horses. Lem - see that our rations are restricted to half for the next two days. Leave the balance, together with whatever else we can spare, for Lady Fell.”

Lem nodded grimly and turned on his heel to make it so.

Lady Fell smiled and tried to maintain her composure as she expressed her gratitude to Gendry, although ‘twas plain her tears were not far away. Arya was pleased to see that not one of Gendry’s men balked at the news they would be receiving half rations for the next few days.

Gendry then directed his attention to Arya. “Milady, will you wait for me with the rest of Bad Company? I would like to take a tour of the keep with Lady Fell. I hope I shall soon be able to send any other materials she needs to fortify the walls or otherwise protect her people.”

Arya nodded, seeing the anguish in Gendry’s own eyes. She was relieved he was ordering her away. In truth, she could not bear to stay here one minute longer.

She had hoped to receive some relief from the harrowing experience of Fellwood Keep once she was back with Bad Company, but there was no respite there either. The dozen soldiers, who had accompanied her back, were busy explaining how bad things were inside the keep to their comrades. The only man who complained about the short rations was Tom O’Sevens and he was swiftly rounded upon by the men who had seen the occupants of the keep with their own eyes. Tom kept his mouth shut after that.

The two dry tack biscuits Arya had been handed by Lem for her mid-day meal seemed even less palatable than usual. As she chewed all she could think of was the hollow cheeks of the children not far away.

Once they were fed, they had to take turns leading their horses down to a nearby stream to drink. When ‘twas Arya’s turn and while Lightning drank her fill, Arya’s eye was caught by movement in nearby bushes. She watched carefully out of the corner of her eye, while pretending to concentrate on Lightning. Slowly, so as not to attract attention, she moved her hand to rest on the hilt of her sword which was mercifully hanging on the hip furthest from the bushes. There were not enough bushes to hide many of them and surely these raiders would not be foolish enough to attack an army in broad daylight?

Bending down to the edge of the stream, Arya lifted a smooth, palm sized stone. After assessing its
weight in her hand, she whirled whilst still in a crouch to hurl the stone at the bush where the watcher hid.

It found its mark as a squealed yelp rang out from the bush. Whoever it was, ’twas no bloodthirsty outlaw.

Drawing her sword, Arya advanced slowly to the quivering bush as the other men who had also been watering their horses began to take heed.

“Show yourself – whoever you are!” Arya demanded, holding her sword before her as a threat.

“Please do not kill me!” a small voice squeaked as a ragged child crawled from the bush.

Arya felt a rush of guilt for having thrown such a sizeable stone at the child. She quickly sheathed her sword and ran over to help the child to his or her feet. It was so ragged she could not immediately tell if it was a boy or girl.

“I am sorry for hurting you, but you should not spy on soldiers.” Arya chided.

“But you ain’t no soldier” the child said with a stubbornly before she started rubbing vigorously at her arm. Arya decided ’twas a girl child who stood before her.

“Here, let me see…” Arya grabbed the girl, wincing as her fingers wrapped around the child’s arm. ’Twas thin as a dry stick.

“Let me alone!” the girl yelled, trying to twist and turn out of Arya’s grasp.

Arya grabbed her other arm and dragged the girl, kicking and screaming back towards Lightning. By now, all the other men by the stream had stopped what they were doing to watch.

“Stop fighting me!” Arya hissed to the girl, “I only want to give you something”

Mercifully the ragged child stopped struggling so hard and asked, “Are you a woman or a man?”

Arya chuckled, “I am a woman.” ’Twas the first time she had ever been asked so bluntly. “I am Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell” she explained, “and I am betrothed to your liege lord, Lord Baratheon of Storm’s End.”

The girl considered Arya’s reply before nodding, her brows drawn together in a worried frown. She looked behind Arya at the men of Bad Company.

“But what about them?”

“They are Lord Baratheon’s men and they are here to rid the Stormlands of the evil men who raided your Keep.”

There were mutters of agreement from the men. Again the girl nodded but her eyes kept flicking to the keep, as if she was considering trying to run back there.

Arya let go of one of the girl’s arms in order to open a saddle bag. As Arya drew out an apple, Lightning whinnied, assuming the apple was for her. Lightning would be getting no more apples on this trip, Arya though ruefully. Not while there were starving children to feed.

Arya offered the apple to the girl.

“What is it?” the girl asked, eyeing the fruit suspiciously.
“Tis an apple.” Arya said. Seeing no flicker of recognition in the girl’s eyes, Arya explained, “You eat it.”

She needed to say no more, as the girl snatched the apple from Arya’s hand – quick as a snake. Arya chuckled, wondering if she had appeared this wild to Lem and Anguy when they first met.

As the girl bit into the apple, her eyes flew open in wonder. She took bite after bite, stuffing her mouth full until juice dripped down her chin.

“I have more if you want.”

 Arya’s offer was answered by a vigorous nod as the girl devoured the entire apple, seeds and all, barely stopping to chew.

“You must not eat them all at once or you shall get a stomach ache.”

“I shall share them.” The girl vowed.

Arya smiled at the girl’s solemn promise, muffled as it was by a mouthful of apple.

“What are you doing out here when everyone else is in the Keep meeting Lord Baratheon?” Arya asked.

As she reached into the saddle bag to get another apple, the girl whispered, “I have to hide when the bad men come ‘cos they rape the young ‘uns too.”

Arya’s hand stopped half way out of the bag. This girl could not be more than eight or nine at most. Some of the girls in Fellwood Keep had only been a year or two older. Arya’s head swam and ‘twas all she could do to tell the girl she was very clever and to always hide when men came.

The girl took every one of Arya’s apples, stuffing them into her shirt so she could carry them off.

“I like you.” She grinned up at Arya.

Arya tried to keep her voice steady and return the girl’s smile as she replied, “And I like you too. I shall come back with Lord Baratheon and visit you soon. After we have killed all of the men who raided your Keep.”

“Are you and Lord Baratheon going to kill the evil men?” the girl gasped with wide eyes.

“Yes,” Arya promised through gritted teeth.

As the girl ran away, Arya leaned her head against Lightning’s neck and closed her eyes. In Braavos she had killed and killed again, but none of them meant anything to her. Not like this. This was for Weasel and Mycah, for all the smallfolk The Tickler had tortured and killed, for the women of Fellwood Keep, for that little ragged girl and the scared little girl she had been herself. This was personal.

Without a conscious thought, Arya’s lips formed those familiar words once again…

Joffrey
Ser Amory
Ser Gregor
The Tickler
Polliver
Gendry walked alongside Lady Fell atop Fellwood Keep’s battlements, listening to tale after sorry tale of looting, rape and destruction.

Battle hardened as he was; Gendry felt sickened by what he heard. This was not warfare, this was slaughter. The strong terrorising the weak; men, women or children, it seemed to matter not to these raiders. As he listened, vengeance grew hot in his blood. All this death and for naught; no land had been won; there was no treasure, no cause for which these outlaws fought.

‘Twas up to him as Lord of the Stormlands to ensure that no others suffered at the hands of these fuckers the way Lady Fell and her people had.

Lord Baratheon’s retribution would be swift and brutal.

---

By night ‘twas not only Ty’s head that drooped as he ate his meal. Arya felt her eyes closing and her head nodding several times as she lifted her spoon methodically, from bowl to mouth and back again. She could not remember ever being this tired.

As with the night before, there was no sign of Gendry. They had spoken little after they left Fellwood Keep, no-one had. Still, Arya had assumed he would come to his furs, nae their furs, once he had finished whatever tasks he had to attend to.

The same as the night before, once the eating was done all the men settled around the camp fires, pipes were lit and Tom brought out his harp. Mayhaps ‘twas the nature of the day or the hunger in their bellies from half rations, but all seemed to be subdued tonight. Tom did not ask her to name her request and there was no banter between the men this night.

Arya barely heard the first line of the lament Tom sang afore she was asleep.

When she awoke she was still alone in the furs. Nymeria howled in the distance. No doubt that was what had woken her. The Direwolves had not been seen since Bad Company had entered the Kingswood. Only at night did they make their presence known.

Arya imagined Ghost and Nymeria running silently through the forest together, moonlight flowing over their pelts like silver silk. Mayhaps if she closed her eyes and concentrated she could warg into Nymeria, like Jon said, but not now. This was not the time for wolves. She sat up and looked around. The embers in the fire still glowed, so the night could not be too old, but where was Gendry?

She listened, but only the snores and grunts of sleeping men could be heard. She was sure he had come to their furs earlier the night before. Mayhaps something was wrong? With a sudden sense of
dread, she lifted up the top fur, wrapped it around her shoulders and set off to find him.

The moon was high and almost full, it’s bright, pale light casting eerie shadows amongst the trees. Still, it made picking her way around the black bundles sleeping on the ground easier. Arya walked downhill, in the direction of the stream. ‘Twas as good a place to start as any.

She did not see the guard until he held up his hand in greeting. He was damn near invisible, sitting wrapped in black furs at the base of a tree. Although he faced out from the camp, he had turned to watch her progress. She had made no attempt to hide, or move with stealth. She had no wish to be mistaken for an outlaw and shot through with an arrow, or worse.

The guard’s head nodded in greeting as she approached and she heard the man murmur her name.

“Have you seen Lord Baratheon?”

The head nodded again. “He passed this way a good while ago. Said he would not stray far and bid me keep my post here. I have heard nothing since.”

“Thank you.”

“‘Tis unwise for a lady to wander about alone in the night.”

“Your concern is appreciated, but I am armed and I am sure Lord Baratheon will see to my safety. Once I find him.”

Even as she said it, Arya surprised herself by admitting Gendry would protect her. The truth was, she felt safe when she was with him and always had.

The black shape shrugged. “Scream if you have need of us.”

Arya smiled as she replied “Of course,” confident there was no-one out there more deadly than she.

Once beyond the perimeter of the camp, Arya moved stealthily towards the stream. Quiet as a shadow. She did not set out with the intention of surprising Gendry, but at the same time she wanted to see what kept him away from the camp, and more specifically away from their furs.

The trees were fewer and smaller here, but still afforded plenty of cover for her. Gendry was making no attempt to hide himself. He sat on a log near to the water. From her position against the tree line, she could see him silhouetted against the starry sky, a black shadow against a curtain of twinkling lights. His elbows were on his knees and his head in his hands.

Pausing for only a moment, she walked towards him, deliberately making enough noise to alert him to her presence. He turned to watch her. As the moon was behind him she could not see his face, but when she was within touching distance she heard him sighed deeply and murmured, “You should not have come.”

Arya took another step forwards and rested her hand on his shoulder. “But I wanted to.”

Had it been anyone else Gendry would have snarled and told them to fuck off, but she was the one person he wanted to see. As she rested her hand upon his shoulder he leaned into her. That contact through her clothing, was not enough. He wanted to feel her touch, so he lifted her hand and pressing it against his cheek. Her hand was soft and warm against his face. As he closed his eyes he was able to forget about the vileness of the day. They remained like that for a while before she whispered,
“Tell me what ails you.”

He dragged his eyes open again. She was looking down at him with big, wide eyes that seemed to shine in the moonlight.

“Nae.” He shook his head. He did not wish to burden her with this.

She stroked both of his cheeks with sure fingers, sinking down to kneel in front of him as she cradled his face in her hands.

“I am worried about you,” she said with a gentle smile that pierced his heart. Arya saw his despair and he felt an overwhelming tenderness for her then. He wanted to lose himself inside her, forget about everything he had seen and heard and everything he knew he had to do.

When she brushed his hair back from his forehead, he closed his eyes and could not help himself from sighing as he felt his burden ease, even if for a moment. Her warm breath and then soft lips grazed his forehead.

Arya was not sure if she could run his castle for him or be the Lady wife he wanted, but she knew she could help him now. “Let me comfort you.”

Comfort him? He wanted a hell of a lot more than comfort from her tonight.

As wrapped her arms around him, trailing slow kisses down his forehead and his nose until she finally found his lips. As soon as his lips touched hers there was fire. There always was with them. He wanted to taste her fire and her strength. He ran his fingers through her hair, pulling her closer to him, deepening their kiss.

She pulled away and he growled with frustration. Arya rocked back on her heels as she moved her hands from his face, trailing them lightly down his arms, before resting them on his knees.

Had she any idea how provocative it was to have her kneeling before him? Mayhaps she had more of an idea than he thought, as she began to run her hands slowly up his thighs. When she looked shyly up at him, the desire he saw in her eyes sent a jolt of lust pounding through his veins. His cock jumped to attention, staining against the laces of his britches, making its presence obvious, even in the half light of the moon.

He was breathing hard as her hands slid to the top of his leather encased thighs. He drew in a sharp breath when they brushed, as if by accident, against his cock. She had been seeking his sword belt and unbuckled it, letting it drop without bothering to look where it fell. He had to bite his lip from begging her to touch him.

He was desperately hoping she would untie his laces, but instead she began unfastening the buckles on his boiled leather jerkin with aching slowness. When he tried to help her she batted his hands away. He groaned again.

“You are killing me Arya.”

She looked up at him with a beguiling smile on her lips and a devilish twinkle in her eye. “If I wanted to kill you Gendry Waters, you would be dead already.”

He chuckled, letting her open his jerkin at her own pace, beginning to enjoy the slow build up of tension.

When she ordered him to pull his shirt out of his britches, he was fortunate not to rip it in his haste to
comply with her demand.

As soon as his shirt was free he gripped her shoulders and pulled her to him for a passionate kiss. She immediately opened her mouth for him and ‘twas all he could do to keep his tongue moving in a slow dance. She ran her hands through his hair, letting the dark strands slide through her fingers before tracing the muscles of his shoulders and back. Her hands roamed under his shirt, sending waves of heat wherever she touched.

Kissing her was not enough, he wanted to devour her. Oh why would she not move her hands lower? She was torturing him with her hands, with her tongue. He forgot he had meant to kiss her slowly and his kisses became harder, deeper, more urgent. His need to claim her threatened to overtake him in a tidal wave of lust and longing.

He started tugging at his own laces, desperate for her, his heart hammering in anticipation. She pulled away from him again and he near roared in frustration, but ‘twas only so she could claw at his laces too. Now. It had to be now. Nothing else mattered by here and now. Her and him.

When her hands finally touched the bare skin of his cock, he thought the pleasure of it might make him come there and then. He drew in a gasped, ragged breath.

When Arya looked up at his face, she thought he was in pain. She quickly released her grip and whispered, “Did I hurt you?”

He shook his head.

“Nae. ‘Tis only that I need you so badly” he said, his voice a low rasp from deep in his throat.

Once again she curled her fingers around him. His cock was as hard as steel. As she slid her hand slowly up and down his length he groaned helplessly, rocking his hips in time to her caress. His body tightened, strained and began to shake with his need for her.

Arya leaned forward so her hair tickled his belly. When he felt her tongue taste the tip of his cock he had to squeeze his eyes shut and force himself not to grab her shoulders and thrust up into her.

Lifting her head up much too soon she asked breathlessly “Is this a Lady’s kiss?”

“Well…” he gasped, trying to think clearly enough to give her a suitable answer, “I think a real Lady might use her whole mouth.”

Arya nodded seriously and bent her head again. This time she drew all of him into her mouth. His groans only seemed to encourage her and he needed to give her no further instructions as she worked her hand and mouth in a rhythm as old as time. He came in an explosion that he thought might kill him.

When she lifted her head again she looked very pleased with herself as she drew the back of her hand across her mouth.

“That was…that was…unexpected and very nice. Very, very nice.” he said, already thinking about giving her the same pleasure.

“I wanted to prove to you that I can do anything a lord can do.” She said proudly, “including kiss!”

“Aye well, you can give me that lady’s kiss of yours anytime,” he laughed, “…but where did you learn how to do that?” He needed to know, but he was not sure if he was going to like the answer.
“I have not done it before,” she admitted. He breathed a sigh of relief. “But in Braavos I learned to keep my eyes and ears open and men like to talk about it,” she said with a shrug.

He raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“…and women like to laugh about how much men like it.”

’Twas Gendry who laughed as he pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. He kissed the top of her head and chuckled, “I can assure you I will not be talking about it…at least until after we are wed.”

Arya stiffened in his arms. Why did he have to say that? She wanted him; there was no use pretending she did not. She had almost managed to convince herself she wanted his babes too, but she had fled his side in Fellwood Keep. Could she truly give him everything he needed?

“Do you think you could sleep now?” she asked changing the subject.

Gendry had been anticipating returning Arya’s favour with a lord’s kiss and he was puzzled by the sudden change in her. He pulled back and, placing a finger under her chin, raised her head up so he could look at her.

“I would sooner kiss you as you have kissed me than sleep.” he grinned, remembering how much she had enjoyed his lord’s kiss the first time.

“I am tired. I think we should go back.”

She started to stand without waiting for his answer.

He blew out a sigh. He would not question on her this; not tonight when he had so many other problems on his mind. Tomorrow, as they said, was another day. He could only hope it would bring better tidings than today.

He caught her hand before she could turn away. “At least let us walk back together.”

She gave him a smile that did not reach her eyes.

Would he ever understand women? He thought it highly unlikely.

Chapter End Notes

Yet again I owe Brazilian Guy a debt of gratitude for his time and advice, particularly on certain parts where…ahem…men have a more instinctive understanding. All these debts. Hmmm. How can I ever hope to repay them?

I honestly don’t know if I will manage to post next Friday. I want to, but alas really life keeps getting in the way. All I can say is - I’ll see you as soon as I can…
A debt is paid

Chapter Notes

Firstly, sorry this is so late. I had a disaster tonight and lost 2 hours of work and then wasted even more time trying to recover it. Feel like crying still. However, I eventually had to take a deep breath and retype it all. Before that happened, I was going to say…

Hoorah! It’s Friday again.

I’ve had an eventful 2 weeks. I met my first, real life fan (hello Lynn!), I’ve had to increase my hours at work – a sure sign that the UK economy is finally recovering (less time for writing though) and I had my first fight with Brazilian Guy. But don’t worry! We kissed and made up. He must have forgiven me as he let me drive him mad with this chapter. Some come easy, this one didn’t. Even with 5 hours sleep last night it still wasn’t ready on time, but dear friends, you make it all worth while.

To my delight, this story continues to gather more and more readers with every chapter and I would like to thank everyone who has reviewed, commented and read it for making it such a success.

Right, enough chat! On with the show…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She moved her head this way and that, but The Tickler was obscuring her view. She could see his back; sweat soaked and filthy, his arms covered in blood up to the elbows. Cold fingers walked down her spine. Fear. She had not known fear like this since, since…

Before she could think on when, she heard him repeat the same bloody questions again and again,


The same questions as before, only this time ‘twas Gendry and Bad Company he sought.

The desperate, heart rending shrieks of the person sat in the chair before The Tickler rent the air. He raised his knife, the one with the curved hook on the end, the one for flaying skin. Brandishing it aloft, he turned slowly around to face her, only there was no face. Where there should have been a nose and eyes and a cruel mouth, ‘twas only an empty, black space. He nodded to her, acknowledging her presence, before he moved aside, allowing her to see the figure strapped to the chair.

Not just another faceless man, but a small girl. As Arya started in horror at the bloody mess of torn skin, the girl’s face appeared to move as if in a Braavosi heat haze. As her face came into sharp focus, Arya realised ‘twas the little girl from Fellwood Keep.

“Where is the food? How many men? How many, how many, how many?”
Arya opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came and then the small girl’s face changed again and ‘twas her own as a girl from all those years ago.

“Nooo!” Arya lunged forwards, only to find she was also restrained. She kicked and struggled and fought against her bindings.

“Shh Arya, shh, shh…”

The words were soft and warm against her ear, strong hands and not leather straps, held her arms firm against her sides.

“‘Twas only a dream. A bad dream. You are safe. You are here with me.”

Gendry.

Brienne had warned him Arya talked in her sleep. As the night had progressed, she had become more and more restless; moaning a never ending list of names. Most he could not make out, but when he did, they were names from the past, their past; Polliver - the one who had taken Needle, Dunsen - the one who had taken his old Bull Helm, The Tickler – the evil piece of shit who had enjoyed torturing smallfolk on the way to Harrenhal and The Hound. Always The Hound.

Gendry had held her, whispering words he hoped would comfort her, brushing her hair back from her face and telling her ’twas all in the past and all was well now. Sometimes she stilled at the sound of his voice and under his touch, but soon she would start again, growing restless and moaning those damn names.

When she began shaking and lashing out, he had no choice but to hold her tight. By The Gods she was strong, but he wrapped his legs around hers to stop her kicking, pinned her arms against her sides and stifled her cries with his hand. All the while he repeated her name and tried to calm her by whispering “Shh…” against her ear, the way he had heard Maesters do with the afflicted and mothers do with their babes.

“Come back to me Arya…” he had begged and finally she had, stilling in his arms and blinking in the starlight.

Rising on his elbow, he rained gentle kisses on her ear and neck as he turned her slowly onto her back. As he kissed her cheek he tasted salt and pulled back to see another tear spill from the corner of her eye.

“’Tis all right” he murmured, wiping the tear away with his thumb, “‘twas only a dream.”

She looked up at him with haunted, grey eyes that glistened in the moonlight.

“‘Twas not only a dream Gendry. You were there. You saw it all too.”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, shaking his head, “Aye, but we cannot change the past. We must concern ourselves with the living rather than the dead.”

Arya reached up and touched the scar under his eye, tracing her finger along the line of puckered skin. This time he did not flinch or turn away.

“When I was in Braavos, in the House of Black and White, I was told to bury my past and myself. ‘Tis only now I am here with you, I feel as if I am truly myself again.”
Gendry listened intently. When they had first been reunited, she had admitted that she had not thought on him at all, in all those years. That had been like a knife in his heart, but perhaps now he might begin to understand why. He clasped her hand to his cheek and waited for her to go on.

“I became no one; with no past and no future.” Although she smiled up at him, ’twas a smile that could easily break his heart, “Now I am back here, under the stars with you, I am remembering things…things that were buried deep and that I have not thought on since…since we were last together.”

He moved her hand from his cheek to his lips and kissed her open palm.

His lips were warm and soft and she sighed at the overwhelming tenderness of his touch; that he could be so big and strong and determined, yet still so gentle with her.

“I do not think I…I can go through all of this again,” she whispered.

Looking down at her, he smiled, “We shall face this together, as we did before.”

He kissed her palm again, before wrapping her hand around his and lying down beside her, facing her, still holding her hand in his, “If the past vexes you so, then do not think on it. Just feel what is here and now. Only you and me. Feel the earth below us, the furs around us, the stars above us.”

Arya closed her eyes and tried not to think of the past or the future. Gendry was beside her and she wanted that to be enough; the feel of his big hand wrapped around hers, the reassuring strength and roughness of it, his heat against her, his slow, steady breathing and the beating of his heart.

In trying only to feel, she realised no one had ever made her feel like he did. No one had ever touched her like he had. No one had ever told her she was beautiful except him. All those years in Braavos had been spent with no human touch and no human kindness. She realised the Kindly Man had not been kind at all. ’Twas as if a veil was lifting from her eyes. She had been blinded in the House of Black and White and when her sight returned she had thought she was seeing clearly, but ’twas just another illusion, another lie.

She felt Gendry squeeze her hand, heard him take a deep, steadying breath and whisper, “You were all I ever wanted and now I have you here with me.”

She did not know what to say and simply squeezed his hand in return, hoping that might do. How could she tell him what she wanted, when she did not know herself?

Pushing himself up onto his elbow so he could see her better, he said softly “Although all those terrible things happened around us and we were running for our lives, somehow, ’twas also the best time of my life. I had never had a family before or someone to hold at night and then I had you and The Brotherhood.”

Gendry had liked holding her at night? She had never known it. “But I was only a child.”

He chuckled, “But I was older than Ty is now and I knew what I wanted. Oh, I know you were only a girl then and a lady at that, far beyond the reach of the likes of me, but what a girl you were.” He stroked his fingers through her hair and down the side of her face to rest his warm hand against her neck. She had been touched so little in her life. It felt so good to be touched by him now.

“You fought against every convention, every attempt to make you a lady. Do you remember Acorn hall and that nice dress you wore? You only lasted five minutes ‘afore you ruined it.”

Arya snorted, “Hmmph. I do not recall you thinking it so nice at the time. I remember you laughing
until wine came down your nose.”

He chuckled at the memory, “So I did.”

Arya disentangled her hand from his and rolled towards him, lying on her side, resting her head on her elbow as she looked at him,

“…and if I remember correctly, ’twas you who ruined my dress by rolling me around the floor of Lady Smallwood’s smithy.”

Without warning, Gendry grabbed her and rolled her onto her back. Pinning her down with the weight of his hips, he pressed a hard, quick kiss on her lips.

“There.” He said with a satisfied smile that shone in his eyes, “That is what I really wanted to do in Lady Smallwood’s smithy. Instead I had to make do with tickling you.”

Arya looked up at him, remembering the boy he had been and seeing the man he was now. She supposed he had been a fine looking boy then, big and strong with serious, sky-blue eyes and tousled black hair that had all the silly girls mooning over him. Now he was a warrior and a lord, rather than a bastard ‘prentice smith, he had a confidence and a fearlessness about him that had not been there before. But even as a boy, he had been tender with her and he was showing her the same tenderness now. He had lost none of that in the years that had passed, ’twas just that she recognised it now, understood it for what it was. He did love her and he always had.

She closed her eyes and held him tight, determined to do as he said and not think any more, just feel. She felt only the steady beating of his heart against hers until sleep claimed her again.

-o-

When she awoke, Ty was crouched over her holding a cup of water and one hard biscuit. Half rations again, she thought and groaned.

As she expected, there was no sign of Gendry, but she had not expected to see that many of his men had also broken camp.

“Lord Baratheon…?” she mumbled to Ty through a mouthful of biscuit.

The squire shrugged and yawned.

“He left before dawn with a scouting party. Ordered me to let you sleep as long as possible. Woke me up of course to see to Thunder for him,” Ty grumbled and yawned again

“That is a squire’s job.” Arya pointed out dryly.

Ty pulled a face and shrugged again. Arya had not met many squires, but she imagined most were rather more humble and certainly more obliging than Gendry’s.

“I think I shall ride with you today,” she told him. In truth she had no particular wish to ride with Ty, but with Gendry gone already, she was unsure of where else she should go.

Ty’s face lit up and he bounced to his feet, suddenly much more awake, “Great! You can start teaching me how to Water Dance!”
“On the back of a horse?” Arya scoffed, regretting her harsh tone immediately as Ty’s face fell. That forlorn look on his face reminded her of a sad puppy. She sighed and relented. “Yes, I am sure we can start on…on the theory as we ride.”

Once again Ty’s face became a picture of happiness. He even bounced on his toes as he babbled about duelling and becoming the best Water Dancer in Westeros. Arya shook her head. He no longer reminded her of a sad puppy, but rather an overly excited one who would exhaust her long before he exhausted himself. ‘Twould be a long ride today she thought wearily and she was not even out of her furs yet.

Once they were mounted, the morning passed much the same as the one before, only the pace Lem set was faster. Men were still despatched to search every derelict cottage, only this time Bad Company did not stop to hear the inevitable news that ‘twas empty. Instead they pressed on, leaving the searchers to catch up.

“Why are we travelling so fast?” Arya asked Ty, as the order came from the front of their column to pick up the pace again.

“How should I know?” Ty shrugged. “Nobody tells me nothing, unless ‘tis to order me around.”

She refrained from pointing out again ‘twas a squire’s role in life to be ordered around and instead rolled her eyes. ‘Twould be a long day indeed.

-o-

Harlan knew of a sizeable village, almost a town, on the banks of the Wentwater. ‘Twas likely someone there would know where to find these raiders, if the fuckers were not there already.

There was only one bridge across the Wentwater for leagues in either direction. Any Commander, whether outlaw or no, would not overlook the strategic advantage of controlling that bridge. Control who crossed the Wentwater and you controlled the Northern Stormlands. If Lord Baratheon knew it – the raiders knew it too.

With an early start and if they made good time, Gendry hoped to arrive at the river while ‘twas still daylight. The rest of Bad Company should arrive under cover of darkness. He had made the decision to lead a small, fast, scouting party ahead. Lem had been given command of the rest of the men and orders to check every dwelling they came across and to help any smallfolk they found, in whatever way they could.

Everything Gendry had heard about these outlaws had convinced him they were opportunists and cowards, unlikely to attack a troupe of well armed soldiers. He was sure they preyed on the weak, those who had nothing with which to defend themselves. He was confident any attack would not come in broad daylight, but all the same, they maintained a vigilant watch for any sign they were being observed or followed. All day there was nothing to suggest they were and the ride to the Wentwater was mercifully uneventful.

As with the day before, the sight of yet more ruined dwellings was dispiriting. Gendry clung to the hope that Wentwater had faired better then Fellwood Keep. As they approached the village, it appeared his hopes had been in vain. The houses at the edge of the village had also been abandoned, but all hope was not lost. Smoke could be seen rising from chimneys nearer the heart of the village.
His conspicuous stag helm had been left with Ty and, although all his men wore half armour, they were careful to conceal it under their cloaks. Harlan told them there was an inn by the bridge – the Drowned Maid. Providing they saw no sign of the Outlaws beforehand, Gendry intended to go there with his men. They would pretend to be wandering sellswords and learn what they could.

Smoking chimneys could belong to either smallfolk or bandits and Lord Baratheon had no desire to lead his men into a trap and.

“You there!” Gendry yelled at the first person they came across; a frail old man bent over a stick, who was either too slow or too curious to get out of their way.

“Does House Wentwater still hold this village?”

The old man looked him up and down with tired, rheumy eyes and slowly muttered, “That depends. Ain’t no-one else claimed it, if that’s what you mean.”

“Does House Wentwater survive?” Gendry pressed, wishing he had chosen a more cooperative, less aged, villager to question.

“I s’pose some of them that went off with that young fop Renly might. None round ‘ere though.”

It seemed as if House Wentwater had suffered the same fate as House Fell. Gendry’s hopes sank again, but he still had to ascertain if the village was controlled by the outlaws. “Who occupies these houses?” he nodded to the area of the village with the most smoking chimneys.

The old man reeled off a list of family names that meant nothing to Gendry. A glance across to Harlan, who nodded in recognition at the names, gave Gendry some measure of reassurance.

“Where might a weary band of sellswords obtain a cup of ale in this place?” he asked the old man.

“And some whores who aren’t ridded with pox?” Tom O’Sevens added.

Gendry refrained from reprimanding Tom as he would normally have done. Mayhaps Tom’s remark added to the impression that they were undisciplined sellswords and posed no threat to any outlaws lurking in the village.

The old man gave Tom a disdainful look, “You’ll find what you seek in the inn by the bridge, but I canna say whether they have the pox or no. They certainly do good business with the likes of you.”

Gendry leaned forward, resting his arm on the pommel of his saddle and asked “…and who else might be here like us? Mayhaps we know them?”

“Mayhaps.” The old man snorted in disgust, “You outlaws are all the same, only interested in gold, your bellies and your cocks.”

Gendry guffawed, “Old man, you know us too well!” Turning around in his saddle, he shouted to his men, “Let us make haste to this inn, for it sounds as if we shall meet some kindred spirits there.”

The old man spat on the ground before looking at Gendry as if he was a piece of pig shit. The man was a fool. Had he truly faced a sellsword or an outlaw, the old man’s head would have been severed from his neck for such a look. As Gendry was neither, he felt only admiration for the old fool’s courage.

“To the inn men! We must make hay while the sun shines, for I hear there is a new Lord Baratheon in the Stormlands, and he is hell bent on spoiling our fun!”
With a grin, Gendry saluted the old man, before putting his heels to Thunder’s flanks. Lord Baratheon and his band of sellswords rode off towards the inn, leaving the old man puzzling over what he had just heard.

As they rode through the main thoroughfare, people came out of their houses to watch them. Although not as emaciated as the occupants of Fellwood Keep, every one of them looked thin and weary. They were smallfolk who scratched a living from the Kingswood, simple people who cared little who sat upon the Iron Throne. Such people, his people he reminded himself, were easy prey for well armed soldiers with no loyalties except to themselves.

Although there were more men here, both young and old, again he saw none of fighting age. There were no smiles of welcome on the smallfolk’s faces and, on some, Gendry saw outright hostility. He took that as a good sign. There was obviously still some resistance to outlaws and sellswords here. Hopefully they would rally to the new Lord Baratheon when he was able to reveal himself.

The Drowned Maid was certainly prospering in such troubled times. The walls were freshly painted and the kitchen gardens seemed well stocked and tended. A plump, though sullen, youth appeared to help with their horses. As Gendry ordered Notch and Jack-be-Lucky to stay and keep a close eye on them, he realised this stable boy was the first well fed person they had met since arriving in the Stormlands. Aye, business was good here. It remained to be seen why.

The inn was empty, for ‘twas too early for proper carousing. His men were well acquainted with the parts they had to play – sellswords with some coin, but in search of more and the easier earned the better.

Gendry dropped a handful of coins onto the bar and ordered ale for his men. As he poured their ale, the landlord proudly reeled off a menu of the food he could provide for his patrons. ‘Twas mostly pies; pork pies, game pies, pigeon and potato pies… the list went on. And on.

Gendry’s mouth watered and his stomach grumbled. ‘Twould be unfair to indulge themselves while the rest of Bad Company was on half rations he decided. But, as they stood beside him, Harlan and Anguy’s stomachs answered his with growls of their own. The two men glanced sideways at him; embarrassed, but also hungry.

Mayhaps ‘twas more foolish to allow his men to drink ale on empty bellies, for any advantage gained here could as easily be lost if one of his own men let slip more than they aught. Thinking particularly of Tom O’Sevens, Gendry pulled out more coin and, to Harlan and Anguy’s obvious relief, ordered pies all around.

The landlord swept Gendry’s coins off the counter, afore they had even stopped rolling. This barkeep had to be one of the fattest men Gendry had ever seen. He waddled when he walked and his multiple chins shook as he bellowed for his wenches to come attend to the new customers.

As they ran down the stairs, their ample bosoms bouncing with every step, ‘twas obvious the whores were also well fed. Their revealing dresses were gaudy and new. From what Gendry had seen of the village, there was not enough coin, nor enough men to keep these women so well employed. Nae, there had to be another, much more lucrative, source of income for the landlord and his whores.

No sooner had Gendry picked up his cup of ale than he had three of the inn’s working girls fighting over him. The oldest snaked her arm through his, grasping her arms together around his, making sure he could not easily extract himself from her vice like grip. She had claimed her prize and ‘twas clear she intended to have him to herself, hissing at the other, younger girls, warning them off. They were not so easily intimidated and, with lecherous smiles, they also wrapped greedy arms and hands around him.
The smell of cloying perfume and well used cunt threatened to make him gag. He resisted the urge to shove them all away and instead gave one of the younger ones a playful slap on the arse. She squealed in delight, earning herself another hiss of disapproval from her older rival. If he was to find anything out about the outlaws, these women were as good a place as any to start. He hoped their lips were as loose as their drawers.

As he supped his ale slowly, listening to the three women’s attempts to engage his interest while making snide comments to each other, he watched his men play their parts; some with greater enthusiasm than others. Tom O’Sevens was already on his second cup of ale and had the youngest whore giggling as she sat upon his lap. Tom’s hand was already up her skirts. He played his part with such gusto that Gendry suspected the minstrel might happily forget his allegiance to Bad Company and stay here whoring and drinking for ever if he could. Fortunately, the rest of his men seemed not to have forgotten their true purpose in coming here.

Harlan and Anguy had engaged the landlord in conversation, their voices loud and already boisterous as they question him about the prospects of employment for a band of sellswords. While the landlord appeared friendly enough, his answers were guarded and Gendry noticed the man’s eyes darting to the side door with increasing regularity. Gendry was not the only one who noticed.

Beardless Dick sidled up to Gendry, a buxom black haired wench under his arm. Giving the girl several coins and a pinch on her arse, Dick sent her off to buy him more ale. Gendry did the same to his three admirers, sure that most of his coin would be secreted in their skirts or down their bosoms afore ‘twould be used to buy him ale, but it bought the two men some precious minutes alone.

“Our host seems mighty keen to leave us, does he not?” Dick asked, inclining his head towards Gendry’s to avoid being overheard.

Gendry took a sip of his ale and nodded his agreement, “If you were to follow him when he leaves, I suspect he would lead you to men who would be very interested in the news of our arrival.”

“Aye and I presume that while the landlord is away, you will take your leave and meet up with Lem on the outskirts of the town?”

Gendry nodded again. “If you can lead us to them tonight, a surprise attack sounds like a good plan to me. We shall catch them afore they have time to prepare.”

Both men smiled as a mutual agreement and understanding passed between them. They had toiled and fought together for years, all over Westeros and beyond The Wall. No more conversation was needed to cement their plan. The whores had returned, giggling and shrieking and bearing mugs of frothy ale. The opportunity for conversation had passed. However it had been enough and when, an hour or so later, the Landlord slipped out of the side door, Beardless Dick did not even have to signal his own departure to Gendry, for both men knew ‘twas already arranged.

As expected, Tom O’Sevens had to be dragged, protesting loudly, from the inn while the rest of them tried to placate the disgruntled whores with promises of a speedy return with more friends and more coin.

After they had shared their information and plans with Lem and while they waited for Beardless Dick’s return, Gendry sought out Arya. She ran towards him as he approached and ‘twas wonderful to be able to sweep her up in his arms and hold her against him again. But it seemed she had other ideas. No sooner had he pressed her against him than she was pushing him away, declaring “You stink!”

He reluctantly loosened his hold on her, trying not to make his disappointment too obvious. “Aye, no
doubt, but there seems to be a lack of hot water and tubs in the Stormlands this time of year, as I’m sure Milady has noticed.”

“I do not mean that. I am getting to quite like your smell.”

He was pleased hear it, although the admission seemed to embarrass her, for a most attractive blush rose up her neck and cheeks. Still she kept him at arms length.

“You smell of ale and food…you have been to an inn!” Arya sniffed him again and wrinkled her nose in disgust. “An inn with girls.”

They looked at each other; both remembering a similar conversation from years before.

“The Peach!” they said together.

He laughed, but she was not amused, giving him a harder shove. He refused to let her go, sliding his hands down to cup her arse and pulling her hips harder towards him as she braced her arms against his chest, pushing him away. He puckered his lips and tried to kiss her as she yelled, wriggled and turned her face as far away from his as possible. “Get off me!”

He was tempted to do as she requested and let go suddenly, so she fell flat on that wonderful, firm arse of hers. But he decided that would win him no favours. Instead he groaned in mock surrender and, giving her arse a final hard squeeze, reluctantly let her go. She immediately stepped back and glared at him, her hands fisted on her hips. He braced himself for the rant about brothels he was sure was coming.

“I cannot believe you ate delicious food at an inn while I am left here eating dry biscuits!”

“And I cannot believe you are jealous of the food and not the girls,” he teased.

“Pah! You can ring your bell anywhere you want and I would not care!” Her failure to meet his eyes and the flush of her cheeks told him otherwise.

He reached for her again, but she took another step away, causing him to sigh deeply.

“If you wed me, I swear I shall be faithful.”

Arya heard the unspoken question in his vow to her. He wanted the same promise from her. Again, she could not bring herself to say want he wanted to hear, turning away and looking up at the moonlit sky.

She heard him sigh again and move away. When she finally turned around he was sitting on a fallen tree, watching her intently.

When she made no attempt to speak, he began to tell her of their plan. “We found the rats nest, or at least one of them. We are going to strike tonight. If all goes well, I should be back by the morn’.”

“I am coming too!”

He smiled and shook his head, “Nae. ‘Tis task for men who know what they are doing.”

Arya blazed with indignation. He expected her to stay here and wait on his return like a…like a little lady, while he got the satisfaction of sending these outlaws to the hell they deserved. Nae! Never! ‘Twould not do at all.
“Tell me what you want me to do and I will do it better than any of your men!” She said, biting out the words.

“Even if you could, ‘tis a foolish idea.” He spoke to her in slow, measured tones as if she were slow witted. “I would not be able to concentrate on the battle if I were constantly worrying about you. Better you stay here with Ty and the horses.”

“Ty and the horses?!?” she repeated incredulously. That was all he thought she was capable of? Acting as nursemaid to his squire and his precious horseflesh!

He stood up and stretched, drawing himself up to his full height. “Do not worry. I will leave enough men here to ensure there is a constant watch. You should get some sleep and wait for me on the morrow.”

Wait for him?! Wait for him?! She damn well would not. ‘Twas on the tip of her tongue to tell him how many men she had killed and list all the various ways she had done it, but ‘twould be better by far to show him. “Fine!” she declared, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I am please you see ‘tis for the best.” He leant over and kissed the top of her head. “Until the morrow then.”

Gendry stood before her expectantly, as if waiting for a farewell kiss. He would be waiting a long time, for she turned on her heel and walked away.

“Thank you kindly for your concern my Lord,” she said over her shoulder as she left him standing there.

-o-

With Beardless Dick as their guide, they found the outlaw’s cabin easily enough. Three rotting corpses they passed on the way and twenty good horses confirmed they had found their target. The outlaws had only one man posted outside the cabin and the men of Bad Company were far too shrewd to be seen.

Apart from the odd man leaving the cabin to piss in the woods, there was no movement from the outlaws. Gendry intended to wait until the darkest hours, when all should be asleep, and strike then.

Arya found it easy to escape Gendry’s guards. She simply chose the tree nearest the edge of the camp with the widest spread of branches. Then she climbed it, made her way across the branches to the one furthest away and dropped down silently, out of the camp and beyond the guard’s sight.

Following Gendry and his men was easier still. She was quiet as a shadow. Syrio Forel would be proud.

Arya did not bother announcing her arrival. Rather, she made her way stealthily amongst the men of Bad Company. She was sure one or two of them even saw her but, not knowing she was supposed to be looking after horses, they paid her no heed.

Gendry had his captains around him, all crouched in the woods as he gave them final orders. ‘Twas child’s play to stealthily make her way up to them and wait silently for an opportunity to reveal herself.
“I need someone to get up on that roof and place this over the chimney.” Gendry waived a brown bundle before them.

Arya recognised the thing in his hand as one of the useless blankets she had brought with her from King’s Landing. Every man’s hand shot up, but Arya stood up and stepped forwards, “I’ll do it.”

If Gendry was surprised to see her, he hid it well. He fixed her with a piercing stare and, in a voice that made it clear he was not prepared to discuss this, simply said “No.”

Wanting to rage against him for being so pig headed, she barely held her anger in check and spoke to him as if she was explaining something to a simpleton, “I am the best climber and the lightest of the lot of you.” She surveyed the warriors of Bad Company arranged around her, “That roof is thatch and you are all so heavy, ‘twill collapse under your weight. I am also an excellent shot with a bow.”

Gendry was in mood to listen. “No.”

“She’s got a point…” Lem started to say.

“No! She shouldn’t even bloody be here!” Gendry glared at her and hissed, “I will deal with her later. Mudge – here…”

Gendry flung the blanket at Mudge who was the smallest man in the group. But for all he was short, he was well muscled and Arya knew he would weigh half again what as she did. Arya started to protest, but Gendry ignored her, ordering Mudge to, “Piss on this and get it up top to cover that chimney. Silently.”

Arya drew Gendry a venomous look. ‘Twas a waste of time though, as he was still pointedly ignoring her. He continued to ignore her as he went over the plan again with his captains.

“Anguy, you and the rest of the archers are key to our success tonight. Does every man know what is expected of him?”

Anguy nodded grimly.

“Kill them if you can. I want no mistakes and every last one of these fuckers dead.”

“Lem, if they survive our arrows I want your men man ready with their spears. Avoid sword play if you can. I don’t want these rats to have a chance at one of our men.”


“Harlan, are your men ready with the kindling for the fires?”

Arya listened to no more of it. Gendry thought her useless; worse than useless, a burden! Pah! He had no idea of what she could do, of what she had done. Leaving them to their plotting, she determined to show them just how much of an asset she could be to Bad Company.

Acquiring a bow and a quiver full of arrows was easy. All the men were crowded around Gendry and paying her no mind at all. She settled the quiver on her back and slung the bow of her shoulder. The blanket for the chimney was more of a problem and something to soak it with. When she found one, she would prefer not to have to piss on it to dampen it against the flames.

She looked around for another blanket but she could see no more. However, Lem’s yellow cloak, bundled up beneath a heap of shields and weapons, caught her eye. That would do nicely.
She slung it over her shoulder and set off silently in a circuitous route towards the cabin. She did not want to give Gendry the opportunity to stop her now.

It was almost too easy. Bad Company had not yet assumed their positions and there was but one man guarding the cabin. He was sat with his back against the wall near the door and his head down. Arya thought he might even be asleep. ‘Twas hard to believe these outlaws had once been soldiers. They had obviously become over confident and lax. That suited Arya very well.

Quiet as a shadow. Quick as a snake.

It felt good to be doing what she knew, what she was good at, what she was trained for. The anticipation of the kill sang in her veins. Tonight she welcomed it. ‘Twas not death for mere coin tonight. ‘Twas a debt that required to be paid and not a debt due to The Red God. ‘Twas a debt due to The Stormlands.

Arya allowed herself a cold, mirthless smile as she thought on everything she had learned in the House of Black and White. She had travelled so far, only to find herself back where it had all begun, only now she was the hunter, not the hunted. Jaqen H’ghar’s skills had seemed like magic to her then, but now she knew all his secrets, all their secrets.

Gambling debts, bad business deals, stealing another man’s wife; all deeds the Kindly Man had deemed worthy of death. It shamed her now to think she had killed for so little. She had been fed only lies. ‘Twas not the Red God who decided who should die, ‘twas The Guild in their greed for gold.

But tonight, by her hand, death would be repaid with death. How many men, women and children had these raiders killed? How many lives ruined? The debt owed to the smallfolk of the Stormlands and to Lady Fellwood and her people would be repaid in kind tonight.

Arya scaled the stone chimney easily enough. She had climbed innumerable walls higher and more treacherous than a rough hewn chimney. There had been a rain barrel behind the cabin and she had dunked Lem’s cloak in that, thankful for not having to wet it any other way.

Very carefully, she pulled herself up and over the roof, making sure she kept all of her weight on the warm stone of the chimney and her face away from the smoke rising straight up. ‘Twas not a breath of wind, for which she was grateful, a face full of smoke might have set her coughing and alerted the men in the cabin below to her presence.

She was pleased to find that her assessment of the roof had been correct. ‘Twas thatch and would never have supported the weight even of Mudge. But it would burn like wildfire.

From her high vantage point, Arya was able to see a lone, shadowy figure begin to make his way through the trees from the spot where Gendry and his men were gathered. She could not risk attracting the attention of the men inside, but she had to let Gendry know she was in position. She worked a smallish piece of stone loose from the chimney and, taking careful aim, threw it to where she knew he waited. It landed with a soft, dull ‘thwack’ against a tree. Had she not been listening for it, she might not have heard it. Hopefully, if the guard outside the door noticed it all, he thought it simply part of the noise of the forest.

She waved her free arm, hoping Gendry would look up and see the movement against the starlit sky. Someone did, for she heard the call of a capon. Only a fool would think there was a capon around at this time of night. She hoped the guard below her was a fool.

Mudge paused in his progress through the trees. Arya waved again and was pleased to see him turn
and retrace his steps. She imagined Gendry cursing her all the way to the seven hells and back and allowed herself a smile.

A few moments later, she saw a slight movement directly in front of the cabin and the glint of steel in the moonlight. Then came the unmistakable sound of an arrow being let loose, quickly followed by a soft, wet thud as it found its target. Arya’s blood pounded in her ears. And so it began.

Gendry had Anguy despatch arrow after arrow into the guard, ensuring there would be no alarm raised by him.

Other men set noiselessly about their tasks, steel glinting off helms and swords in the moonlight as they set fires around the cabin. On the roof, Arya spread Lem’s damp, yellow cloak over the chimney to smoke them out. There was only one exit – the door at the front, straight into the crossfire provided by Bad Company’s archers.

These men cared nothing for honour or chivalry and, in return, Bad Company would not afford them an honourable death. Gendry would not risk his men in an open battle for scum like them.

As the fires took hold, flames began to lick up the walls and smoke that could not escape through the chimney began to pour out of cracks and gaps in the logs that made up the cabin.

Arya knew she should get off the roof, but the vantage point ‘twas too good to abandon so soon. The clamour of panic could be heard in the cabin. Not realising ‘twas a trap, half a dozen men ran out and fell under the archer’s arrows before the remainder realised they were cornered.

Desperate screams of “Mercy!” and “Surrender!” could be heard from within the cabin.

Gendry stood in the shadows of the forest, staying well back in case the outlaws had bowmen of their own. In reply to their pleas he bellowed “No mercy! For desecrating the Stormlands you will die by my hand or by fire. Take your pick!”

The outlaws came out fighting, pouring out of the door and running like rats in all directions, brandishing swords and screaming undecipherable war cries. Gendry gave the signal and a sheet of arrows rained down upon the outlaws, dropping them like stones. Not one of them reached the tree line where spears lay in wait. Any outlaws still alive would face the hangman’s noose on the morn.

Anguy and his archers continued to pick off the men who still staggered from the burning cabin, already half dead from the smoke. The likelihood of another charge was remote. As he surveyed the scene, Gendry noticed one of the outlaws lying face down with an arrow in his back. How could that be when his archers were arranged in front of the cabin? He looked up to the roof and his blood turned to ice in his veins. Arya still standing on the roof, a bow in her hands and an arrow strung ready to let loose. Thinking nothing for his own safety, he ran into the clearing roaring at her to get down. The flames had almost reached the thatch and, once that caught, the entire roof would be alight in seconds.

As he ran towards the cabin, Gendry offered up a prayer to The Old Gods and The New that she survive this unharmed. He could no longer see the roof of the cabin and the heat from the fire felt as if ‘twas singeing his left side. As he rounded the corner to the back of the cabin, a dirty yellow ball plunged from the roof, rolling as it hit the ground. Arya unfolded herself and stood up, grinning at him.

At that very moment, the thatched roof caught fire with a ‘whoosh’ that seemed to suck the air from
all around them. A column of flame rushed upwards to the stars. Gendry did not halt his progress, grabbing her by the arm and dragging her behind him into the trees. When he judged they were far enough away from the flames, he turned her roughly towards him.

Arya could see him clearly by the light of the flames. His fists were clenched and his chest heaving. With three days of black stubble on his face and rage burning in his eyes he looked so dark and dangerous the very air around him seemed to shimmer with his anger. ‘Twas hard to believe he was the same man who had held her so tenderly the night before.

“If you every put your life in danger like that again I swear I will kill you myself! With my bare hands!” he thundered.

“You worry like an old woman.”

“Someone has to worry for you, seeing as you have no regard for your own safety!” Gendry said between his gritted teeth.

“You have no faith in my skills,” she spat back.

“’Twas no reason for you to remain up there except your vanity. All you needed to do was place the blanket over the chimney and get the hell off that roof. Anguy and his archers had everything in hand. You risked your life in order to show off! Admit it!”

She pressed her lips together and looked off to the side. ‘Twas true, not that she would ever admit it to him and anyway, ‘twas all his fault for not believing she could do anything any man in Bad Company could do.

He gently took her chin in his hand and turned her face back to his, titling her chin up so she had to meet his eyes.

“I know how strong and skilled you are Arya, but I will not be the man who has to tell his children their mother is dead because of her foolish pride.”

Gendry knew this had to be resolved between them now.

“Give me your solemn promise me that you will not risk your life for nothing again.”

She looked as if she would rather die than give him her promise, but he would not compromise on this. He waited for her answer, the silence stretched between them, broken only by the roar and crackle of the flames.

Arya took a deep breath in and blew it out slowly. “I swear it.”

Gendry pulled her into his arms and held her tight to his chest. Above her head, he smiled in satisfaction. He had won two, very different, battles tonight and he was confident victory in both wars was almost within his grasp.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter – Storm’s End.

I had intended there to be another chapter next week, until that earlier word processing
disaster. I’m currently feeling very tired and dispirited, so I’ll need to see. Send me enough love and I might manage it…
Lord Baratheon sat astride his horse watching his men hang the second of the border raiders from an oak branch stretched out over the kingsroad. Lord Baratheon had ordered the raiders, both living and dead, hung along the kingsroad as a warning to any other men who thought to desecrate his Stormlands.

This one was still alive and, although they had gagged him, they could still hear his screams as they hauled him up; legs kicking frantically in the air for a moment, until his neck snapped suddenly under his own weight. Then he hung limply, twirling from the branch like some blasphemous fruit.

Jon had taught Gendry long ago that, if a man expected to command respect, he must not ask another to do what he was not prepared to do himself. So Gendry hung the first of the outlaws himself.

He had thrown the rope over a suitably sturdy branch and dropped the noose over the man’s neck himself. Then he tied the other end of that rope to the pommel of his saddle and kicked his heels to Thunder’s flanks, sending the huge destrier lunging forward and the man high into the air. Lord Baratheon smiled with grim satisfaction as he heard the man’s neck snap behind him. No longer would these fuckers terrorise his people.

Lem could see to the rest. There were near on three score of the raiders, both living and dead. It would take his men the best part of the day to hang them all. Lord Baratheon had other plans.

He put his heels to Thunder’s flanks again and set off towards last night’s camp where Arya waited on him.

Then he saw her where she shouldn’t be. Damn that girl. She had said she would stay in the camp, seemed happy to stay even, yet there she was, standing by the side of the road watching the grisly scene.

Annoyed that she seemed to be deliberately trying to vex him at every turn, he was ready for an exchange of angry words until he rode closer. Then he saw Ty crouched by her side. Her hand rested on Ty’s back as he doubled over, retching into the grass.

“Has Lem forgiven me for using his cloak?” Arya asked, looking up at Gendry with mischievous grey eyes as Gendry pulled Thunder to a halt beside them.

“You know he would forgive you anything lady. He says the smell of wood smoke is better than its usual odour.”

They both laughed, for the state and aroma of Lem’s ancient yellow cloak was a standing joke amongst the men of Bad Company. Then Ty retched, choked and coughed loudly, seemingly all at once, drawing their attention to him.

“Your bold squire wanted to watch.” Arya offered, by way of explanation.

“His first hanging?” Gendry asked, leaning on the pommel of his saddle as they both watched the boy vomit into the grass again.

“His first death I think,” Arya muttered, patting Ty’s back while trying to keep her boots away from
the contents of his stomach.

“‘Tis not!” Ty spluttered, lifting his head and glaring at the two of them, before urgently bending over into the grass again. When Ty lifted his head again, his face was waxy, with a greenish tinge, but it did not prevent him from fixing them both with an angry, defiant stare. “I watched my mum die and she took a lot longer that that!” he yelled, before clutching his stomach and retching again.

Arya and Gendry exchanged concerned glances.

“I had to watch my father die too,” Arya said softly, circling her hands gently on Ty’s back.

As Gendry watched them both, he felt an unexpected and improper flare of jealousy. The suddenness and strength of the feeling shocked him. That needy, insecure part of him, the bastard part of him, wanted to demand that Arya remove her hands immediately. Seven buggering hells. He was jealous of his own pathetic, vomiting squire. He should be ashamed of himself. But he wasn’t. His desire for Arya grew with every passing day and with it his need to possess her, make her his own, bend her to his will. Why did he have to want the woman in Westeros who was least likely to submit to his command?

Ty sniffed, groaned and wiped his mouth and his nose on his sleeve. With another sniff he looked up at Arya and said bitterly, “At least your father died an honourable death. My mother was mad. She’s probably still sitting in a rocking chair, tearing her hair out, only she’s in one of the seven hells now.”

Again Arya and Gendry looked at each other, both wondering the same thing - what kind of life had the boy had?

“Dying surrounded by people who love you is a better death than that,” Gendry grunted, nodding towards the two bodies swinging from the trees. “Now clean yourself up and fetch your horse, for I have other plans for this day.”

“What?” Ty and Arya both said together, Arya with rather better grace than her patient.

“We are going to climb a hill,” Gendry said with a twinkle in his eye and a smile tugging at his lips that made Arya eager to find out what else might be involved in climbing this hill with him.

Ty groaned and collapsed backwards, his gangly arms and legs sprawled wide on the grass. “Just leave me here to die.”

“Up soldier!” Gendry ordered gruffly. When Ty failed to respond, Arya rolled him over with the toe of her boot.

“I thought I was a squire, not a soldier,” Ty mumbled into the grass.

“Up!” Gendry repeated. “If you want to stay a squire you’ll get up now boy, otherwise it’s back to the stables with you.”

As Ty began pushing himself up onto all fours, a man’s scream, swiftly followed by a dull “snap” came from the direction of the kingsroad. Thunder stamped his great, iron shod hooves restlessly.

“Yes, my Lord,” Ty manage to choke out as he staggered to his feet.

Gendry wheeled the mighty destrier around and rode off towards the hangings, yelling “Hurry or I shall leave you behind” over his shoulder as he went.

“Which is exactly what I wanted in the first place,” Ty muttered, earning himself a playful kick in the
The squire gave a high pitched shriek of surprise and indignation as the toe of her boot made contact with his bottom.

Knowing how much it annoyed Ty when Tom O’Sevens recounted the tale of Ty’s girlish screams as they were ambushed on the kingsroad, Arya tried to mimic the sound he made in her highest pitched voice. ‘Twas still not high enough or girlish enough though.

Easily avoiding the wild, flailing kicks Ty was attempting to aim at her own bottom, Arya continued to tease him, “I hear they have a great need of stable boys in Dorne and pretty ones who squeal like girls are exceedingly prized. If you don’t want to be sold off to a boy-loving Dornish lord, then I suggest you obey your lord’s command.”

“You can’t sell me!” Ty yelped, trying to deepen his voice and failing. His efforts only made him sound more ridiculous.

Trying to control her laughter, Arya narrowed her eyes, and smirked, “How much would you care to wager against it? Dornish lords pay most handsomely for the feisty ones. Lord Baratheon might make a tidy profit from you if you do not get a move on.”

Her empty threat had the desired effect. Cursing inventively under his breath, Ty hurriedly brushed down his clothes and started back towards the camp.

As Arya followed, she wondered about Ty’s upbringing. Arya had known Ty was an unacknowledged bastard from Flea Bottom of course, but she had never bothered to ask about his mother or other family. Now Arya knew he had no mother or father, she felt a sort of kindred spirit with the boy. Mayhaps Gendry would know more. She resolved to ask him tonight. Meantime, she would need to chivvy Ty along so they could both find out what Gendry had planned for the day afore ‘twas over.

Gendry, Arya and Ty left the kingsroad accompanied by two dozen armed men to make their way westwards through the forest. Following what was probably a hunting trail, they headed towards the hill Gendry had been contemplating all morning. ‘Twas a whim, an indulgence, he knew when he could have spent the hours in many other ways, but he needed to do this. Some nameless urge was demanding he climb that hill to see what lay before them.

The trail they had been following curved around the base of the hill, so they left it to climb the slope, picking their way through the trees, ducking under low branches as they pushed onwards and up. The trees began to thin out as they rode their horses up the slope. Then quite suddenly the trees ended, giving way to grassland dotted with patches of heathers and wild flowers. Gendry lifted his hand aloft and the column of men and horses stopped on his order. He turned around in the saddle to look over the heads of his men, back the way they had come.

The kingswood lay below them, the different textures and shades of green woven together like a luxurious tapestry. The kingsroad snaked through it all like a thoughtlessly discarded ribbon of brown silk. Here and there streams sparkled silver and blue in the sunlight.

They had come so far he could not see King’s Landing. So much had happened since then, so much he had not expected; the best being that Arya had joined him, the worst that The Stormlands lay in ruins.
Never once had he imagined ‘twould be like this. He had not considered he would have to pretend to his men and the smallfolk that he had situation in hand, when what he truly felt was that he had failed utterly and miserably to protect his people.

He should have been here months ago. Mayhaps that would have made a difference.

Gendry was not a man taken to pondering “what if” and he knew looking back would change nothing. He had secured one victory against one band of raiders with no loss to his own men. Bad Company had proved their mettle again. ‘Twas a start, a good start, but the whores at the inn had been adamant; there were more raiders out there, many more. He would have to smoke them out and destroy them ‘afore he could begin the task of rebuilding The Stormlands.

But today was not for that. Lem had his duties well in hand. A large contingent of his men, captained by Beardless Dick, had been sent to hold the Wendwater crossing and, save for the two dozen he had brought with him to this hill, the rest were heading down the kingsroad to make camp, where he intended to join them later. Tomorrow, or mayhaps the day after, they would reach Bronzegate, but today Gendry needed to look to the future, his future, the future of The Stormlands.

Swinging out of the saddle and giving the order to his men to do the same, he offered his hand up to Arya, “Come, we shall walk from here.”

Frowning, Arya hesitated before taking the hand he offered. Since when had she needed a man’s assistance to dismount from a horse? To do anything?

As if reading her thoughts he murmured “‘Tis an excuse to touch you” as he helped her down. He let his other hand brush over her waist, hip and thigh. Her body prickled with awareness and anticipation of the pleasure more of his touch could bring. Arya heard herself give an involuntary sigh as he let her go.

A warm smile curved Gendry’s lips as he recognised his own needs and desire mirrored in her.

He gave the order for his men to remain there and await their return. Leaving the horses to graze and the men to seek their rest Lady Stark, Lord Baratheon and his squire set off to climb the hill.

Gendry took Arya’s hand in his. “Is this not nice? We are like two lovers out for a stroll.”

Lovers. He said the word so casually; yet hearing it made her heart lurch in her chest and that place between her legs, his place, grow wet and warm with anticipation and longing.

Arya knew she would need to give him her decision soon as the intimacy between them was building with each passing day and more with each passing night. How long could they lie together and take pleasure in each other without that final act? If ‘twas up to her, they would have become lovers in The Red Keep, but his demand for more thwarted her still. He wanted everything from her; a faithful wife, an obedient mother for his babes and worst of all, a dutiful lady for his Stormlands. She knew nothing of any of it and could not, would not, give it. Yet with every day that passed, every shared experience and intimate touch, it became harder to contemplate being without him again.

If he only wanted to bed her, she would be happy. If he suggested they find a secluded spot, out of sight of Ty and the men below, she would not have objected, nae, she would have dragged Gendry down on top of her and demanded he finished what he started all that time ago.

Arya looked across at him, wondering how he would react if she suggested such a thing. No lady would ever do that, but as she fond of pointing out, she was no lady. Damn him. She already knew
what his answer would be. He was too stubborn and bull headed. In that, at least, he had not changed at all. He was determined not to bed her without receiving her promise to wed. No matter how much she wanted it, she knew there was no point in attempting to change his mind now.

She blew out a deep sigh of frustration. In an attempt to take her mind away from her body’s clamouring desires, she asked “What is up here that you are so keen to show us?”

“Mayhaps nothing. Mayhaps everything.”

She frowned. “You are not usually prone to speaking in riddles.”

“Do not be so impatient,” he grinned, “wait and see.”

Muttering under her breath, Arya let him lead her by the hand up the hill.

The climb was steep and the going underfoot loose and slippery. Come summer, this hill would be covered in lush grazing, but for now, the grass was patchy. The earth, still saturated from winter snows and spring rains, turned to mud under their boots.

Gendry set a fast pace and there was not much breath left for talking as they marched upwards. Ty pressed on ahead, slipping frequently, sometimes having to scramble on all fours in his haste to make it to the top first.

If Gendry and Arya had not held each other’s hands, they might have slipped as Ty did, but they held tight, each catching the other when they stumbled.

After almost an hour, when Arya was beginning to believe there was no end to the damn hill, from above them Ty started yelling, “Come quick! I can see the sea!”

“I hardly think the sea is going to disappear if we do not hurry,” Arya muttered. Nevertheless Gendry upped the pace, pulling her behind him as he strove towards the summit, anticipation singing in his veins.

He had hoped that Shipbreaker bay might be visible from atop this hill and more than that. Much more.

As Gendry crested the peak his hope was realised. Sunlight sparkled on the horizon, where sky met water. There, in the far distance, where land met sea, stood the ancient Baratheon stronghold of Storm’s End.

Gendry had long ago accepted and embraced the blood of the ancient Storm Kings running through his veins. Since leaving King’s Landing he had imagined he felt its pull, drawing him inexorably towards the great castle that had been the cradle of his ancestors. Calling him home.

He had heard it said that, from a distance, the drum tower of Storm’s End resembled a mailed fist, clenched and held skyward. The tales were not wrong.

Holding Arya’s hand tight in one of his, he clenched the other and held it up before him; his fist, side by side with his castle. Storm’s End was his.

Not caring what Arya thought or if the sound carried back to his men, he threw his head back and roared. The sound that burst from his lungs was of pure, animal triumph. This was what he had fought for, had been prepared to die for. His sons would not be homeless, landless bastards; they would be proud lords and his daughters fine ladies.
The reason all soldiers fought, the cause for which they were willing to die and he intended to claim his with Arya by his side. Tugging her towards him, he swept her into his arms and bent his head towards hers. When Arya started to object, he silenced her by crushing his mouth over hers, swallowing her breathless words, his tongue hot and strong, surging into her mouth, seeking the touch of hers. For a moment he thought she melted against him, but then he felt her hands on his chest, between them, pushing him away.

He had wanted to be a lord, he had wanted Storm’s End, but he had never wanted anything or anyone as much as he wanted Arya Stark right now. From the moment he had first set eyes upon her, all those years ago, he felt that it had been ordained they would be together. He had to have her. He would have her.

Gendry deepened their kiss, his tongue thrusting, possessing, as lust and a feeling of triumph, the like of which he had never known before, throbbed in his veins. Ignoring her attempts to free herself, he held her tighter.

The sharp prick of her blade against his neck was rather harder to ignore.

Slowly Gendry straightened and forced himself to release her. “Was it really necessary to draw Needle on me?” he asked, speaking slowly and raising his hands in surrender.

Although her face was flushed and her lips full and red from his hard kisses, her eyes were cold as the steel against his neck.

“You showed no sign of stopping and ‘tis not appropriate in front of Ty.”

Gendry looked to his squire, who was studiously ignoring them.

“Mayhaps I let my joy overtake me,” Gendry shrugged, unsure of what had provoked such a violent response from her, “but I am sure Ty has no objections to our passion.” If he was hoping for some manly support from Ty he would have been disappointed, as his squire shuffled even further away.

The blood was pounding so hard in Arya’s ears she could hardly hear what Gendry was saying. She should have wanted that kiss as much as he did, mayhaps more, but ‘twas too much. She had witnessed his reaction as he caught sight of Storm’s End for the first time. ‘Twas his heart’s desire, what he had striven for all these years and as he crushed her hand in his and clutched her to his chest, she knew his plans had her at their very heart and she was scared. Arya Stark, who would swear on the Old Gods and the new that she was scared of nothing and no one, was terrified and she had panicked.

Her hand was shaking as she let Needle drop to her side. What had she done? She was acting as a Faceless Man would. To put a knife to the throat of the man she loved was unforgivable, but still he forgave her. She turned around, away from him and from Storm’s End. In the opposite direction she could see King’s Landing outlined against the blue sky, the dull ochre of the Red Keep sitting like a scab in the midst of it all. Whichever way she turned she felt trapped.

“‘Tis not about Ty is it?” Gendry asked gently.

She managed to shake her head.

He remained silent as a heavy sadness descended upon him like a great weight. He had dreamed of Storm’s End, prayed for it for so long. Gendry Waters the bastard should never have risen to such a position in life. By rights he should still be a smith in King’s Landing, or worse, a nobody in Flea
A man such as him should not have become a knight, gained a title and the great castle that lay before him. But he had. Was his hope to wed Lady Arya Stark a reach too far? Once again he felt the unworthy bastard.

In war, strength, skill and success mattered, blood did not. But this was not war. Would he ever get over the feeling that he was unworthy of it all, and in particular that he was unworthy of her?

Standing close behind her, yet careful not to touch her, Gendry took a deep breath and began to explain, “The day I first met you, the day we left King’s Landing for The Wall, was the first step on my journey to make my own destiny. I had hoped you felt the same. ‘Twas a road we travelled together then and I hoped we would travel together again now.”

“Do you mean to take me to Storm’s End?” she asked quietly.

He took another deep breath and blew it out slowly, “When I left King’s Landing I did not. As you know, I have given my word to Jon that I will re-forge ice. Tobho cannot wait and Jon will not wait.” He ran both of his hands through his hair, unsure of how to explain all he felt to her. “In my dreams, when I dreamt of riding into Storm’s End, I always had you by my side. When you followed me, when you joined me on the kingsroad, when you shared my furs in the kingswood, I began to hope that…” he trailed off. He had hoped for everything from her. Did she now intend to leave him with nothing?

“I do not wish to go to Storm’s End.”

“Then you shall not go. ‘Tis not my way to force you to do anything you did not want to do Arya.”

Still holding Needle, she rubbed the back of her hand over her eyes. Gendry was a good man. Too good for her.

“I want to…” she nearly said ‘go home’, but where was that? Winterfell? It lay in ruins and Bran was the only Stark there. So instead she settled for, “…get off this damn hill.”

Gendry took a step back and let her lead the way.

For a while they walked in silence until Ty, anxious to break the awkward silence asked, “Will you tell me of one of your battles My Lord?”

Arya cast a suspicious glance at both Ty and Gendry. Was this something they had cooked up between them in order for Gendry to impress her? Ty’s face was the picture of enthusiastic innocence and she doubted Gendry was that good an actor, for he merely nodded and appeared to consider with what tale he should regale his squire.

“How we broke the siege of the Iron Islands? That is a good tale.”

Arya rolled her eyes.

Her reaction did not go unnoticed by Gendry, who winked at Ty, “Milady thinks she has heard it all before. During the last war, her father and mine also laid siege to Castle Pyke. What Milady does not know is that we had two advantages they did not - Samwell Tarly and a dragon.”

“Let me guess…dragon fire laid waste to the lot of them, you met with no resistance and the Ironborn welcomed you with open arms.” Arya said sarcastically.

“Nae.” He replied, trying to engage her with a smile. She was in no mood to return it. “No dragon fire was needed. Castle Pyke was untouched and no Ironborn lives lost. We won a great victory.
without one of our men suffering so much as a stubbed toe.”

“Really?” Ty gasped incredulously.

“Really.” Lord Baratheon confirmed proudly. “The Ironborn never even held out a day against us.”

Ty gave a low whistle of respect. Despite herself, Arya was keen to hear how this great, bloodless coup had been achieved. Unfortunately Gendry seemed in no hurry to reveal all.

“So young Ty, you want to be the greatest knight in the whole of Westeros. How do you think the master strategist, Samwell Tarly won us such a swift and bloodless victory?”

Fat Sam was a master strategist? Arya had not known it and this tale grew ever more intriguing.

“I would take my dragons and burn them all!” Ty claimed enthusiastically.

Gendry shook his head, but grinned at his squire. “Ahh, I told you - no dragon fire. And we only had one dragon – Rhaegal the Green, ridden by Aegon.”

“But one was all the first King Aegon needed, when he rode Balerion over the walls of Harrenhal and roasted King Harren and his sons in their tower!” Ty babbled excitedly.

Arya’s throat tightened as she remembered the melted towers of Harrenhal and all that had come to pass there. No such bitter thoughts seemed to taint Gendry’s memory as he laughed and chided Ty, “You have obviously never seen Harrenhal my young squire. Its towers are twisted and ruined. Is that not so Arya?”

She could only nod.

“You are not listening Ty. I have told you, Castle Pyke was untouched.”

“If Aegon and Rhaegal did not burn the castle, I think they burned the Ironborn’s boats and, being nothing without their boats, the cowardly Ironborn promptly surrendered!” Ty declared, obviously pleased with his explanation.

“Hmm. Nae again. The Ironborn are far from cowards and we needed their boats to cross the Trident and take The Twins. Destroying the boats would have defeated our purpose.”

Arya stopped dead in her tracks. So that was how they had done it. The Frey’s had held The Twins for six centuries, successfully repelling every assault, to the extent than no one tried any longer. Even Robb and his army of Northmen had agreed to pay the toll demanded by the Freys. To attempt to take The Twins by force was thought to mean a certain and useless death. Yet Gendry and Jon had done it. Sansa had even confirmed Gendry led the van.

“But The Twins are leagues from the sea. How did you use the Ironborn’s boats against the Freys?”

Gendry shrugged, grinned and waggled his eyebrows at her. “That is another story Milady.”

Arya glared at him furiously which only seemed to amuse him more.

“Shall I tell her Ty? Or shall I wait until she begs to hear tell of my victories, for she has never asked, nor shown any interest before.”

“Finish your tale of Castle Pyke first,” Ty decided. “I want to hear about King Aegon and Rhaegal the Green!”
“Aye,” Gendry said dryly, “everyone always wants to hear about Aegon and his bloody dragon.”

“And…?” Ty urged.

“Aegon flew Rhaegal to the huge stone tank the Freys use to collect their rain water for drinking. There are no freshwater springs on the Iron Islands. Sam knew that the Ironborn could hold out weeks, mayhaps months against us as long as they had fresh water. If they had no water, they would fold.”

“Did Rhaegal boil it all away to steam?” Ty gasped,

Gendry grinned, “Nae, for that would have taken too long and been too dangerous. ‘Tis a huge tank and even dragons can be vulnerable to a sustained attack. Sam wanted the dragon to shit in it.” Laughing at Ty’s shocked expression, Gendry explained, “Dragon shit is the vilest substance know to man. Once the Ironborn realised their water was poisoned, they surrendered, bending the knee to King Jon the same day.”

Ty laughed uproariously until tears streamed down his cheeks.

Arya remained stony faced.

Gendry sighed. There was obviously no lifting her foul mood.

“Did my tale not amuse you Milady?” he asked, knowing the answer afore he asked the question.

“Nae, it did not. Pray finish your story of the Battle of The Twins.”

“As Milady commands. ’Tis a fact no one can take The Twins from one bank of the river. Even with a dragon. Aye, the bridge is wood and we could have burnt it down, but we would still have to cross the Trident and rebuild the damn bridge. To win, we needed to strike from both north and south. But how were we to get half our army across the river to attack from the south bank?”

“The Ironborn’s boats!” Ty cheered.

Gendry nodded his confirmation.

Arya remained unconvinced. “The only way to get boats from the Iron Islands to the Trident would be to sail them down through the Summer Sea, around Dorne, up through the Narrow Sea and past Maidenpool. You did all that?” she scoffed. Surely ‘twas impossible? ‘Twould have taken half a year at least and the Frey’s would have known they were coming for months. She was not as easily taken in as Ty by Gendry’s tall tales.

“Do you doubt me Milady?” Gendry asked solemnly in response to her mocking tone. Arya flushed. In truth, she did doubt him.

“Mayhaps you are not only a knight, a smith, a victorious warrior and a great lord but also a sailor. Mayhaps I overlooked that last of your many achievements.”

“There is another way to get boats to the Trident.” He replied slowly, choosing his words carefully, determined not to respond to her goading.

“If there is, then why had it not been done before?” Arya pointed out angrily. If there was another way to take The Twins, her mother, Robb and his army of Northmen died for naught.

“Ahh, but it has!” Gendry answered triumphantly, “Sam read of it in an ancient book. In the Age of
Heroes, seafarers dragged their longships from the sea, across the land and into the rivers. Sam said if they could do it — so could we.”

Gendry looked inordinately pleased with himself. She supposed he had the right to — ‘twas a great victory against her family’s enemies, but she felt loath to admit she had been wrong.

“Then Sam deserves my gratitude for avenging my mother and my brother.”

‘Twas Gendry’s turn to stop in his tracks.

“Many, many men lost their lives that day Milady. Those men deserve your gratitude too. ‘Twas Sam’s idea, aye, but he did not risk his life on the day.”

Gendry had risked his. She knew it. ‘Twas no place more dangerous than the head of the vanguard. But she could not bring herself to thank him. Why had Robb not thought of the same plan and destroyed The Freys before they destroyed him? Robb might still be alive. Her mother too.

Arya started off again, pushing past him and shouting angrily over her shoulder, “If you do not hurry up, darkness will overtake us.”

In a moment he was at her side, grabbing her by her arm and turning her back to face him.

“I did not kill Robb and that thing I did kill was not your mother. So why are you angry with me?” he demanded through gritted teeth, his eyes flashing with frustration. “Tell me what you want me to do and I will do it!”

“I want my family back!” she yelled at him, shaking his hand from her arm once more. He let his hand drop, having no idea how to respond to such an impossible demand.

“And do not look at me as if you are the answer to all my problems, for you are not!”

With that she ran away from him and down the hill. This time he did not follow her.

-o-

Arya found it easy to avoid him for the rest of the day. Gendry had many demands on his time and she spent the hours between their returning to camp and supper continuing with Ty’s tuition. The boy seemed uncharacteristically eager to please, mayhaps anxious not to vex her more after the day’s earlier events. Arya gratefully lost herself in the rhythms and patterns she carved out in the air as she taught Ty the art of the Braavosi blade.

The boy was a natural. ‘Twas as if he was born to wield a sword. With his tenacious spirit, her tuition in swordplay, if Lem trained him the way he had trained Gendry and with Lord Baratheon’s patronage, ‘twould certainly be within Ty’s reach to become a great knight and more. Another bastard plucked from Flea Bottom to be raised high due to his sheer strength of will. ‘Twas no wonder Gendry held a particular fondness for the boy.

As Arya watched Ty’s brow furrow in concentration and his mouth set in a determined line, she could see the man the boy would become. He would be as handsome and golden as those knights Sansa swooned over when she was young. Arya found herself wondering what had become of the Knight of the Flowers, who had been the prettiest of them all. Another question she would need to ask of Sansa when she returned to King’s Landing.

Thinking of a return to King’s Landing brought back all Arya’s troubling thoughts. Would she be alone again then or would Gendry return with her?
In the fading light, Arya called a halt to Ty’s training. Mercifully, the restriction to half rations no longer applied and they ate their fill of a hearty game stew. Then, as had become her habit, she settled down to listen to Tom O’Sevens songs and wait for Gendry.

None of them had managed much sleep the night afore and it had been a trying day for most of them. Tom had been in the hanging party and he seemed to be in a contemplative mood, for there were no lively tunes or bawdy lyrics tonight. He played only sad, sweet ballads and Arya found herself sinking into sleep, until she heard the first few notes of a familiar tune drifting from Tom’s harp. ‘Twas the one Sansa hummed as she had bathed Arya and cut her hair. Arya had thought she had heard it before then and ‘twas hauntingly familiar now.

My featherbed is deep and soft,
and there I’ll lay you down,
I’ll dress you all in yellow silk
and on your head a crown.
For you shall be my lady love,
and I shall be your lord.
I’ll always keep you warm and safe,
and guard you with my sword.

And how she smiled and how she laughed, the maiden of the tree.
She spun away and said to him,
no featherbed for me.
I’ll wear a gown of golden leaves,
and bind my hair with grass,
But you can be my forest love,
and me your forest lass.

Arya was not prone to mawkish sentiment, yet this song had her wiping tears away from her eyes. She got up from her furs, picking her way through the sitting and softly snoring men to sit beside Tom.

“What is that song you played Tom? I feel as if I have heard you play it afore,” she whispered.

He strummed the first few bars again while he pondered her question. Eventually he answered, “I have not played it for a while, so your memory of it must be from the days of The Brotherhood.”

Arya could hear the smile in his voice. Those days seemed to hold happy memories for him.

“‘Twas a favourite of Lady Smallwood. Mayhaps you heard me play it when we visited Acorn Hall? Aye, you were wearing a dress if I recall rightly.” Tom chuckled and gave her a lopsided, toothless grin. Arya flushed with embarrassment. The bloody acorn dress.

“I think on her often,” Tom sighed wistfully, playing a sad little melody on his harp.

“Lady Smallwood?” Arya asked. She had seemed much too grand a lady for Tom O’Sevens, although Arya seemed to recall the reason The Brotherhood had gone to Acorn Hall in the first place was because Tom knew the lady. Arya would wager the old sot had known her very well indeed.

“Aye,” Tom agreed, “my beautiful Lady Smallwood.”

Arya did not recall her being very beautiful at all, but then Tom was hardly a beauty either.

“The one that got away…” Tom murmured as if to himself.
“The one that got away?” Arya repeated, wondering what in seven hells he meant by that.

“Aye, there is always one and I should have stayed with her. I would trade all the ones afore and since to be settled snugly between her thighs now.”

Tom began to play the song again. As he picked the first notes he chuckled, “His Lordship asks me to play this for him sometimes. Not often. Only when he’s in his cups and The Seven know that ain’t often.”

As Tom began to sing, Arya left him to go in search of Gendry.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, my heartfelt thanks to Brazilian Guy for his help morning, noon and night. I know I’ve said it before, but this story is far better for his having a hand in it.

Ever heard of the website “8tracks”? I hadn’t, but jlovesallfandoms has made the modern equivalent of a “mix tape” inspired by this story. It’s called “You’d be my Lady and I’d be your Lord” and you’ll find it tagged arya/gendry on the site. There is a song for each chapter and, although I have to confess to knowing only 3 of them, it is awesome knowing this story has inspired someone to do such a wonderful thing. Well worth a look and kudos to jlovesallfandoms for doing it.

On a similar note, amz208 has posted a map on tumblr (tagged Lady3jane) of The Stormlands if you want to follow our journey. However, I must say that Fellwood Keep isn’t where I thought it was, so I’m claiming artistic licence there!

Thanks to you both and to everyone else who reads and reviews. Even after all the love I was sent after the last chapter I couldn’t manage another one in a week. I dunno, they seem to be getting harder as we near the end. That doesn’t mean I didn’t appreciate the outpouring of love and encouragement. I so did! It does spur me on, but all the same, I’m making no promises about next week either…
Gendry was not hard to find. He was leaning up against a tree and although all she could see was shadows, she knew his shape, they way he held himself and she knew he watched her approach.

The last few bars of Tom’s tune drifted to them through the trees.

“Tom says you like that song,” she said as she stopped a few feet away from him, uncertain whether he wanted her here or not. He did not move.

“Tom O’Sevens says a lot of things, only some of which are true.” Gendry said softly. “Did he tell you Lady Smallwood was his one true love?”

Arya nodded, surprised. She had thought Tom had shared a rare confidence with her.

Gendry snorted. “He’s told me that too, when he plays that song. Still, it does not stop him tupping every willing woman he meets.”

“Tupping?” Arya wondered aloud.

“Fucking.”

“Oh.” She mumbled, embarrassed. There it was again. The inescapable reason she was here; the thing that they both wanted and it seemed they could not have.

She moved a few steps closer. “I am sorry about today. I should not have done it. I…I do not know what came over me.”

He shrugged dismissively, in a way she found irritating.

“Then you are lying to yourself Arya. You know exactly why you pulled Needle on me.”

He knew her too well, better it seemed that she knew herself. She cursed his astuteness, but was not ready to admit defeat.

“I do want you,” she maintained stubbornly.

“But ‘twould seem not enough.”

She had no answer for that. ‘Twas not him she did not want, ‘twas everything that came with him.

The irony of it was not lost on her. He strived for so long to become a lord in order to prove he was worthy of her, yet his title and lands and all the expectations and responsibilities that came with them were what kept them apart. Had he remained a lowly bastard smith, surely everything would have been easy between them.

Even while she rejected him again with her silence, Gendry wanted her as much as he ever had. She looked so pale and serious in the moonlight and he saw the uncertainty in her. He wanted to pulled her up against him, feel her breasts against his chest, her hips against his, plunder that soft, sweet mouth and tell her he could make everything alright. The problem was, he wanted the only woman in the whole of Westeros who did not need or want guarding with his sword. Just like in Tom’s
damn song. So he did none of the things he wanted to do, instead he growled,

“Leave me alone and go back to your furs Arya.”

She hesitated and then reached out and rested her hand on his chest, directly above his hammering heart. Why did she have to touch him? He had no defence against her touch.

She took another step towards him so their bodies were almost touching. He could feel her heat, smell her scent and he wanted her with everything he had in him.

“I need you to hold me; I want to feel you inside of me. Make me your forest lass like in the song.” The plaintive tone in her voice tested his resolve to its very limit, the sad, sweet longing in her eyes, her hand sliding down his chest, over his sword belt and...

He stopped her hand before she went any further, but even the touch of his hand against hers was enough to send blood rushing to his cock. He regretted having leant against the tree; there was no escape from her. Yet he had to stop this now before he broke every promise he had ever made to himself about her; to wed her, to make her his in every possible way and not to father a bastard.

He lifted her hand off his belt and dropped it back down at her side.

“Go back to your furs Arya.” His voice was thick with tension and lust and denial.

“Please Gendry. Do not make me beg…” he voice was breathless and he imagined he heard her heart racing, pounding in the same rhythm as the hot blood searing through his veins.

He took her shoulders and pushed her gently, but firmly away. “I cannot give you what you want Arya.”

“I want you…” she began to plead.

He cut her off. “You want your family back. I cannot give you that.”

He dropped his hands from her shoulders to her waist and slid them slowly over the curve of her hips to rest against the flat of her stomach.

“…but I can give you another. Until you decide whether what I offer is enough, there will be no peace between us.”

Arya stared down at his hands, wanting him to go further, wanting him to touch her and love her and give her the child he promised, yet at the same time she wanted to turn and run and never look back.

“Go back to your furs Arya.”

When she did not move, he slipped away from her, heading deeper into the forest.

She watched him go until she could not see him at all.

-o-

With a start, Arya opened her eyes. ‘Twas dark and stars twinkled through the trees but they were not the same stars and the same trees she had seen moments before. Was she awake or still asleep?
She closed her eyes again. Had she been dreaming or was it something more?

He had been behind her, covering her, the sweet, heavy ache between her legs proof of their joining. But Gendry had vowed he would not. Had she dreamt it all? Had she imagined the furs of their bed to be the fur of a wolf? Had she mistaken the scratch of Gendry’s whiskers against her neck for those of a wolf? His heat and hardness behind her for Ghost’s? Had she imagined the reek of men as they approached?

A Direwolf’s long howl shattered the silence. Arya understood its message, heard the urgency of the call and received the warning.

“Gendry, Gendry…” she hissed, struggling free of his slumbering hold on her to turn over and shake his shoulder.

“Wake up! We are under attack.”

He bolted up, his hand already reaching for his sword.

“Men are coming. Not our pack.”

Looking swiftly around and seeing nothing he asked, “How? When?”

Arya did not know the answer to either question, she only knew she had received a warning and they must make haste.

“Nymeria”

Gendry’s life had been saved too many times by Jon and Ghost to doubt what Arya said. “Wake the men. Quietly. And no matter what happens…” he cupped her face in his hand, his eyes boring into hers, “…take no unnecessary risks with your life.”

“I will not.” She promised.

“And protect Ty. Every other man can take care of themselves.”

Arya nodded and Gendry was gone, buckling on his sword as he ran.

She crawled to Ty and placed her hand over his mouth before shaking him awake. He tried to scream, as she knew he would. After silencing him with her hand and a fierce stare, she explained the imminent threat in hurried whispers. The two of them then set about waking the rest of the camp. In less time than Arya thought possible, the men of Bad Company were alert, armoured and assuming their positions with an economy of movement that spoke of years of living and fighting together.

Every man, together with Arya and Ty were crouched low against trees and rocks, weapons and shields ready and waiting. As Arya looked around in the darkness at the abandoned bundles of furs, she realised no approaching force would know they had lost the advantage of surprise.

Another howl, closer this time, shattered the stillness. Arya had no doubts about the warning from Nymeria, but she had been surprised and relieved to find Gendry believed her so readily. Mayhaps he would thank her for it when this was all over.

The attack, when it came, was as silent as it was brutal.

From the blackness of the forest, balls of flames came flying through the air. Arya heard Ty’s sharp
intake of breath and her own first thought was – wildfire. She felt panic rise in her chest until she followed the arc of one of the fiery balls and saw ‘twas only a netted bag of burning straw.

“Poor man’s wildfire,” the man on the other side of Ty muttered, the relief obvious in his voice.

“Does the job just as well,” Arya replied as the first of the balls, streaming embers and reeking smoke, landed on a pile of furs and set them instantly alight. Had there been a man lying there, he would have burned as surely as if ‘twas the Alchemist’s own treasure that landed on him.

Wherever the projectiles landed, on raised shields, tree branches or furs, the burning straw was sent flying in all directions and dozens of the balls landed within the camp. Arya watched men race to stamp and cover the fires and a few roll on the ground to smother glowing embers that landed on sleeves or britches. Mercifully, no man seemed to have been caught directly by fire although smoke swirled around them.

Before Arya had time to offer up a swift thanks to her father’s Gods, the cry of “Shields!” went up. Arya pushed Ty to the ground and threw herself on top of him, raising her shield along with every other man as a hail of arrows rained down upon them.

The Gods were merciful as the arrows only ricocheted wildly from the shields around her. Somewhere nearby a man cursed, as an arrow found its target. His Gods were obviously not so kind.

“Next time you see Lord Baratheon, remind him to provide you with a shield!” Arya hissed to Ty as he lay under her. She wondered where Gendry was and prayed he was safe and would triumph this night as he had so many times before.

-o-

Every one of Bad Company knew his duty tonight. Gendry would have trusted every one of them with his life. And Arya’s. He prayed to the old Gods and the new that he would not have to. His golden antlered helm made him both a target and a rallying point. This was the first time he had worn it in battle and he offered up another prayer to his Baratheon ancestors, asking them to bless helm and bring their great house victory.

He sweated inside his boiled leather and helm, feeling the powerful urge to piss, run, attack, throw up or mayhaps all of them at once. ‘Twas always the way until the heat and action of the battle would cause him to think of nothing more than survival; his own and his men and now his Lady’s too. He could not protect her as he wished. He needed to be in the thick of the battle, wherever it may be.

Gendry saw the first of them come through the trees and swirling smoke; grey shapes, half crouched behind shields with swords, hammers and spears glinting where steel caught moonlight.

“Loose!” he thundered and a hail of arrows flew outwards, bolts flashing. Those too late or unlucky with their shields dropped or staggered. The rest of them charged.

Lord Baratheon heard no house name or battle cry he recognised, just incoherent bellowing.

The attack was met head on. The men of Bad Company stood shoulder to shoulder in a shield wall that had been tested and tempered by battles the length and breadth of Westeros. It would not be found wanting now.
Metal screamed and banged, men struggled and cursed but the shield wall held.

To his far left, he could hear a commanding voice shout the order to “Regroup! Regroup!”

So they had a leader and he had the measure of this battle. As Gendry began to turn, he saw a Knight in full silver plate and close helm direct the men around him. Although the Knight’s eyes were mere slits, they met Gendry’s and in that instant the knowledge passed between them that this would only end when one of them fell.

“To the breach!” Lord Baratheon thundered.

Every free man sprinted for the gap and every one of the attackers seemed to follow. These rats were the dregs of soldiers and sellswords and poor ones at that; all mismatched armour and weapons of dubious origin. He had even seen a pitch fork wobble and fall earlier. But this Knight was the power and discipline without whom the rest of the outlaws would have already scattered like roaches in the light.

Gendry ran, bellowing commands above the chaotic noise of battle. Reaching the mêlée, he swung his war hammer above his head and, twisting to avoid a spear, sent it spinning out. The enemies in front of it had no hope of avoiding it in the crush and folded, to vanish under the surging, stumbling mass of men.

With a tremendous roar Gendry swung again, sending men flying and screaming in an explosion of flesh and bone.

“Baratheon!” he bellowed. In answer to his war cry, men surged behind him and into the breach.

When he looked up, the Knight was nowhere to be seen and, faced with such a ferocious defence, the attackers broke from the rear, reeling and running away as Bad Company pressed forward to close the gap and hold the line.

Feeling the pressure lift, those in the front began to shout for swords or spears to replace what had been lost in the attack or for more men to replace the injured and the dead. From the number of the enemy lying before them, ‘twas clear Bad Company had won the first round. But the roaches would regroup and, when the attack came again, ‘twould be more desperate and ferocious than before.

“Be alert! Hold that line! Captains to me!” Gendry shouted, battle anger roaring through his veins as he turned and ran back to find Arya and Lem.

Lem found him first and told him what he most wanted to hear. “Your Lady is safe. Ty too.” Gendry felt the tension writhing within him uncoil, just a little, at the news.

“They broke through my line and lady Arya saw off twice her fair share.”

Furious that she had defied him and risked her life again, Gendry snarled, “I told her to stay out of trouble and watch over Ty.”

“Stay out of trouble?” Lem snorted. “You might as well try telling a Lannister not to shit gold.”

“If she was one of my men I’d have her whipped for failing to follow orders.”

“Aye, but she’s no a man is she? And you wouldn’t whip a woman.” Lem said with a knowing chuckle.

Gendry grunted in reluctant acceptance of Lem’s assessment of the situation. He could not have her
whipped, as much as he would like. Gendry cursed her and the whole damn situation under his breath. Why would she not do as she was damn well told? If they survived this night, he would have time in which to ponder that question and berate her for her disobedience, but they had to survive the night first.

He sat down heavily on the nearest fallen tree and, removing his golden helm, wiped the sweat from his brow. “What will they hit us with next? I do not think they will try the same tricks again.”

“Agreed. Unless they have a dragon, I…”

“Do not fucking jest with me Lem!” Gendry snarled.

Lem chuckled and continued, “…as we know they do not have a dragon, I’d wager my old cloak they’ll attack on horseback.”

Seeing Gendry’s eyebrows shoot up, Lem explained, “They’ve got nothin’ else. We withstood their arrows and their buggering fire. The trees and rough ground will work against horses, but I don’t see how they’ll break through our line otherwise.”

There was no one else’s opinion Gendry trusted more than Lem’s. The old man had seen it all and had the winning of most of it. Looking into his steely blue eyes, Gendry found himself wondered what Lem would do when this was all over, when there were no more battles to fight.

“So…do you agree? Horses?”


“Aye. I’ll pull the line in and we should manage a double row. Our losses were light considering…”

“Every one, is one too many. We shall mourn them properly later. For now, let us do our damnedest to ensure we lose no more.”

“Agreed.” Lem nodded, clasping Gendry’s shoulder and pulling him into a brotherly embrace. “They only have a few hours until ‘tis light. I’d wager my old cloak that…”

“You know no man in his right mind would accept a wager for that piss coloured rag!” Gendry said as he had oft times before.

Lem pretended to be offended, slapping his hand against his chest in mock indignation. “If this old cloak could talk…”

“It would demand to be washed!” Gendry grunted, unable to hold back a smile as he traded banter with his old friend and mentor. “Now back to business. Did you see the Knight who leads them?”

“I saw his back in retreat!”

“‘Tis the fact that he was wise enough to call a retreat bothers me. He is the power here, no doubt about it. He wore no sigil, yet I would swear that he knew me.”

“Who wouldn’t know you with that bloody golden helm on?”

Gendry narrowed his eyes and Lem, sensing he was close to overstepping the mark, continued more warily,

“He could be any fallen Knight or a sellsword in some fancy armour.”
Gendry shook his head, convinced there was more to the man than armour, “Nae, he is much more than that, I am sure of it and I am sure he and I will meet again afore the dawn breaks.”

“And we shall be at your shoulder when you do!” Anguy said as he approached from behind, accompanied by Harlan and Mudge.

They quickly exchanged information on their losses and gains before Lem started outlining his plans to defend the next attack.

“If they are mounted, should we not have men on horseback too?” Harlan suggested.

“But think of the risks of so many horses in a confined space. We may trample more than we save. Let me send my archers up into the trees and we’ll pick them off afore they get far.” Anguy argued.

“If you can see them in this damned darkness,” Gendry growled, before making his decision. “We’ll do both. Half your archers aloft and no more than a dozen men on horse, including myself.”

“Will you wear full armour?” Lem asked.

Gendry weighed up the risks; protection against speed and agility. “Nae, not tonight.”

Anguy, Harlan and Mudge departed quickly to attend to their various duties.

“Why don’t you find Milday while I fetch the horses?” Lem grinned.

“I’ll come and get Thunder…” Gendry began, only to be interrupted by Lem, “Away with you. Do you not even trust me to fetch your damn horse?”

Gendry knew when not to argue with the old man, and this was one of those times. Satisfied all could be done to prepare for the next assault was in hand, he set off to find Arya.

He found Ty first.

The boy was lugging a bucket of water around, offering ladles of it to the thirsty men.

“A great victory my Lord!” he cheered as he saw Gendry approach.

“‘Tis far from over.” Gendry growled, taking a drink from the bucket himself. “I am glad to see you have no arrows sticking out of you. Did Lady Arya protect you as I ordered?”

“Aye…until some of the buggers broke through and then you should have seen her! She had Needle in one hand and her sword in the other and she sliced them and stuck them like this and like that!” With his teeth bared and his face screwed into a mad grimace, Ty make wild jabbing movements with both arms in an attempt to show Gendry Arya’s prowess on the battlefield.

Gendry blew out an angry breath. It seemed Arya had been showing off again. “Tell me where Milady is,” he said through gritted teeth.

Ty whirled and pointed his imaginary sword to a group of men huddled around lit torches, not too far off. Gendry stomped away to find her.

The sound of laughter from the group of men with Arya at their centre sent his already heated blood thundering through his veins.

“Lady Arya!” he called and was pleased when the laughter stopped immediately.
The men who stood holding the lanterns swiftly parted to let him through. He noticed the guilty expressions on their faces and that not one of them seemed prepared to meet his eyes. When he saw what their parting revealed he was not surprised. A man lay on the ground and Arya was crouched down beside him. As she turned to see what had silenced her audience, Gendry had an unobstructed view of a giggling Jack-Be-Lucky, propped up on his elbows, his britches pulled down around his knees.

Arya looked up at Gendry, not an ounce of shame in her defiant stare. ‘Twas all he could do not to drag her up and put her over his knee. Mayhaps a good thrashing would teach her a lesson.

“I just cut an arrow out of Jack’s thigh.” She said proudly, holding aloft a bloody arrow and her equally bloody Needle as proof of her efforts. Gendry belatedly realised Jack-Be-Lucky was roaring drunk, no doubt dozed full of rough alcohol to dull the pain. All the same, his lowered britches revealed everything and Arya was too bloody close to…it did not bear thinking about.

“A word Milady!” Gendry snapped.

He walked off a distance, to where their conversation would not be overheard. He had to wait as she wiped Needle on the grass, took a torch from one of his men and strolled towards him as if she had not a care in the world.

Gendry stood silently, waiting.

Arya was certain she had done nothing wrong; seven buggering hells, she was only attending to the wounded. All the same, in the dark and the flickering torch light it seemed as if his anger shimmered around him.

“You wanted to speak to me?” Arya kept her voice pleasant, but she did not appreciate being lectured about her behaviour and she was sure a lecture was coming.

“I asked you to protect Ty,” Gendry said so coldly that a shiver went up her back.

“And I did.”

“Until you left him.”

“To defend the breach in…”

He cut her off before she could finish, “I have men whose orders were to hold the line. Yours were not.”

“Oh, so you can give me orders now?”

“When they are vital for your safety and for Ty’s - Yes.”

“Ty is fine. I am fine. Thanks to me, Jack-Be-Lucky will be fine. I promised you I would not risk my life unnecessarily and I did not.”

What in seven hells did she consider jumping into the middle of the breach was, if not risking her life? He was back to wanting to throw her over his knee and beat some sense into her. He blew out a deep breath, trying to control the urge to do it there and then. Had they not been expecting another attack, he told himself he would have.

“My Lord Baratheon worries like an old septa,” she said, shrugging dismissively.
“I do not have the time to argue with you,” he growled through gritted teeth, “I do not doubt that you can protect yourself lady, but Ty cannot. My men have a task to complete here this night and they can do it well enough without your…assistance.”

He tried very hard to ignore the rolling of her eyes. By The Gods she tried his patience.

“You brought Ty here, ’tis your duty to protect him. Give me your word on it.”

Yet another bloody vow he wanted from her. Mentally cursing him and his oaths, Arya narrowed her eyes and huffed, “Fine.”

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips, intending to kiss it, but saw Jack-Be-Luck’s blood there and swiftly decided against it. She seemed to find that amusing.

“Stay out of trouble. Keep Ty safe and, Gods be good, we shall win a great victory tonight that we can bore our children with for years to come.”

He never gave up. Even in the midst of a battle he still tried to tempt her with mention of their children. She had to smile, “And you stay out of trouble too…”

“I mean it Arya.”

“I know!” she shouted after him as he stalked away.

-o-

This time there were no surprises, no flaming, falling bags of fire.

One of the archers high up in the branches spotted the approaching army first and alerted all below.

Lord Baratheon growled, spat and swiftly mounted his horse. As he dropped the visor of his golden helm in place, he saw men pelting out of the trees like rats and heard their blood curdling war cries. The mighty destrier stamped his hooves and started to snatch and pull on the reins, as anxious as Gendry to enter the fray. But their time had not come yet.

Gendry cursed as he watched the first wave hit Bad Company’s shield wall. The fuckers had learned their lesson and this time focused their attack on specific points in the line. Unable to help, he could do nothing as the line broke in several places. Forced to hold back, he watched his archers begin to find their targets, the first outlaw through the nearest breach gawped in astonishment and reeled backwards as an arrow hit him square in the chest. A second arrow took him in the throat and he went down, only for a dozen more take his place.

Swearing and yelling, his men fought to close the gap and hold the line against what they knew was coming next. More shouts went up and Gendry’s eyes flicked up from the mêlée to see horsemen, brandishing swords, wearing leather and bits of armour appear through the trees. Where was their fucking leader? Cursing the darkness, he bellowed the command, let loose the reins and Thunder plunged forwards.

As the enemy horsemen charged, those in Bad Company not urgently occupied with closing the breaches raised their spears as one and, too late, the horsemen realised to go over was near impossible.
Squealing in terror, horses slammed into the line, simultaneously impaling themselves on spears and
sending men spinning. Others tried to go over, plunging headfirst into a sea of spikes and crashing
down, taking too many good men with them. Some turned to head towards the breaches while others
simply turned and ran as suddenly as they had come.

Gendry took it all in as he charged, spinning Oathbreaker up, forward and back with a flick of his
wrist. The few who had made it over or through the spears tore towards him. Gendry dropped his
sword hand down low on Thunder’s flank before bringing it up again in a whirling cut. He felt his
blade tug but there was no time to see where it had caught as he brought Oathbreaker sweeping up
again and over Thunder’s head. With a vicious back-cut, Valyrian steel severed a rider’s arm from
his shoulder.

Thunder, who was paying attention when Gendry had no time to, was skidding on his haunches,
scrambling to break before they reached their own line. As suddenly as they had charged, they were
riding back through it; only this time men and horses lay on the ground. Thunder had been set on
pursuing the remaining riders, but Gendry spied their leader and hauled on the reins, forcing his
destrier around towards the Knight.

Silver armour, silver horse and silver sword, the Knight seemed to glow in the moonlight. Oblivious
to Gendry’s approach, he was yelling instructions to the men on foot who were pouring through a
breach in the line. Gendry had time to offer up a prayer that Arya was well away from here, before
he roared “Baratheon!”

He and his horse had been through so many battles together that they moved and thought as one. The
Knight in full armour had the advantage as long as he stayed on his horse, but neither Thunder nor
Gendry had any intention of letting him keep that advantage.

Thunder jumped a fallen tree, lurching Gendry forwards with the impact of their landing. Belatedly,
the Knight turned his much smaller, faster mount, but the mighty destrier was not for stopping and
slammed into the enemy horse, sending it stumbling and crashing heavily to the ground, hooves
flailing wildly. The Knight was thrown clear, but was now hampered by his full set of armour.

Gendry wheeled Thunder around as the Knight scrabbled stiffly to his feet and retrieved his sword.
Holding it up and ready the Knight shouted out his challenge,

“If you are as noble a lord as they say, you will meet me on foot!”

Although his words were was muffled by his helm and his face hidden, Gendry felt again that he
recognised the Knight. The voice, the stance and the way he carried himself were all familiar, but not
so familiar that he could match them to a name.

Honour demanded that he accept the Knight’s challenge. Gendry dismounted smoothly and, drawing
Oathbreaker, issued a challenge of his own, “Show yourself Ser, so that I may know the man I
destroy.”

The Knight laughed, but ‘twas a hollow, mirthless sound.

“You know me already Lord Baratheon and I intend to destroy you and keep the Stormlands for
myself,” he declared, his voice soft and vicious.

Cold, hard anger filled Gendry as he slowly circled his opponent.

The Knight was tall and powerful but Gendry was all that and more. Without armour it might have
been a close match, but Gendry was agile and fast and had the advantage now they were on foot.
He waited for the Knight to make the first move, a lunge that Gendry easily sidestepped. They circled each other again. Gendry might not have had Knightly training since boyhood, but he had fought for his life on battlefields the length and breadth of Westeros and his skills had been earned through survival.

He knew 'twould be wise to play the waiting game and let this heavily armoured Knight tire, as he surely would, but this was not only about the two of them. All around them the battle still raged. Arya was out there somewhere and the longer he delayed here, the more chance there was of her coming to harm. He needed to finish this now.

The Knight seemed to like the sound of his own voice, for he started again, “How does it feel to know that after I kill you here, I will take Storm’s End with your horses and your weapons?”

Gendry did not bother to answer. He let the Knight talk, while he concentrated on finding an opening.

“How does it feel to know that I will hang your lifeless body from my castle’s walls, the way you hung my men on the king’s road? You think the Stormlands are yours, but they are mine!”

Gendry caught sight of the Knight’s wild, mad eyes through the slits of his helm. This was the man who had brought the Stormlands to its knees and he would not shut up.

“How noble of you to face me without armour Lord Baratheon; how noble and how foolish. How does it feel to know I will fuck Lady Arya Stark today after I gut you from sternum to cock?”

Rage could cloud a man’s judgement and make him rash. Anger made some men careless, but not Gendry. It sharpened his senses and focused his mind.

“Arya will kill you if I do not.”

Gendry feigned an attack and felt the wind of the Knight’s sword as it cut through the air where his head had been moments before. The Knight had over committed himself with the lunge. Now.

With two hands, Gendry brought the point of Oathbreaker’s blade down on the Knight’s neck. No armour could withstand such a driving blow from Valyrian steel. Gendry felt the blade struggle at first to pierce the armour, then glide in easily as it found soft flesh beneath.

The Knight’s momentum still carried him forwards. Pulled nearly from his feet, ‘twas all Gendry could do to free the blade and stand panting with the effort as the Knight staggered a few steps further, dropping his sword and clutching at his neck before crashing to the ground.

Battle rage rang in Gendry’s ears and he would take no chances here. In moments, he was straddling the Knight’s chest while the injured man struggled and tore at his bloody neck with clumsy mail gauntlets. Taking his dagger from his belt, Gendry sliced the lowest of the leather straps that held the Knight’s breast and back plates together. Forcing his fist between the plates, Gendry drove his dagger up and into the Knight’s body. Lord Baratheon felt the man stiffen and then sag as the warm, slick gush of blood soaked his blade.

He wrenched off the Knight’s helmet to reveal sweat soaked hair as black as raven’s wings and blue eyes that gave a view into a blacker soul.

“How does it feel to know that after I kill you here, I will take Storm’s End with your horses and your weapons?”

Gendry did not bother to answer. He let the Knight talk, while he concentrated on finding an opening.

“How does it feel to know that I will hang your lifeless body from my castle’s walls, the way you hung my men on the king’s road? You think the Stormlands are yours, but they are mine!”

Gendry caught sight of the Knight’s wild, mad eyes through the slits of his helm. This was the man who had brought the Stormlands to its knees and he would not shut up.

“How noble of you to face me without armour Lord Baratheon; how noble and how foolish. How does it feel to know I will fuck Lady Arya Stark today after I gut you from sternum to cock?”

Rage could cloud a man’s judgement and make him rash. Anger made some men careless, but not Gendry. It sharpened his senses and focused his mind.

“Arya will kill you if I do not.”

Gendry feigned an attack and felt the wind of the Knight’s sword as it cut through the air where his head had been moments before. The Knight had over committed himself with the lunge. Now.

With two hands, Gendry brought the point of Oathbreaker’s blade down on the Knight’s neck. No armour could withstand such a driving blow from Valyrian steel. Gendry felt the blade struggle at first to pierce the armour, then glide in easily as it found soft flesh beneath.

The Knight’s momentum still carried him forwards. Pulled nearly from his feet, ‘twas all Gendry could do to free the blade and stand panting with the effort as the Knight staggered a few steps further, dropping his sword and clutching at his neck before crashing to the ground.

Battle rage rang in Gendry’s ears and he would take no chances here. In moments, he was straddling the Knight’s chest while the injured man struggled and tore at his bloody neck with clumsy mail gauntlets. Taking his dagger from his belt, Gendry sliced the lowest of the leather straps that held the Knight’s breast and back plates together. Forcing his fist between the plates, Gendry drove his dagger up and into the Knight’s body. Lord Baratheon felt the man stiffen and then sag as the warm, slick gush of blood soaked his blade.

He wrenched off the Knight’s helmet to reveal sweat soaked hair as black as raven’s wings and blue eyes that gave a view into a blacker soul.

“Brother…” the dying man gurgled as blood oozed from the side of his mouth.

With shaking hands, Gendry flung the helmet as far away as he could while he struggled to comprehend what he saw. Edric Storm was the Knight he had just killed, the Knight who had led
these outlaws in their rape and pillage of the Stormlands.

“Why?” Gendry whispered as he looked down at his half brother whose blood stained his hands now and would forever.

Edric’s breath came in short wet pants. The end was near and they both knew it. Gendry had to bend over to hold his ear close to his brother’s mouth to hear his final words, “At least…I held the Stormlands before you.”

Gendry opened his mouth, to try to say something, but ‘twas already too late. Edric Storm’s head rolled to the side and his eyes gazed, unseeing into the trees.

There was no time to ponder on why or how. The living still needed his help and Lord Baratheon rose to his feet. Taking his bloody dagger in one hand and Oathbreaker in the other, he ran towards where the battle raged thickest.

“Baratheon!” he roared. “Your leader is dead by my hand!” he bellowed at the enemy as he launched himself into the fray.

Gendry knew the power that belief in victory played in battle. He also knew that a loss of faith in that victory could be enough to turn the tide, even when winning was still within the enemy’s grasp.

‘Twas his enemy’s weakness he sought to exploit now. They fought for no banner, no cause, and no home, only gold. With their leader nowhere to be seen, Gendry prayed they would turn tail and run like the rats they were.

The men of Bad Company took up his war cry. “Baratheon! Baratheon!” they shouted, their leader’s presence strengthening their resolve and galvanising their swords.

The tide had turned and the rout had begun. Gendry had seen this oft times before, when men’s ill discipline and haste to save their own skins resulted in more dying in the rout than had on the battle field. He was in no mind to show mercy to these fuckers now and would have his men pursue them to the ends of the earth if needs be.

As the enemy began to flee into the trees, knowing victory was his, Lord Baratheon allowed himself pause. Taking deep, gulping breaths, he surveyed the scene of devastation around him. Dawn was beginning to break and in the cold, grey light he could see the true cost of the battle; multiple horses dead on their side and men lying everywhere like bundles of discarded clothes. Some of them would be his. The reckoning would be hard, but they had not died in vain. The Stormlands were secure and soon he could begin the task of rebuilding.

Gendry recognised one of his younger archers pulling arrows out of the bodies on the ground. He shouted over and the man seemed embarrassed to be caught retrieving arrows rather than giving pursuit to the enemy.

“I lost my sword and have no arrows left…” the man began to explain.

Gendry silenced him with a wave of his hand. “We won a great victory and I have no doubt you played your part. Gather what you can, but tell me, have you seen my Lady Arya?”

The archer nodded off to the right. “I saw her go in that direction just before the rout began.”

With a great wave of relief washing over him, Gendry set off to find his lady. He shouted for her and for Ty. Another soldier, nursing a bleeding shoulder pointed him on and soon he spied her, kneeling again on the ground. What in seven hells was she up to now?
He heard the groans of injured men and shouted her name again as he approached. She half turned and nodded her acknowledgement before turning back to the man in front of her. Gendry arrived at her shoulder in time to see her hold Needle to a man’s neck.

“I presume you intend to show no mercy to our enemies?” she murmured without looking up.

“You are correct,” he replied, swallowing hard as she draw Needle fast and deep across the man’s throat. The man convulsed and choked once, twice and then lay still. Gendry had seen many, many deaths, but still it shocked him to see Arya deliver it.

“Death is a gift.” She said, before whispering “Valar morghulis.”

Gendry wondered why the sight of her killing a man so coldly and efficiently affected him so.

“What is the meaning of those strange words?”

As she wiped Needle on the dead man’s sleeve she whispered, “All men must die,” so quietly he could hardly hear her.

There was no doubting the truth of that, but Gendry wondered how she could think death a gift, until he saw the man’s legs. One was lying at a strange angle, cut almost in half, filthy with mud, blood and dry leaves. The infection would kill him if the blood loss didn’t. Not that Gendry cared. The man was an outlaw and the punishment for his crimes was death, whether gifted or not.

“Where is Ty?” Gendry asked, anxious to see the boy before setting about his many other tasks.

Arya straightened up to stand beside him, but avoided his eyes. “I do not know.”

Seven buggering hells, he would throttle her happily once he knew Ty was safe.

“Arya, you promised me…”

“I did not leave him until you slayed that silver Knight. When you charged and began shouting “Baratheon” he wanted to join in the action before ‘twas all over.”

“Ty wanted to join the battle?” he repeated sceptically.

She flushed and shrugged, “All right, we both did. ‘Tis hard to sit and watch everyone else claim the glory.”

Gendry snarled his annoyance. “If you cannot keep your promise on this, how can I trust you in any other matter?”

“You can…”

“We must discuss this later!” he snapped. “Now, help me find the boy as I have much to do that I cannot until I know he is safe.”

“He will be fine. He had a sword and my shield.”

“Aye and less than a months training, yet you let him loose on a battlefield! I cannot comprehend your thinking on this Arya.”

Gendry was so angry his voice shook with it. ‘Twas a dangerous thing to rile a man while the fire of battle still roared in his veins. Arya was closer to that beating than she knew. Once he saw that Ty was safe, once this battle was behind them, he determined to put her over his knee and do it.
Saying nothing more, Arya trudged off in the direction she had last seen Ty.

The crows were already beginning their feast on the dead. Gendry shooed them away from one of his own men’s corpses, knowing they would be back as soon as he was out of sight. If there were too many of his men to bury, they would burn them instead. Later he would see a monument was raised to their bravery. He shook his head to clear it of such grim thoughts. He needed to find Ty first.

The day was getting brighter and some of his men were beginning to limp back through the trees,

“What news?” he yelled.

“We have them on the run.” A man replied. “Harlan has taken horses to pursue them if they think to flee along the king’s road. ‘Twas a great victory you won my Lord!”

“We won!” Gendry replied, although his words sounded hollow. Until the cost was known he could not think of it in those terms.

“Have you seen Ty?” Arya shouted over.

They all shook their heads. One of them said, “I was at the rear and I never saw him join us in the pursuit.”

Gendry blew out a deep breath and glared at Arya, who looked studiously away at the trees.

“Help us find him, if you are able.” Gendry ordered.

All of the men made their way over and together they began calling Ty’s name and searching the battle field.

There was no answer from Ty, but some men, both enemies and comrades called out to them. The man Gendry and Arya were nearest to was not from Bad Company.

“Help me” he moaned, stretching out a shaking hand towards them. Arya bent to draw Needle from her boot. Gendry grabbed her arm to stop her.

“I will attend to this,” he growled. Unsheathing Oathbreaker he placed both hands on the pommel and raised it so the tip pointed down to the man’s heart. The outlaw began to wail and beg for his life, but Gendry drove the point down straight, bringing death and not caring whether ‘twas a gift or not.

He was still tugging the blade free when a panicked shout went up “Over here! Ty is over here!”

Gendry’s heart dropped to his boots and he dared not look at Arya for fear of what he might say or do.

Everyone ran to the spot, parting to let Lord Baratheon and Arya through.

Ty lay on the ground, a spear driven straight through his belly. Arya immediately dropped to her knees, wailing. As she lifted his head into her lap he groaned.

“Ty, Ty, I am sorry,” she sobbed, tears already rolling down her cheeks and land on his face. Ty blinked at the sudden wetness and groaned again.

“Call for Lem. Get the spear out. Let us see what we can do.” Gendry barked, feeling a sense of helplessness and dread descend on him that he could not let any of the others see. Just as the
infection would have done for that man whose throat Arya slit, so it would do for Ty, even if they
could remove the spear without him bleeding to death.

“I am sorry!” Arya wailed again, looking up him.

Gendry gritted his teeth and could only nod back at her. Apportioning blame would not bring Ty
back. He should have sent Ty and Arya back as soon as they arrived. ‘Twas mainly his selfish desire
for Arya’s company that had kept them here. He could have left them at Fellwood Keep or at the
Wentwater Inn, out of trouble and guarded by a quarter of his men. He could have done so many
things differently. And so could Arya, but none of it would help Ty now.

As Arya cradled the boy’s head, Gendry turned Ty on his side as gently as he could. Ty screamed
and thrashed as the long shaft of the spear pulled on his wound. A dozen hands, all desperate to
assist, surged forwards to hold him down. The spear had not penetrated his back, but whether that
would make a difference or not, Gendry did not know. He eased the boy back into the position they
had found him.

Lem pushed his way through the gathered crowd and dropped into a crouch beside Ty, his normally
granite hard face already crumpled and white as sheet. Even Lem, the most battle hardened of the lot
of them, could not bear to see the boy like this.

“He yet lives and the spear has not made it all the way though,” Gendry murmured, unsure of
whether Ty would hear or understand what was said. Arya continued to sob and stroke Ty’s hair as
she looked anxiously at Lem, then Gendry and back to Lem.

“He needs a Maester,” Lem said looking directly at Gendry and slowly shaking his head.

“Then we must get him to a Maester!” Arya wailed. “Hurry!”

Lem placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. “The nearest Maester is at Storm’s End Arya.”

“Then we will take him there.” Arya shouted at Lem, giving voice to the desperation, hope and fear
they all felt.

“’Tis three days ride Arya. He will not last that long.”

“No! We must try. He is strong! He is going to be the greatest Knight Westeros has ever seen! He
will show you all!” Arya screamed, looking from Lem, to Gendry and then up at all the grim faces
assembled above her with increasing desperation.

“You are all wrong! We must try!” she wailed.

“Arya…” Gendry began, reaching out to her. She jerked away from him, causing Ty to groan
sharply.

“Get off me! If none of you will help me, I will take him myself. Lightning is the fastest horse you
have ever seen! She will get us there. You will see!”

“Arya!” Gendry said sharply, “You must listen to Lem; no horse can carry you both for three days.
Even if we took every horse we have, we would still not get there in time. ’Tis just not possible.”

“Ahem,” someone cleared their throat.

Gendry looked up furiously; ready to silence whoever had interrupted them with his fists. Jack-Be-
Lucky had limped into the circle, swaying as he leaning on what looked like a broken lance.
“Are you still drunk?” Gendry snarled.

“Nae, Milord…well, mayhaps a bit.”

Gendry opened his mouth to curse him loudly, but Lem interrupted, “Let the man say his piece. The Gods know we have nothing to lose.”

Jack-Be-Lucky nodded his thanks to Lem and swayed some more. Gendry cursed under this breath.

“That Knight’s horse - the silver one, ’twas a Sand Steed, I’d bet my life on it and I’ve heard tell they can run for a day and a night and another day.” Jack-Be-Lucky blurted out.

Lem looked at Gendry. “I’ve heard that too.”

“’Tis true.” Ty mumbled, his voice barely a whisper. They all stopped to look down at him. “King Aegon has a Sand Steed and he told me that himself.”

Gendry drew in a deep breath and blew it out. If the horse could truly run for a day, a night and another day, then they might make it. Might. But the horse would need to carry two and besides, he had seen the Knight’s horse fall. It might be injured or lame. But ’twas the only hope they had.

“Find that horse.” He ordered. “Remove this spear and, if that horse can run, I will take him myself.”

“No. I shall take him!” Arya cried out. Before Gendry could argue, she continued, “I am lighter than every other one of you and that horse must carry us both…and ’tis my fault he is…he is…” her bottom lip trembled. She could not finish her words because of the lump in her throat.

“Let me take him,” Gendry said gently. “If there is any fault, ’tis as much mine as yours.”

Arya shook her head vehemently. “I will go.”

Stubborn as ever. Gendry could see he would not win this argument.

“Where is that damn horse? Bring me milk of the poppy for the boy’s pain, and water. Milady shall need food and water for the journey!”

Men scurried off to see to it all.

-o-

The morning had broken bright and sunny; completely at odds with the death and destruction they faced on the battlefield.

After Ty had been rendered unconscious by milk of the poppy, Lem was able to remove the spear and bind the wound as best he could. Then he wrapped the boy in his old yellow cloak and called for Gendry.

“I’ve done all that I can. He’s in the God’s hands now.”

“And Arya’s,” Gendry whispered as he lifted the boy into his arms.

Lem fussed over Ty as if he was his own, pulling the cloak tighter and brushing some hair away from the boy’s slack mouth. Then he bent down and pressed his lips to Ty’s ear. A kiss? From Lem? Gendry tried not to let his surprise show.

“I was just telling him to take good care of my old cloak.” Lem muttered, his voice thick with
emotion, “I’ll be wanting it back.”

Gendry, turned to Arya who was sitting, grim faced on the silver Sand Steed. She opened her arms and Gendry placed Ty as carefully as he could on her lap. He did not hold out much hope that Ty would survive and he knew Arya would die trying to save him.

“Would I be wasting my breath to tell you to keep out of trouble?” he asked her.

She managed a weak smile. “I promise I shall try.”

“Do not make promises you cannot keep Arya.” He said, instantly regretting it. He did not want the last words he might ever speak to her to be said in anger. Sighing, he placed his hand on her knee, wondering if he would ever again get to stroke his hand up the bare, smooth skin of her thigh. He looked up at her, trying to convey everything he felt in four little words.

“I love you Arya.”

“I know.”

She wheeled the Stand Steed around and, with Ty in her arms, Lady Arya Stark set off for Storm’s End.

Chapter End Notes

Phew! That was a big, fat, exciting chapter I hope. Unfortunately you’re gonna have to wait 2 weeks to find out what happens next as I have a busy week ahead.

As always – thanks to my Brazilian Guy. He is wonderful and every Lady should have one. Did that make you blush BG? ;)

Seriously though, he is a tremendous help and gets nothing in return except a chapterly thank you.

See you all in 2 weeks…
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The road to Storm's End

Arya urged the sand steed up the slope, through the trees and out onto the king’s road. Then she gave the silver horse his head and held on. The way the horse moved under her was different, smoother and faster than anything she had experienced before and as she shifted in the saddle, trying to settle Ty against her as comfortably as she could, she thought about the task ahead. ‘Twas a day and a night and another day to Storm’s End Lem had said. She looked down at the boy in her arms, his face pale, his head lolling against her chest. Storm’s End had to be close enough, this horse had to be fast enough, she had to be strong enough and this Maester skilled enough if Ty’s life was to be saved. She bent as low as she dared over Ty and the horse’s neck and gritted her teeth.

The horse’s pace was a revelation, its rhythm unrelenting and, as the trees flew by and the sun shone, Arya began to believe all would be well. Surely no one could die on a day as fine as this? Especially one as strong as Ty. He was destined for great things, she knew it and this was not his day to die.

Gendry had won a great victory that surely secured the future of the Stormlands. But Arya had to admit she had made a grave mistake, a terrible error of judgement. She still had no idea of how Ty had come to take a spear in his belly. She had not given in to his pleadings to join the battle until the tide had turned. When Gendry had launched himself into the thickest knot of the enemy soldiers bellowing “Baratheon”, who could have stood quietly by and watched? Who would not have followed? Certainly neither Arya, nor Ty could resist the chance to take part in the glorious victory. And ‘twas glorious until…until she had seen Ty lying there impaled on an enemy spear. Nae, Ty would not, could not, die this day. She would not fail him again. She would make Gendry proud. This horse was fast enough, Storm’s End close enough, Ty would survive and they would resume their water dancing lessons once again.

After the tension of the night and the frantic panic after the battle, she found the rhythm of the silver steed’s hooves lulling her into an exhausted trance. Her head rolled and her eyes closed several times as she fought sleep, only to jerk awake, scared that she would drop Ty. But ‘twas not long before the heat of the sun on her back and the drumming of hooves would carry her away again.

She could not have said how long that continued, before some sense, some wolf awareness made her eyes snap open, instantly, warily alert.

Up ahead, in the far distance, heading in the same direction as she, were riders on the king’s road. Friends or foes? She would find out soon, for she was gaining on them with alarming speed.

Gathering the reins in the one hand that also cradled Ty, she checked her sword and Needle; secreted as always in her boot. Her mind was working frantically; would it be better to fight them one handed or head into the trees? Could she rely on the sand steed’s pace to outrun them? What if they heard her approach as they surely would soon and closed ranks against her to block the road?

The same wolf sense that had woken her in the night and snapped her into a heightened state of alarm now, made her turn and look over her shoulder. She almost missed the movement in the trees. Even from this distance, she could tell that it was moving too fast to be on foot. Her eyes flicked back to the men ahead, close enough now for her to see that there were five of them, soldiers rather than smallfolk. Ragged and evil looking, she did not doubt they were deserters from the battle, cowards intent only on saving their own skins. She crouched low over Ty. No matter how, no matter the cost, she had to protect Ty.
She looked back over her shoulder and was relieved to see Ghost rushing from the trees, running directly towards her, tail straight, ears forward. Within moments, Nymeria also burst through the trees. As soon as she saw the Direwolves, Arya’s ferocious grip on the reins loosened and shoulders relaxed from their desperate hunch. She released the deep breath she had not even realised she was holding. With two Direwolves by her side, the riders ahead did not stand a chance.

Ghost, in a long, loping gait that belied his speed, drew alongside her and the sand steed belatedly sensed the presence of the wolves. The horse’s most basic instinct to flee the predator caused the horse to bolt forwards, squealing with terror, ears flattened, eyes rolling.

Trying to pull away from Ghost, the sand steed caught sight of Nymeria approaching fast on the other side. As Arya fought to keep the horse from bolting wildly into the trees, Ty’s head rolled off her chest and he let out a sharp, heart wrenching, cry of pain. Arya cursed loudly and the horse lurched forwards again. The animal was in a blind terror, believing itself hunted by the ancient enemy. Arya knew what it was to be hunted and, stretching her free hand out, she stroked the panicked horse’s neck, whispering words she prayed would soothe both the horse and Ty.

As she feared, the riders ahead had been alerted to their presence by the sand steed’s shrieks. The deserters wheeled their horses around, closing rank and blocking the width of the king’s road. With her terrified horse still plunging blindly on, Arya did not fancy her chances if forced into the trees. The uneven ground and low branches would surely unseat her and if she fell, so would Ty. The only way was forwards.

Nymeria gave a deep snarl that reverberated in Arya’s chest. The two Direwolves, pelts bristling, fangs bared and wild, ferocious bloody death in their eyes, launched themselves forwards towards the waiting horses. Two of the five reared in panic, immediately unseating their riders while the other horses squealed and skittered violently as their riders tried to bring them under control.

The wolves were upon the fallen men before either of them had time to draw steel. Men’s screams merged with the horses in an unholy cacophony of pain and terror. Still Arya’s sand steed plunged onwards. Crushing Ty to her chest she drew her sword. The slim Braavosi blade was not designed for hacking and cutting on horseback and, for the first time, she wished she had a sword like Gendry’s; flat bladed and heavy.

The rider with the most presence of mind and control over his mount unsheathed his sword and kicked his horse towards her, setting himself on a collision course with her.

“Lord Baratheon’s bitch! Get her!”

The other two men, who had managed to stay on their horses, showed their true mettle and turned and fled. Cowards to the end. Thanks to the Direwolves, there was no one else to answer his call, but the man heading straight for Arya seemed not to notice. His dismissive sneer and the arrogant way he held his sword, going for the easiest, most direct blow to her head confirmed what Arya suspected; he took her for a stupid, defenceless girl, thought she was easy prey.

She had never fought on horse back before, but the basic strategy had to be the same – find your opponent’s weakest point and exploit it. Gendry’s sword, Oathbreaker, could slice through a horse’s leg or neck, bringing the beast and its rider crashing down, but not her slim, Braavosi blade. Arya had to focus on the rider. Mercifully the only armour he wore was a filthy breast plate, leaving his head and neck exposed. An eye might do. His throat would be better.

To her horror, the leering face of the rider galloping towards her seemed to swim before her eyes and became Sandor Clegane’s. His burned faced was twisted in an evil imitation of a grin and he was intent on cutting her down as he had Mycah.
A rage filled Arya, consumed her. Rage at this coward bearing down on her now, rage against The Hound and rage at herself and the arrogant foolishness that had landed them here in the first place. Ty would not be another Mycah.

Holding her sword down beside her boot, but with the rapier’s blade pointing up, she held Ty even tighter. She would only have but one chance.

As the man who looked like The Hound, but wasn’t, swung his sword in a sweeping arc at her head, Arya pushed Ty forwards and to the left, the two of them dipping down behind the horse’s straining neck in one seamless movement. Even as she ducked to the left, she swung her right arm up, her blade finding the soft underside of the man’s chin. She felt the wind of his blade in her hair, slicing through the empty air where her head had been a moment before. She had time to see shock and disbelief widen The Hound’s eyes before her blade was tugged from her hand and she was passed. The sand steed galloped on, leaving the man behind to slide from his horse, a look of disbelief still etched on his face. If only it had been The Hound she killed.

Arya risked one more look over her shoulder at carnage behind her. The Direwolves, with pelts already scarlet from deserter’s blood, began to give chase.

The two remaining riders were whipping their horses in a futile attempt to outrun the wolves. The white pelt, red eyes and red jaws of Jon’s Direwolf flashed past as Ghost launched himself at the nearest horse, tearing at the animal’s haunches, dragging the screaming horse and frantic rider down.

Nymeria was close behind. The final rider’s fate was inevitable as Nymeria gained on her prey with every effortless bound. The man screamed frantic, garbled prayers as the Direwolf matched her speed to that of his terrified horse. Nymeria looked across at the rider and bared her fangs in triumph. Then she leapt, twisting in mid air as her jaws clamped around the man’s neck, dragging him from the saddle. The horse staggered under the impact, but without a rider, was free to continue its desperate escape. Nymeria pinned the doomed man to the ground and ripped his throat apart, sending droplets of blood flying up into the air, to glisten like little rubies in the sunlight.

Arya did not want to look back; only forwards. The sounds of fear and death quickly receded into the distance, or perhaps the Direwolves simply silenced the men and horses, for soon Arya heard only the pounding of her horse’s hooves and her own ragged breathing.

The way ahead was clear and, blowing out a deep sigh of relief, she turned her attention back to Ty. Lem’s yellow cloak had fallen open in the scuffle and an almost perfect circle of deep red stained the bandages around Ty’s middle. The relief that Arya had felt moments before evaporated the moment she saw the boy’s blood; a terrible reminder that she may have survived another battle, but the war for Ty’s life was far from won.

The sand steed’s steady rhythm returned as the horse realised the Direwolves were not in pursuit. Arya watched the trees fly past at a speed her own Lightening might be able to match, but could not sustain as this horse could.

After a while, Arya risked another look behind. There was no sign of the Direwolves. Mayhaps they were eating their fill; horseflesh or manflesh, it made no difference to Arya. The wolves deserved their feast, for without their intervention, she and Ty would have been the ones lying dead on the king’s road.

Arya had not considered how she would die, but she thought about it now. Mayhaps before she would have been content to die with a blade in her hand, if every name on her list was dead and her family was revenged, but not now. She could not say exactly when things had changed, but they had. Mayhaps ‘twas when Gendry offered her a family of her own. Now she knew she did not want
to die until she was old and grey and surrounded by her children’s children. And she wanted the same for Ty. Wrapping Lem’s cloak tight around the boy as best she could, Arya headed for the horizon.

The hours and the miles seemed to slip away and still the sand steed did not tire. However, Ty groaned and writhed in discomfort. He needed more milk of the poppy. She could not get off the horse, or more accurately, back on it, without assistance.

Trying to manoeuvre the water skin from her saddle bag, while simultaneously holding Ty and the reigns, was awkward. Pulling the cork out with her teeth, she tried to pour some water into Ty’s mouth, but his lips remained stubbornly closed. She tried to force the spout of the water skin between his lips, but with the motion of the horse and her only having one free hand, more water poured down his chin than into his mouth. She had been given all the milk of the poppy Bad Company could spare, but was still not much and she dare not risk spilling it like that.

Ty’s eyes began to flicker open, but she saw only the whites of his eyes as they rolled up in his head. His moans became even more pained and agitated.

Carefully removing the stopper from the little glass bottle, Arya took a swig of the bitter liquid, careful not to let any milk of the poppy trickle down the back of her throat. Then, raising Ty’s head, she covered his mouth with hers. His eyes opened and, for a moment, his green eyes met her grey. As if in a gasp of surprise, his lips parted, allowing her to pass the drug from her mouth into his. She kept her mouth clamped over his, in a desperate kind of kiss until she felt him swallow and then relax.

Reassured that Ty would not feel any pain for another while, Arya tried to work out how far she had come and how far there was to go. The sun was sinking towards the west and still she could not see the great castle that was her goal.

The terrain had changed. Somewhere forest had given way to rolling hills and what should have been fertile farm land, but as before, farms lay burned and abandoned, their fields unploughed.

Lem had told her Bronzegate was half way. If the tales were true, if this horse could run for a day and a night and another day, she would reach Bronzegate sometime in the night and, if the Gods were good, she would see Storm’s End by morning.

A breeze was blowing from the west and Arya realised she smelled the sea and tasted its salty tang on her lips. She imagined how Storm’s End must look, bathed in gold as the sun sunk behind it into the sea. The great Baratheon castle was Gendry’s now. His home. She wondered if he would come to love it as she loved Winterfell. She supposed he had never had anywhere to call home before and he wanted to share it with her.

A deep sense of melancholy settled over her. He had offered to share everything he had with her. He had even offered her a new family to replace the one she had lost and time and again she had rejected him. But she didn’t want a new family. She wanted the old one back. She wanted her father and her mother and Robb and Rickon. She wanted them all and she could have none of them. A lump of self pity formed in her throat that she fought down. How could she be so foolish as to cry for what she could not have?

Arya looked down at Ty in her arms, so still and white he could be dead, but he was not yet. She should save her energy for the living. Crying for the dead would help no one.

As red stained the sky in the west, Arya offered up a prayer to her father’s Gods; please do not let Ty die because of me. Let him live and I promise I will not fail others as I have failed him. I will protect
the weak and teach them to defend themselves against the strong.

As she made her vow, she realised with a heavy heart that was what Gendry had been doing all along, only she had been too wrapped up in herself to realise it.

She could still make amends. She still had Ty. She would get him to the Maester at Storm’s End and he would live. She had Nymeria and Ghost. She had Jon and Sansa and she could have Gendry. All she had to do was say yes.

So why hadn’t she? Mayhaps because she remembered how it felt when he left her before; when Gendry had kneeled before Beric Dondarrion.

Arya had not understood then. Gendry had said he only wanted a forge and some place to sleep and she had thought him stupid for it; just a stupid bastard boy. Who would want as little as that? Lady Arya Stark, the spoilt little girl, who had known only Winterfell and a loving family had judged the bastard boy and found him wanting.

But she understood now. Gendry had only wanted the same thing she did - his own family, his own pack. She had wanted him to be part of her pack, to smith for Robb at Riverrun, but Gendry had chosen Lem and Anguy and the rest of The Brotherhood over her. That had hurt and the pain of it still smarted.

Despite having locked it all away deep inside of her for so long, she remembered it all; how Beric had put his sword on Gendry’s shoulder and asked him to swear he would defend those who could not defend themselves, that he fight bravely and do anything asked of him, no matter how hard or humble or dangerous and Gendry had sworn it all gladly. Then Beric had welcomed him to The Brotherhood and pronounced him Ser Gendry, Knight of the hollow hill. Arya had wanted to kneel and give her vow to Beric and become a Knight too, but little girls did not become Knights. Gendry was one of them and she was not. He had found his pack and she was alone. Again.

Then bloody Sandor Clegane had appeared and scoffed at them both.

Gendry could not have been much older than Ty was now. Arya brushed some damp strands of hair away from Ty’s forehead, remembering what a beautiful boy Gendry had been. What would Ty do if offered the chance to become a Knight? Arya smiled down at the boy as she realised her question had already been answered. When the bastard stable boy had been offered the opportunity to squire for Lord Baratheon, he had seized it. When Gendry had been offered the chance to be knighted by Beric, he had seized it too.

Arya stroked the side of Ty’s face gently as she thought about what the boy in her arms might achieve and all that Gendry had become; a Knight, a Lord, a great commander and a great man. Gendry had told her he had done it for her. A bastard smith would never be worthy of a Lady, even one who wasn’t really a proper Lady like her. So Gendry had worked and struggled and fought to become a Lord. For her.

And what had she done for him? Broken her promises.

She was a fool. As night fell, in between dreaming and shivering, Arya thought about what she could do to make it up to Gendry. She could give him what she wanted, for ‘twas what she wanted too. She could say ‘yes’ and despite everything she managed to smile.

The night passed with aching slowness in a haze of fear for Ty and her own vivid waking dreams. The sand steed carried her on and on. As Lem had predicted, they passed Bronzegate some time in
the night. Arya had no idea if ‘twas at the start of the night or near the end, for time had begun to take strange shapes by then; sometimes moving with aching slowness, yet sometimes she would look up to discover the hill or tree she seemed to have been riding towards for hours was far behind.

She was heartened to find that Bronzegate was not abandoned. For what seemed like miles before, she smelled the unmistakable reek of people and animals. She saw dark shadows and outlines of buildings; the occasional yellow shadow cast by a candle in a window and imagined the people who lit the candle warm in their beds. She heard voices of men well into their cups singing ribald songs and yelling slurred insults to each other; no doubt leaving some inn or whorehouse, but no one saw her, or if they did, no one cared.

Arya imagined herself to be a wolf, running silent and unseen through the moonlight. The night flowed over her pelt like cold silk, and there was a heavy, sensuous feeling in her belly. Mayhaps ‘twas from gorging on so much fresh meat or mayhaps ‘twas caused by the proximity of her mate and the delicious promise of that aching, animal need finally being satisfied.

Of course, ‘twas not Arya’s legs covering the miles, but the sand steed’s and she had no idea if she was dreaming or if she had warged into Nymeria again and she was too tired to care. She gave herself up to the feeling of being elsewhere, of pure animal joy as every sinew and nerve strained towards her goal.

And so the night ended. As the dawn of the second day began to break, Arya could see that Ty’s face, which had been merely pale the night before, now had a waxy, yellow look and that his hair was stuck to his face by a slick sheen of sweat. Worse, the warm wetness that had soaked her in the night, that she had taken to be Ty’s incontinent bladder, was in fact his blood. In the dawn light she could see that the dark shadows staining Lem’s cloak and her own tunic she thought was mere piss, were really the deep red and rusty brown of Ty’s blood. The sight shocked and horrified her. How could she have thought ‘twas anything other than blood? Gingerly she pulled at the fold of Lem’s cloak. As she peeled the material away, thick clots of congealed blood slowly tore apart to reveal a bloody mess and a smell that made her gag.

She wanted to scream with impotent rage, but what good would that do Ty and who would hear? All she could do was keep on…and on.

At least Storm’s End was in sight. ‘Twas still only a black stone on the horizon, sitting squat between the green of the land and the blue of the sky, but that was where her hope lay. She reached for the water skin, but ‘twas nearly flat. She had wasted too much in the night trying to get Ty to drink. What was left was needed by the boy.

Sucking her dry, salty lips to try and moisten her mouth, Arya pulled the cork and carefully poured all was left into Ty’s mouth. He was too far gone now to react at all as she forced the spout between his lips. His mouth hung slackly open and most of the water poured away before she could close it. Grinding her teeth in frustration, she flung the empty skin away. There would be no more water until Storm’s End.

Time seemed to stretch and then rush together. She did not know how it happened, but the sun was suddenly high in the sky, yet Storm’s End seemed hardly any nearer. Although ‘twas only spring, there was enough heat in the sun, to make her long for a cool drink of water. Mayhaps ‘twas the breeze from the sea, but she found herself shivering although she would have sworn the day was too warm for that. The shivering made it harder to hold Ty straight and the harder she tried, the more she seemed to shake.

Again time seemed to crawl. Every hoof strike on the ground rattled her bones and still the great castle seemed far beyond her reach. Minutes stretched but then disappeared into hours. When she
next looked up, her eyes would hardly focus. Every bit of strength she had left was needed to stay upright on the horse and support Ty.

When had Nymeria and Ghost reappeared? She had not noticed and could not say. The sand steed seemed to have no energy to flee from the predators and merely eyed them warily as it struggled on.

Soon, or mayhaps ‘twas not soon at all, Nymeria fell back, growling and nipping at the sand steed’s heels, driving the horse harder towards Storm’s End. But eventually even that had no effect. The sand steed’s tireless gallop had deteriorated to an exhausted, shuddering plod. Its neck drooped and foam flecked its chest and shoulders. The horse would not last much longer and neither would Ty.

Arya’s head rolled and no matter how hard she tried, she could not push her shoulders back to sit upright on the horse. Through the haze of her exhaustion, she suspected the only reason she was still able to hold Ty was because her muscles had frozen into that position. Mayhaps she could not move, even if she tried. But she had no will to try.

What would Gendry think of her? She had promised him she would get Ty to Storm’s End and here she was – about to break another promise. She might have shed a tear then, but any tears she had must have evaporated in the wind and sun hours ago. How foolish she had been to think she might die happy and surrounded by grandchildren. She would never see Gendry again and she would fall here. Her last act would be to drop Ty and break her final promise to Gendry. ‘Twas all her fault. She did not deserve either of them, for she had let them all down. The horse lurched again. Even the damn horse was going to die because of her.

When she heard men’s angry, demanding voices, she knew this was the end. She had no sword and no will left to fight. But she still had her Needle. Mayhaps she would be better to give Ty a quick death than leave him out here to die on the king’s road and she would not give those cowards the satisfaction of killer her slowly. Dying by her own hand was not something she had ever imagined either. She almost laughed. How vain she had been to think she could have saved Ty when it had all been her fault anyway.

She was sorry she never got to tell Gendry she loved him. Of all the many things she should regret about her life, all the deaths, all the mistakes, ‘twas funny how she thought only of him at the end. She tried to laugh, but no sound came out and she was not even sure if she had opened her mouth.

She swayed and nearly fell as she reached down to pull Needle from her boot as the men’s voices became louder and more urgent. ‘Twas as if she was looking through a keyhole – she could see her hand and her boot in a small circle and everything else around it was black. As if she was observing from a distance, she wondered calmly if that was what happened before you died. Did the circle become smaller and the darkness bigger until there was only darkness left? She hoped her father’s Gods would claim her and not The Stranger. That was the name of the cursed Hound’s horse wasn’t it? Ahhh, another regret. Her list…she had not fulfilled her list. Another promise broken.

A sudden, sharp, searing pain shot through her hand and up her arm. She instinctively jerked it back. The circle of her vision widened enough for her to see Ghost staring up at her, his eyes as red as the blood that matted his pelt. Through a fog she realised the damn wolf had bitten her. Jon’s wolf had bitten her! The pain and the shock of it sent blood pumping through her veins.

Seven buggering hells. She held her hand up in front of her face, not believing that was her own blood running down her wrist. Seeing it drip slowly, drop by horrific drop onto Ty’s innocent face galvanised her more. Shaking her head fiercely, she looked up and around. The great, grey walls of Storm’s End loomed above her. How had she got here? The angry voices were coming from men on a battlement far above, demanding to know her name and her business.
She tried to reply, but her parched lips would not move and the only sound that came from her throat was a harsh, dry rasp. Someone cursed her from above and told her to go back from where she came. She had not come all this way to turn around now.

Seven buggering hells. This would not do!

Arya licked the blood from her wrist. ‘Twas enough to moisten her mouth. She began shakily, but her voice grew stronger as she shouted up,

“I am…I am…Arya Stark of Winterfell, betrothed to Lord Baratheon of Storm’s End, sister to King Jon and I need a Maester!”

Looking up made her head swim. The men on the battlements seemed to be conferring, unsure of what to do. She had no time for this, no time at all,

“Lord Baratheon has won a great victory and marches here with his army. Do you not remember your House words? His will be the fury if you do not open your fucking gates to me!”

They consulted some more, but finally seemed to have reached an agreement. Arya thought she heard the rumble of a great chain being wound, but mayhaps ‘twas the sound of the end of the world, for the circle closed and the darkness descended.

She remembered no more.

Chapter End Notes

So a shorter chapter than usual, but I have been extraordinarily busy. Next chapter we shall definitely have the…uh…climax of the story when Gendry finally arrives at Storm’s End.

Thanks for reading, thanks even more if you review or comment and thanks to Brazilian Guy who is always there just when I need him most.

See you all next Friday…
Dear readers, this was posted rather later than usual as Brazilian Guy and I were still having a last minute discussion about a few things. Believe me; his advice is worth waiting for. Enjoy...

Three nights and four days of torture. That is what he felt he had to endure without her.

There seemed to be no end to the demands on his time. He had to see to the wounded, bury the dead, hang the outlaws and worst of all, remain civil to the turncoat Lord Ralph Buckler.

Gendry had wanted to ride straight through Bronzegate with all possible haste, but Lem and his other captains had counselled against it; they argued that Lord Baratheon must pay their respects to House Buckler in order to avoid more bad blood. Gendry knew them to be right. So he had to sit in Lord Buckler’s hall, take his salt and listen to the traitor proclaim his loyalty to House Baratheon time and again with his lying tongue.

The old fucker had declared for Renly, and then turned to Stannis, before betraying him in turn to the Lannisters. Gendry had no doubt that the old shit would do the same to him if given half a chance. But if the Stormlands were to heal, they could afford no more battles, so Gendry smiled and nodded and praised Lord Buckler’s kin and home, while all he could think of was Arya and Storm’s End.

His heart urged him to take six of the best horses and make all possible haste for Storm’s End. Thankfully, he still has his head and that told him to wait, for what use could he be to either Arya or Ty now? They needed a Maester and Bad Company needed him.

Gendry had known from the beginning, when they set out from Castle Black, that this could never be, had never been, only about him and what he wanted. He had promised his men a home and Storm’s End was their dream as much as ‘twas his. He could not fulfil his dream of riding into Storm’s End with Arya by his side, but he would still have his brothers-in-arms beside him.

Making every excuse not to remain in Lord Buckler’s halls for more than one night, they finally headed for the east and Arya.

Gendry took comfort from the fact that Ghost and Nymeria were with her and if Ghost was by her side, it meant Jon was too. The Direwolves presence had been unmistakable from the mauled corpses of men and horses they found on the king’s road. Gendry offered up a prayer of thanks and for her continued protection to the Old Gods. He had never prayed so much in his life. He had never had something, or someone worth praying for before.

He had set out from Castle Black all those years ago, dreaming of Storm’s End and of Arya. Now, after countless battles and deaths, after winning a war and becoming a Lord, Storm’s End was finally within his grasp. Arya was another matter entirely.

Once they had set up camp for the final night, Lem ordered every man to clean and polish their swords and armour and to brush their horses until their coats shone.
“After all this time, we ain’t arriving like some rag-tag bunch of sellswords.” He had yelled, “We are the victors of the war of the Seven Kingdoms! We are the liberators of the Storm Lands! We are Bad Company and we are coming home!”

The men had given Lem’s uncharacteristic speech a resounding cheer and set about cleaning, polishing and brushing with great enthusiasm. Gendry half heartedly sat down to polish his great, golden helm, dreading the cold, lonely night ahead. He felt as if the best part of his purpose in claiming Storm’s End had left with Arya.

On the first night without her, he had been so exhausted he had fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep and not woken until the morn. But last night, under Lord Buckler’s roof, he had tossed and turned, before finally snatching an hour of sleep when the sky began to lighten. He had no reason to believe this night would be any different.

Alone, he’d had plenty of time to think. During that long, lonely night he had finally come to accept the truth that should have been obvious to him all along, but that, like a love sick fool, he had chosen to ignore. Arya had not wanted to go to Storm’s End, she had no interest in the Stormlands and the cold, hard truth of it was she did not want to wed him. If he loved her as much as he claimed he did, he should let her go. Mayhaps she would find happiness elsewhere; in Braavos or Winterfell, for ‘twas plain she would not find it in Storm’s End. And his place was in Storm’s End.

He was wallowing in his misery, his golden helm and the polishing cloth both forgotten and hanging limp in his hands, when Lem approached,

“Every mother’s son is excited about the morrow, except you. What’s wrong with you? This is your dream come true, yet you sit here, as miserable as sin.”

Gendry stared at the helm in his hands, turning it over, watching it gleam in the evening light. There was no point in trying to hide this from Lem, the old man knew what he was thinking, oft times afore he did himself.

“If I love her Lem, I should let her go.”

Gendry looked up just in time to see Lem’s fist connect with his jaw. He was sent sprawling backwards over the log he had been sitting on, laid out flat on his back, staring up at the sky, helm rolling on the ground beside him.

If any other man had hit him, they would have had their head in their hands by now. But this was Lem, who had trained him with the patience of an old septa and who hadn’t so much as cuffed him around the ear in years.

“What in seven hells was that for?!” Gendry demanded, prodding at his throbbing jaw with cautious fingers. The old man still packed a punch like a mule’s kick.

Lem’s face was purple, his fists clenched and shaking by his sides.

“I’m trying to knock some sense into that stupid, bull head of yours!” Lem ground out through clenched teeth.

“I think you loosened one of my teeth you old fool,” Gendry muttered, before spitting blood out onto the grass.

“By the Gods!” Lem cried, raising his eyes skywards as if beseeching the Gods for their help, “If that wolf girl wanted to leave you, do you not think she’d have done it afore now?”
Gendry was still gazing up at the sky, wondering whether Arya taking Ty to Storm’s End qualified as leaving him, when Lem demanded,

“Did I train you to be a coward?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

Gendry tried to pull himself up and failed. The damn tree trunk kept rolling away from under his legs.

“Help me up old man.” Gendry held out his hand but Lem ignored it and instead rammed his balled fists into his hips.

“Answer me!”

Gendry grunted in frustration as he rolled onto all fours. With his head bowed and hair hanging in his eyes, he spat more blood into the grass. He looked up at Lem, still raging above him. The old man was clearly not going to let this go.

“Of course you did not raise a coward,” he growled.

“Then why are you fleeing the field afore the battle is won?”

“Did you take a blow to the head in the battle that you neglected to mention before?” Gendry asked sarcastically, whilst standing up and brushing leaves and dirt from his britches.

Ignoring the question, Lem shook his fist in the air, “Fight for her and by the Gods, fight dirty if you have to! Fight hard, fight to win!”

“Fight dirty?”

“If she won’t listen to you, chain her to your Goddamn bed, show her so much pleasure she’ll never so much as look at another man. Keep her so busy birthing and nursing your babes that she has no time to think of Braavos and bloody water dancing.”

“But…”

“Shut up and listen to me boy!” Lem roared, “Any fool can see the two of you were made for each other and that she needs you as much as you need her. Can you not see that becoming a Faceless Man was just another mask for her to hide behind, same as pretending to be a boy named ‘Arry?”

“Well…I had not thought on it like that,” Gendry muttered rubbing his aching jaw.

“Because you are a fool! And if you let her escape you again, you don’t deserve her. Mayhaps she’d be better off with Aegon. At least he wouldn’t give her up without a fight!”

Aegon! Bloody Aegon! Never! He’d tie her up and carry her off before he’d see her end up with that preening cunt.

“Now, you listen to me old man…”

“Ach, do what you want,” Lem snapped, waving his hands in the air and cutting Gendry off mid sentence. “Just don’t expect me to sit and listen to you moan about losing her. Save that shit for Tom O’Sevens. Mayhaps he’ll write a song about it for you!”
With a snarl and a final pitying look, Lem turned on his heel and stomped off.

Gendry shook his head as he watched Lem stride away. ‘Twas so ridiculous to be lectured on affairs of the heart by an old bachelor like Lem that a smile tugged at Gendry’s lips. But he had to admit, the old fool had never steered him wrong afore and Gendry suspected he would be the fool if he didn’t take Lem’s advice now.

-o-

All throughout the fourth day since the battle, they could see Storm’s End drawing closer. Gendry imagined ‘twas sitting waiting patiently for him as it had done his whole life. Gendry had lifted his hand towards his castle and closed his fist around the far off image, claiming it as his own. Riding beside him, Lem’s deep chuckling made him drop his hand self consciously back to his side. It made no matter - Storm’s End was his.

As they rode the final stretch of the king’s road, Gendry thought on the long journey behind him and the people who had helped him along the way.

First had been Jon Arryn who paid for his apprenticeship. Then Lord Eddard Stark who had visited him in Tobho’s shop and offered him a place if he ever wanted to swing a sword. Gendry smiled at that. Lord Stark might have smiled too if he had know Robert’s bastard would one day be as a brother to the bastard of Winterfell.

He thought on Yoren, who had first shown him what it meant to swear an oath, to live by it and to die by that same oath and he thought on all the black brothers he had met since. Then came the Brotherhood Without Banners. He could not stop himself from grinning when he remembered the thrill and the deep, hitherto unknown, sense of belonging he had experienced when Beric knighted him.

He touched the scar under his eye absent mindedly and thought of Brienne. ‘Twas she who had given him the courage to take the first steps towards accepting who and what he was. He would never forget meeting his Baratheon kin for the first time at Castle Black; Stannis, Shireen, Edric and of course Davos, who was as much a Baratheon as the rest of them. Finally he had kin, after a lifetime of believing he would never, only to lose Stannis and now he had taken Edric’s life with his own hand.

Finally he thought on Jon, his fellow bastard and the one who had given him more than all the rest.

The nearer they got to Storm’s End, the tighter the knot in Gendry’s stomach grew. While the chatter and singing of the men around him grew louder and more excited with every passing league, he grew quieter and more apprehensive. Although determined to take Lem’s advice and fight for Arya, he had no idea what would he find and she might well have other ideas. Who was left at Storm’s End? Was Arya even alive? And Ty?

By the late afternoon he had the salt of the sea air on his lips and equal measures of excitement and dread running through his veins like wildfire. They had mayhaps only a league or two left to travel when they first saw, then heard, the great drawbridge of Storm’s End being lowered. The low rumble of the chains could be heard, even from that distance. Two men, flying the golden banner with the prancing stag of House Baratheon, rode out from the gate.

“I’d wager my old yellow cloak one of them’ll be that old pirate Davos coming to greet us personally,” Lem said, standing up in his stirrups and craning his neck to get a better look.
“You don’t have your damn cloak to wager,” Gendry pointed out to an unconcerned Lem.

“Ah, but I will have my yellow cloak back soon My Lord Baratheon” Lem chuckled. Gendry wished he shared Lem’s confidence. What if she was not here? What if she and Ty had not made it? What if, what if, what if…? ‘Twas all he could do to hold Thunder to a trot and not put his heels to the destrier’s flanks and ride to the castle as fast as Thunder could carry him.

Lem’s guess was a good one, for ‘twas Davos who rode towards them, older and greyer of beard and hair, but still the same granite faced Davos they had first met at The Wall. Before the battle, Gendry would have expected Edric to be by the onion knight’s side, but instead Edric lay in a shallow grave on the king’s road. Davos would need to explain to him how Edric had come to be leader of that band of outlaws.

Now, instead of Edric, ‘twas surely one of Davos’ own boys carrying the banner. Mayhaps Devan or Stannis, but whichever son accompanied Davos was no longer a boy, but a man full grown. Had it really been that long?

When they were within shouting distance, Gendry could contain his impatience no longer and shouted out, “What news of Lady Arya?”

“She is well!” Davos shot back with a grin.

“And the boy?” Lem yelled across the rapidly shortening distance.

“He lives and Maester Pylos says he will recover in time if the Gods are good!”

Gendry and Lem exchanged relieved grins.

“What say you to our finishing our journey on the king’s road the way we set out from Castle Black – at a full gallop?” Gendry asked.

“I say…why the fuck not!”

Lem kicking his horse’s flanks, making the animal leap ahead. Thunder pranced and pulled, desperate to give chase. Gendry gave the signal to his men before allowing Thunder his head.

“Let us see if you can keep up old man!” Gendry shouted to an astounded Ser Davos as he galloped past.

“I’m not too old to whip your Baratheon arse!” Davos yelled back, wheeling his horse around to give chase.

‘Twas a short race back to Storm’s End and one Gendry was never going to lose. Thunder easily overtook Lem’s horse and sensibly, none of the other riders though it prudent to attempt to beat Lord Baratheon in this particular race.

Gendry bent low over Thunder’s neck and was first to race over the drawbridge and into the bailey yard of Storm’s End. He pulled Thunder up short as he found his cousin, Lady Shireen Baratheon and every occupant of Storm’s End assembled and waiting to greet him.

He scanned the crowd for Arya. There was no sign of her. Although she had not come to greet him, he reminded himself that at least she was well. He hoped she had good reason not to be here, remembering his bitter departure from the Red Keep.

There was no Arya, but he did see a few a few, hard faces looking less than pleased to see him. He
had no doubt those faces belonged to the men of Golden Company who had taken Storm’s End for Aegon years before.

A boy ran forwards to hold Thunder’s reins as Lord Baratheon dropped down from his horse to bow before his cousin. Taking her hand, he kissed it respectfully. She was taller now, a woman full grown, but he noticed that Shireen had not changed in one respect. She kept her head down and let her hair hang over her face and neck to cover the greyscale.

As if anticipating his first question, she said “We did not expect you so soon. Maester Pylos gave Lady Arya a sleeping draft and she could not be woken to greet you.” Her voice was so quiet he had to strain to hear her. But at least Arya was not deliberately avoiding him, he thought with something akin to relief.

“It has been too long cousin,” he smiled.

Shireen whispered “Yes My Lord,” but still she avoided his eyes and continued to stare at the ground.

Lem and Davos galloped into the bailey yard together and, before Davos had even dismounted, he yelled “A speech! I call for a speech from our new Lord and winner of the race!”

A cheer went up from the assembled crowd before Gendry could protest. He made sure he directed a fierce glare of annoyance at a grinning Davos.

Shireen gestured towards a flight of stone steps. Not only was he expected to give a speech he thought with a groan, he was expected to stand on a balcony like a bloody mummer to do it. Heaving a large sigh of resignation, he strode towards the steps.

As soon as he placed his foot on the first step he hesitated.

Each one of the stone steps was worn in the centre from generations of feet. Generations of Baratheon feet. Had his father climbed these same steps? Had his ancestors the Storm Kings? Would his sons walk here too?

He heard Shireen behind him asking softly, “Is something wrong My Lord?”

Gendry glanced up at the worn steps ahead of him and smiled, “Nae, I just realised I am come home.”

Taking his time, he climbed the steps his father had walked before him and, if the Gods were good, his and Arya’s sons would walk after him.

-o-

There was a soft knock on the door. Shireen hurried to open it and was surprised to see Davos and Lord Baratheon standing there, the latter near blocking the corridor with his size. She immediately dropped her head down.

“May we come in? His Lordship wants to see Lady Arya.” Davos explained with a chuckle. He sounded happier and less weighed down by troubles than Shireen could ever remember.
“And of course I want to see my squire too.” Lord Baratheon added, his voice a deep rumble that seemed to reverberate in the very walls of the corridor.

“I am afraid they are both asleep My Lord,” Shireen said, wishing she could sound more assertive like Arya. But as usual, when speaking to someone she did not know well, her words came out barely any louder than a whisper.

“I am prepared to wait.” Lord Baratheon said, taking a step forwards into the room.

Shireen immediately took two steps back and, with a deep curtsey, held the door open for him. As he passed, she noticed he had to duck to avoid hitting his head on the door frame. She allowed herself a little smile of satisfaction. She had made the right decision in having Lord Renly’s old chambers prepared for him. The lintels and ceilings were much higher in that part of the castle.

Although she kept her eyes downcast, she was aware of him stopping in front of her. She could see his dirty great boots with his leather britches tucked in top.

Nymeria padded over towards them from where she had been lying beside the fire with Ghost. The two Direwolves had been an almost constant presence in the room since they first arrive. Shireen did not mind Ghost so much, as he kept himself apart, but Nymeria had a habit of appearing at her side when Shireen least expected it, to lick Ty’s hand, or nuzzle against Arya’s head. Shireen did not think it appropriate to have a Direwolf the size of a pony in a sick room, never mind two of them, but who was going to remove them? So she had no alternative but to tolerate them. It seemed however, that Lord Baratheon was delighted to see them and the feeling appeared to be mutual.

Nymeria rubbed herself off his hips and thighs, making a sound half way between a growl and a cat’s purr. Shireen watched in wary fascination as her cousin scratched roughly behind the wolf’s ears and tugged playfully at the thick, tawny fur of its neck, seemingly oblivious to the risk. Maester Pylos had said ‘twas a Direwolf bite he had to dress on Arya’s hand. If the wolves would bite Lady Arya, Shireen was convinced no one was safe.

Ghost lifted his head to stare at the newcomers. Shireen shivered. She would have sworn the white wolf gave a sly smile, but of course that was impossible. She doubted she would ever get used to these strange, huge animals. The belonged to the wild North and, more importantly, they belonged outside.

Eventually Nymeria seemed to tire of Lord Baratheon’s affections and padded off to lie once more beside Ghost. Again Shireen imagined she saw the white wolf smile, but called herself a fool for it. ‘Twas surely a snarl.

“Cousin Shireen,” Lord Baratheon addressed her directly and once again she lowered her eyes.

“Yes My Lord?” she whispered, focusing on the scuffed toes of his boots. She would ensure that they were polished or, even better, replaced at the first opportunity.

He blew out another sigh, sounding bone weary, “Let us not be strangers. Call me Weyland, or Gendry or any damn thing you like, as long as it is not ‘My Lord’.”

“Yes…cousin.” She replied, curtseying again.

“And stop the curtseying,” he growled.

“My Lady Shireen is only tying to show the proper…” Davos began, sticking up for her as he always did.
“I know, I know…” Lord Baratheon groaned, waving his hand dismissively and cutting Davos off before he had time to finish his speech in her defence, “…’Tis just that I have had enough ‘My Lord this’ and ‘My Lady that’ since I arrived here to last me the rest of my life. We are all friends and family and should speak plainly to each other. What do you say Davos? Shireen? I don’t recall either of you bowing or curtseying to me afore.”

’Twas on the tip of Shireen’s tongue to point out to him that he had not been Lord Baratheon nor in his own castle before but, as usual, she kept her thoughts to herself and merely nodded.

Davos was not as willing as Shireen to accept such a lack of formality. “As you like,” he grumbled, “but I warn you, you had best assert your authority here and soon. Those Golden Company shits…I mean men, will push their luck. Best to make an impression, stage a spectacle, display your power as quickly as you can.”

“Ah Davos, what would I do without you and Lem to keep me right?”

It pleased Shireen to hear the respect in Lord Baratheon’s voice for Ser Davos. The Onion Knight had been like a father to her – more of a father to her than her own flesh and blood.

“I will take your wise council old friend… if only Stannis had taken it too.”

“If Stannis had listened to me, you wouldn’t be standing here as Lord of Storm’s End.” Davos muttered dryly.

Lord Baratheon laughed, “Still as subtle as a flying hammer Ser Davos!”

’Twas strange for Shireen to hear them discuss her father in such an easy manner. Davos was reluctant to speak to her about him and avoided the subject with a stubborn determination. Shireen suspected Davos was afraid that, if she heard the truth, it would somehow sully her memories of him. But Shireen had eyes and ears and a sharp brain. She knew her father had been a fool for The Red Woman and it had ultimately cost him his life. Davos refusing to discuss it with her did not alter the facts.

“I presume you already have some grand spectacle in mind that will prove to…those Golden Company shits and any other doubters that I am indeed the rightful Lord of Storm’s End?” Lord Baratheon asked with a chuckle.

Although she did not want to risk looking up for fear of showing the shameful mark on her face, she could imagine Davos was stroking his grey beard. She smiled as she pictured that twinkle he had in his eyes when a plan came to fruition.

“Indeed I have. A feast on the ‘morrow.”

A feast! Shireen nearly shrieked in horror. A feast! Tomorrow! Had Davos taken leave of his senses? How was she to provide for that? Their supplies were at an all time low after a heard winter and with so many in need.

Davos carried on, ignoring her attempts to glare at him from under her hair.

“Aye, a feast – and we’ll make it the best we can in the circumstances. We’ll have jugglers and music and Shireen will find you some lordly clothes of Renly’s to wear. Something flashy, something to let these Gold Company bastards know who’s Lord around here.”

Noticing Gendry raise his eyebrows at the use of the word ‘bastards’, Davos coughed and muttered, “You know what I mean.”
“Aye, I do, but you’d be well advised not to use that word around me too often, unless you want to loose a few more fingers.”

Shireen stole a peak at Lord Baratheon. Although he smiled, it did not reach his oh-so-blue eyes and there was a cold steel in his voice that Davos would be wise to heed.

“Quite so.” Davos coughed again.

“Do we have to have a feast?” Lord Baratheon asked with a heartfelt groan. “Could we not hold a melee instead? Twould be cheaper and we might get rid of some of those Golden arses into the bargain.”

Davos laughed. “Nae. A feast is…less messy.”

Shireen felt the tension between the two men dissipate as they shared a laugh.

“Very well then.” Lord Baratheon muttered. “Just let me know what I have to wear and when.”

“’Tis a wise decision you’ve made,” Davos grinned.

“As if I had any choice,” Lord Baratheon snorted.

With a tilt of his head, that was nearly a bow; Davos took his leave of Lord Baratheon. Before he left the room, he tilted his head to whisper in Shireen’s ear.

“Do not fret My Lady. I sent the fishing boats out last night. Your tables will be groaning with bounty from the sea.”

“And onions too I hope Ser Davos?” she asked with a cheeky little grin.

“Aye, onions too!” he agreed, laughing as he left. Shireen closed the door behind him, relieved that Lord Baratheon would not be embarrassed by the deficiency of their feast.

“I hate bloody feasts,” he muttered under his breath, to no one in particular as he strode over to the bed where his squire lay grievously wounded, with Lady Arya curled up beside the boy.

Shireen watched Lord Baratheon’s face soften as he tenderly stroked the side of Lady Arya’s cheek. He did not speak for so long that Shireen began to wonder if he had forgotten she was there. Eventually he looked up and she managed to drop her eyes before she met his gaze.

“Maester Pylos tells me Lady Arya in unharmed and needs only rest in order to make a full recovery.”

“Yes cousin. She was soaked in blood when she arrived and we all feared the worst but mercifully ‘twas not her blood…” Shireen trailed off, uncertain how to politely say what she wanted. She did not intend to suggest that Lady Arya’s good fortune was at the expense of the boy’s misfortune and wished to avoid causing any offence.

Fortunately Lord Baratheon did not seem to notice. He was looking down at his betrothed and smiling. ’Twas clear from the tenderness of his touch and the softness of his gaze that he held his betrothed in the highest regard.

Shireen suspected that Lady Arya felt the same. They had spoken often when watching over the boy and Shireen had noticed that every time Lord Baratheon’s name was mentioned Lady Arya did not seem to be able to stop herself from smiling. ‘Twas as if she held some secret that could only be
revealed to him. Certainly, ’twould seem theirs was not to be a marriage of convenience, arranged to satisfy the needs of two Great Houses, but rather one of love.

Shireen knew such matches were rare amongst the Great Houses of Westeros and she had never wasted her time hoping for such a marriage herself. Her chances would be even fewer now. So many of the sons of Westeros had fallen in the war, that there would be half a dozen high born ladies vying for the attentions of every high born man. The Lords and the Sers would be able to take their pick.

Given her face, Shireen knew she would always be last in line and would be lucky if any lord, even a minor one, agreed to marry her. Even if they did, they would certainly be marrying her for her name rather than any love they bore her. The notion of a lord loving her was so preposterous, she nearly laughed aloud.

Lord Baratheon talking to her forced her mind back to the present and away from such useless thoughts.

“Maester Pylos tells me that if my squire does not live, then ’twill not be for lack of effort on your part Shireen. I hear you have barely left his side since he arrived and have nursed him most attentively.”

Shireen blushed to the roots of her hair. Then she inwardly cursed herself for being so obviously affected by a few words of praise.

“Anyone would have done the same,” she murmured.

Lord Baratheon snorted, “I can assure you, few would. I shall make sure he is well aware of the debt he owes you if he awakens.”

Shireen bristled at the suggestion the boy might not recover. “When he awakens!” She said with a force that surprised even her. She immediately covered her mouth with her hand to hide her embarrassment.

“You are right; when he awakens. Forgive me. I saw his wound and I held out little hope that he would survive the night, much less make it to Storm’s End.”

“He is a fighter.”

“Aye, I cannot deny that. He and I have had many fights already and now, thanks to you and to Maester Pylos, I can look forward to many more!”

Walking around to the other side of the bed, Lord Baratheon proceeded to ruffle Ty’s hair gently.

“Seek your rest Shireen. If either of them wakes I shall see to their needs.”

Lord Baratheon walked over to the nearest chair and sank into with a groan. ’Twas an ordinary sized chair, Shireen had sat in it herself often during the past three days, but Lord Baratheon dwarfed it, made it look like a chair made for a half man. Surely he could not be comfortable there? Was it proper to suggest to your Lord that he would mayhaps be more comfortable elsewhere? There was an antechamber accessed through an adjoining door. It had once used as a dressing room, and was now equipped with a daybed. The Maester had snatched some sleep there during that first awful night when they had not been sure whether the boy would live or die.

Shireen was still wondering if she should suggest using the antechamber, when Lord Baratheon repeated wearily “Go and seek your rest.”
He had his elbows on his knees and his hands buried in that long, black hair of his, which was so like Edric Storm’s and so different to her father’s. She imagined that mayhaps her father had hair like that, one day, when he was young and happy. Before she had been born.

“Yes My Lord,” she replied with a deep curtsy, which he either did not see or chose not to acknowledge.

Shireen busied herself tidying up before she took her leave. She too was exhausted and the chance to hand over the responsibility for the boy and for Arya should have had her running for her bed with joy and relief. But she was strangely loath to leave now, after all this time. Mayhaps that was why she took longer than was necessary to tidy away the bowls of water and ointment, to make sure Arya and the boy were properly covered, to fold and rearrange the pile of fresh bandages and to place the chamber pot where Lord Baratheon could see it if the boy had need of it.

When she could find no more tasks to attend to, she headed reluctantly for the door. Taking care to open it quietly so as not to disturb anyone, she hesitated; mayhaps she should bid Lord Baratheon goodnight?

Shireen turned, keeping her head bowed. Despite keeping her eyes downcast, she could see his outstretched legs, his head hanging limply back over the chair and one hand resting on the pommel of his sword.

He was fast asleep.

What should she do now? He had told her to go, yet he was exhausted himself and hardly capable of seeing to the boy’s needs.

She tiptoed back over to stand in front of her lord cousin. From here she could see that his mouth hung open and she could hear his deep, steady breathing.

“Lord Baratheon,” she whispered.

No answer.

“My Lord Baratheon” she repeated, just a little louder this time.

Instead of opening his eyes as she hoped, he began to snore softly.

She tiptoed even closer and wrinkled her nose at the smell of him. He smelled of horses and sweat and war. By the look of him, he had not shaved or changed his clothes in weeks. His nails, although short, looked as if they were ingrained with dried blood and his hair hung lank around his face. Warily she reached out to touch his arm intending to gently shake him awake. As soon as her fingertips brushed the top of his arm, she pulled them quickly back. ‘Twas hard like metal, but warm and she had not expected that at all.

He was so broad that she had assumed he was wearing armour, but armour would not warm her fingertips like that. She had not known a man’s arm could feel so hard. That was not what the boy’s arm felt like and it had not been what Edric’s had felt like either. She could not recall touching any another man. If she had ever been touched by her father, either in anger or in love, then she could not remember it.

Wringing her hands, Shireen agonised over what to do. She looked around the room once more. Nothing had changed. Arya lay curled up on one side of the bed, oblivious. Lord Baratheon was not going to wake up unless she shook him hard and, with his hand resting on the pommel of that evil looking sword, she did not want to do that and risk startling him. Yet she could not leave him in that uncomfortable chair all night. She would not be able to sleep if she knew the Lord of Storm’s End
Practical as ever, Shireen decided to solve two problems at once. She would order a bath for Lord Baratheon in the adjoining antechamber and mayhaps the noise would waken him naturally. Also, he would be clean and presentable when Lady Arya woke. Shireen could not imagine that any lady would wish to see (or smell) her lord like that.

Tiptoeing over to the door, Shireen poked her head into the corridor and had a hurried conversation with the maid who had been stationed there on the orders of The Maester. He had ordered a watch to be kept at all times of the day and night under the strictest instructions that he be called at once if the boy’s condition deteriorated.

Closing the door over again as quietly as she could, she rested her back against it and puzzled over the scene before her. The great commander, Lord Baratheon, had ridden here straight from battle, yet he was prepared to act as nursemaid to this boy before seeing to his own needs. Lady Arya, who was unlike any other lady Shireen had ever met before, cared so much about the boy that she would not leave his side – day or night. This boy must truly be someone special for two such important people to value his life so highly.

Arya had said he was Lord Baratheon’s squire, but had given no House name and Shireen had thought it impolite to press for more information. Surely the boy must be the son of a great Lord to be this valuable to them both? With his blonde hair strewn over his pillows like spun gold, he looked so unlike either the Lord or his Lady that Shireen found it hard to believe the boy could be related to either. Both were dark and she would surely have heard if he was a Baratheon relation. She was not so sure of Lady Arya’s side.

Shireen had loved hearing stories of the Great Houses and their illustrious histories as a girl. As she grew older, she had whiled away many lonely hours studying those lineages and dreaming about how much better life would have been had she been born into any house other than House Baratheon.

Lady Arya’s mother had been a Tully of Riverrun and they were famed for their auburn red hair. ‘Kissed by fire’ the wildings had called it. Thinking of those strange, awful days at The Wall still caused Shireen to smile. The time she had spent there had been the most vivid of her life. Although surrounded by so much death, she had never felt more alive.

Shireen had heard tales of Sansa Stark – the most beautiful woman in all of Westeros and her striking auburn hair. Surely any relative of Arya’s would either have Arya’s colouring or darker, like Jon Snow (King Jon now, Shireen had to remind herself) or would be kissed by fire like the Tullys. And then there were the boy’s eyes – green as emerald.

So if he was not Baratheon, Stark or Tully, then who was he? Shireen ran thorough the possibilities; the names of the Great Houses and their sons of the right age. Of course her books were seven years out of date, for who had time to update such works in times of war? But still, the boy had seen at least twelve name days and his birth must be recorded somewhere. She resolved to check her favourite book - ‘The Genealogy of The Great House of Westeros’ at the first opportunity.

Although only moments had past since she gave instructions for the bath, already she could hear the maids preparing the bath in the adjoining dressing room. Shireen gave a little smile of satisfaction. The smooth running of Storm’s End was a matter of great pride for her. The truth was, she enjoyed the responsibility and being busy from morning until night gave her no time to think on herself.

Her fingers dropped to the great set of keys hanging from her belt. She knew by touch alone, which key opened which door; the grain store, the wine cellar, the dungeons and a dozen more. She knew
every one and soon they must be handed over to Lady Arya, for they belonged to the Lady of Storm’s End.

Shireen let out a long, deep sigh, before covering her mouth in horror. What if her moans of self pity woke the occupants of the room? Ach, her misery at the thought of handing over her keys was making her daft. She wanted Lord Baratheon to wake, in fact, ’twould be no bad thing if the boy and Lady Arya woke too.

Trying to walk purposefully, rather than tiptoe over to the adjoining door, she chastised herself again for worrying about making a noise. She slid the bolt free from its latch with a clunk and opened the partition door, which creaked terribly. It had been too long unused she thought sadly. ‘Twas the same with all of the guest rooms, in deed most of the rooms in the castle. Mayhaps now Lord Baratheon and his men had arrived, the place would once again ring with laughter the way it had in Renly’s day. She had only visited once, but the contrast between the colour and gaiety of Storm’s End and the drab surroundings and atmosphere of Dragonstone had been so marked that she had never forgotten it.

Shireen made a mental note to oil the creaking hinges herself and sighed again. She hoped Lady Arya would take good care of her dear Storm’s End.

Steam was rising from the tub and towels and soap had already been laid out beside the big brass tub. Shireen nodded her approval to the maids. She tested the temperature of the water and was pleased to find it just short of scalding hot. A steady stream of maids continued to arrive with pails of water and the bath would be ready for Lord Baratheon soon. Now all she had to do was wake him up.

When she stood before him again, Shireen was disappointed to find that he was in an even deeper sleep than before. The noise of water being poured would have woken most people, but not him. His squire and Lady Arya had not stirred either.

Warily eying Lord Baratheon’s big fist cradling the pommel of his sword, Shireen cleared her throat.

He snorted in his sleep, but that was all the response she got.

She coughed as loudly as she could and this time he jerked awake, eyes wide and ferocious, sword already half way out of its sheath.

“’Tis only your bath My Lord!” Shireen gasped, so scared that he might strike her down that she forgot to bow her head. They looked each other in the eye for the first time; Baratheon blue to Baratheon blue.

“Bath?” he grunted hoarsely as she slid the sword back. Shireen was so relived to see the polished steel disappear that she almost forgot to hide her face. Mayhaps he was not yet awake enough to have notice. Dropping her gaze to the floor again, she replied,

“I took the liberty of calling for one as you…” she hesitated, searching for a respectful way to say this. ‘Twas impossible to tell a lord that he stank, even if he was kin, “…you might like to…make yourself more…comfortable before you greet your Lady.”

“Arya?” he grunted and shook his head. Shireen wasn’t sure if he was disagreeing with her or if he was trying to waken himself up.

Not knowing what else to say, she murmured only “’Tis ready My Lord” and, with her head bowed, gestured towards the dressing room.

He groaned and ran his hands through his hair again muttering, “Bloody speeches and shaking hands
and now a goddamn bath. If I’d know it was this much trouble being a Lord, I might not have fought so bloody hard for it.”

What did he mean by that? When she first met him at Castle Black, he was already a Ser and the young commander of Bad Company. Everyone including her father, acknowledged him as Robert’s son. Edric had been Robert’s bastard too and he had not had to fight for anything. Everything Edric wanted had been handed to him on a silver plate and Shireen had assumed her two cousins would have had the same advantages.

When he still made no move to rise, Shireen tried again, “Your bath is growing cold cousin.”

“All right, all right, I’m going.” He stood up with a creak of leather and a slow groan.

“I will arrange to have some suitable clothes brought to you for you to wear once you are…clean.”

“Seven hells” he cursed, “you’re going to do your damndest to make sure I at least look like the Lord of Storm’s End aren’t you?”

Unsure whether he was japing with her or actually angry, Shireen risked a quick look from under her hair. Gods be good, he was grinning at her. She dropped her eyes immediately, her face suddenly feeling as scalding hot as the water in that bath.

He stretched his huge arms above his head and groaned again.

“Lady Ayra better appreciate this!” he said to her conspiratorially as he strode towards his waiting bath.

Only when he was out of the room, with the door shut behind him and when the giggles of the silly, excitable maids had subsided, did Shireen allow herself to sit down in the chair he had just left.

She would give Lord Baratheon time to wash and then she would wake Lady Arya. Surely Arya had slept long enough and besides, seeing her betrothed would no doubt do her more good than a few more hours of sleep. In the meantime, Shireen had to find suitable clothes for Lord Baratheon and then she had a feast to plan…

Chapter End Notes

I have to beg your forgiveness. I have not kept last week’s promise to bring you the ‘climax’. It’s coming, but you’ll just have to wait a little while longer. I’m not so cruel as to make you wait another full week. So I’ll be hard at it this weekend and give you more on Sunday…definitely Sunday…
Arya & Gendry

Chapter Notes

This story is rated ‘M’ for a reason. This chapter is the reason.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arya gazed at Gendry, asleep in the bath. If a man ever deserved to be called beautiful he did. It made her ache just to look at him. His head fell relaxed against the steep back of the copper tub, his arms rested on the sides. The half light cast shadows on the muscles of his powerful arms and chest. Droplets of water glistened on smooth skin and sleek, black hair in the flickering candle light. With his hair slicked back from his face and his jaw clean shaven, he looked younger, at peace, as if he did not carry the responsibility for the whole of the Stormlands on his shoulders. Arya knew that was a burden she would soon share.

She perched on the edge of the tub and trailed her fingers through the warm water. She wanted, nae, she longed to touch him, to stroke the silky black hair that spread across his broad chest and follow its trail down beyond where it disappeared into the water. It seemed so long since the day of their picnic, since the last bath they had shared, since she had felt his skin on hers. Too long. Every night they had lain together under the stars while she dreamed of their joining had only increased her frustration. But that was all in the past. Tonight she would give herself completely to him and he would be hers. She wanted him and if that meant accepting his damn castle and the Stormlands too, then she would.

Mayhaps her fingers touched him unknowingly and woke him, but she soon became aware of his watching her. As she turned to him, his eyes locked onto hers; the subtle glow from the candles made his appear a deep, midnight blue.

Without speaking, he held his arms out to her. As she leaned into his embrace he rested his head against her flat stomach. Arya wondered if he was thinking the same as she; of the babe that, Gods be good, might one day grow there. She gazed down at him, imagining his head resting against her swollen belly. She slid her fingers into his damp hair, caressing him and cradling his head in her hands. They embraced silently like that for long moments, both relieved to be able to hold the other again and needing no words to explain it.

And then they both spoke at once, “I thought…” They both stopped.

“You first,” she smiled.

“I thought I might never see you again.” He said, holding her tighter to him.

“I am not that easy to kill,” she laughed, making light of her journey here.

“We came across the corpses of men and horses on the king’s road,” he said, releasing his hold on her and leaning back so he could look up at her, his tone and expression deadly serious.

“Then you know I had Nymeria and Ghost with me,” she smiled, trying to allay his fears and sweep away his concerns.
He grabbed her bandaged hand and pulled it to his lips. His breath was warm against her fingers as he turned her hand and gently kissed her bandaged palm. “And one of them bit you.”

She sighed. ‘Twas no use. He was too damn stubborn to let this go. She would need to tell him everything. Mayhaps she should have told him everything from the start, about Braavos and the Faceless Men and her list.

“Ghost bit me. At the end. If he had not, then I think I might have slid from my horse and Ty and I would have died in the dirt outside the gates of your castle.”

“Did they bar the gates to you?” he demanded, gripping the sides of the tub and pushing himself forward, causing water to slosh over the sides and soak part of her robe.

She did not wish to see any heads roll over this. They had granted her entrance, the Maester had undoubtedly saved Ty’s life and all was well. She pushed Gendry gently, but firmly, back against the tub and proceeded to tell him about her journey to Storm’s End. But she left out the most important part – the part about how, during that nightmare ride, she thought she might never see him again. The Gods had been good, they had answered her prayers. He was here. She was here. Ty was recovering in the adjoining room. What she did not tell him was that, now she had him, she would never let him go. She would tell him soon, but not yet.

Once she had finished her tale, she made him tell her his. She had no doubt ‘twas much shortened as he never mentioned the aftermath of the battle, how many of his men had died or what he had done with the prisoners he had surely taken. Mayhaps she would ask another night as this night was not meant for speaking of death, ‘twas meant to celebrate life and mayhaps make a new one she thought wickedly.

“We should go before you turn into a prune,” she said after he had finished his tale.

“Let me show you to your chambers. Shireen has assured me she will not leave Ty’s side tonight.”

“My chambers?” he wondered. He had not thought on that. He had assumed he would sleep here, with Ty and with her, on the floor if he needed to or in that uncomfortable chair.

“Do you not think the Lord of Storm’s End should have his own chambers?” she teased, standing up. She was still weak after that horrific ride and her head spun after standing up so suddenly. She had to grip the side of the bath to steady herself. Mercifully Gendry seemed only to notice that the side of her robe was soaked.

“I am sorry,” he said, reaching for the sodden edge of her gold robe. “I am a clumsy oaf.” She merely smiled and shook her head.

“What material is this?” he asked, letting it trail through his fingers.

“Silk from Qohor” she murmured, watching the silk glide over his skin.

“Tis as smooth as your skin,” he whispered, looking up at her. Before she would have scoffed, but something had changed between them. She understood and accepted that to him, she was beautiful, just as he was to her. It no longer mattered what anyone else thought. Only him.

When the silk had fully run through his fingers, he slid his hand up her thigh over the curve of her hip. His hand felt warm through the fine silk, his touch so soothing, yet so seductive.

”Come Lord Baratheon. I do not wish to keep this wet robe on all night. Mayhaps I can find something more suitable to wear in your chambers,”
The suggestive tone in her voice, the wicked sparkle in her eyes, the promise of the night ahead made his cock spring to life. That did not mean he intended to use it. He still wanted her agreement to wed him first, but mayhaps old Lem was right. He should tie her to his bed and make love to her until she begged to wed him. Would that work? He was beginning to think he should worry about that in the morn.

He stood up in the tub, muscles rippling as water streamed off his torso and down. Her eyes were immediately drawn to his cock, standing to attention, ready and eager for her. She could not drag her eyes away.

“Are you going to hand me a drying cloth?”

Arya looked at the cloth on a chair, just out of his reach and then looked back at him before grinning. “Mayhaps I like seeing you dripping wet and naked.”

He gave her an amused look, his blue eyes sparkling and raised an eyebrow. “Mayhaps I’d like to see you that way too,” he made a lunge for her, almost toppling out of the tub as she easily avoided his grasping arms.

“Arya!” he growled in frustration.

She had no wish to be dunked in that cold bath, so she threw him the cloth and watched in fascination as he dried himself with an easy, unconscious grace. Muscles rippled under pale skin and dark hair as he moved and turned until the damp cloth was abandoned on the floor.

“Where are my clothes?” he asked, looking around for the britches and boots he had discarded earlier on the floor.

“Oh, Shireen has seen to everything,” Arya replied airily. “You have new clothes now.” She waved to a pile of brightly coloured silk on a chair in the corner. His sword and scabbard was laid carefully on top

“I don’t want to wear that,” he grumbled, peering at the garment on top. “Is that pink?” he asked incredulously.

“Tis many different colours. It only looks pink in the candle light. And besides,” she waved her arm around the room, “you have nothing else to wear.”

Having no choice, he dressed in the silk robes and slippers Shireen had left for him, feeling like a fool.

They climbed the winding stairs together. Gendry had taken her hand in his and intertwined their fingers. His were so much thicker and stronger than hers that they forced hers apart. ‘Twas a strangely erotic sensation and she could not help but think it a prelude for things to come.

His chambers were near the top of the tower. Shireen had shown her the day before, seeking her approval. The climb was long, but worth it for the stunning views on every side. Arya could understand why Renly, and ever Baratheon Lord before him, had claimed that room as their own. But she doubted Gendry would appreciate Renly’s choice of the richest, most ornate décor gold could buy. Shireen seemed to like it, but had reluctantly agreed to ‘see what she could do’.

There seemed to be more steps than Arya remembered, or mayhaps, in his haste to get to his room, Gendry’s pace was faster than Shireen’s. Well before they reached the top, Arya found herself
lagging behind, being dragged upwards by his firm grip on her hand. Eventually she had to ask him to stop.

“What is wrong?” he wondered, wrapping his arm protectively around her shoulders, full of concern for her well being. It pained her to admit that she felt a little faint. The words were no sooner out of her mouth than he scooped her up into his arms. She hoped this light headedness was not a permanent state of affairs, for having him carry her annoyed her more than she would have thought possible. She struggled bad temperedly as he tried to settle her against his silk clad chest.

“Do not fight me on this Arya,” he warned, as if reading her thoughts. “Shireen told me you have slept most of the time since arriving here and need more rest still. Mayhaps I will tie you to my bed.”

He had not meant to say that. He stared at her, wondering if she realised he meant what he said and why. The anticipation of the night to come must have made all his blood run straight to his cock and leave his stupid head empty. She merely looked up at him with unblinking, unfathomable grey eyes.

“Should I fetch the Maester?” he demanded, mainly to cover his embarrassment. He had no wish to delay matters further by sending for Maester Pylos.

“I think mayhaps I am just hungry, for I cannot remember having eaten today.”

“The let us go to the kitchens.” He turned to head down the stairs.

No, she did not want to turn back now!

“Shireen promised to leave food in your chambers. She thought you would be hungry.”

“If you are sure,” he muttered, not convinced food was the only reason for Arya’s weakness. No woman was as strong as his Arya. When she narrowed her eyes at him, he sighed and turned again. ‘Twas a timely reminder that no one was as damn stubborn as her either.

As he pushed the door open with his shoulder, the warm glow of a hundred flickering candles greeted them. With Arya still in his arms, he stood speechless in the doorway.

The room was vast; he had been in Lord’s halls that were not as large. On every surface were set candles whose flames flickered and danced. In the soft, golden light, he could see that magnificent tapestries hung on every wall although he could not make out the designs. Exquisitely carved pieces of furniture were placed by the windows and by the fire. A huge, high bed dominated the room. An ornately carved wooden post rose from every corner of the bed, with a draped canopy and richly embroidered curtains that could be pulled closed at each side. He had never seen anything like it and ‘twas all his.

He could not say how long he stood there staring. Only Arya muttering, “You can put me down now,” galvanised him into action.

He set her gently on her feet. As she walked over to the fire, her feet made no sound. Looking down, he saw that even the floor was covered with rich tapestries many other lords would have been pleased to see gracing their walls.

“Oh, here is the food Shireen promised.” Arya said as she lifted the lid from a pot sitting by the side of the fire. A delicious aroma immediately filled the room and his stomach growled its approval. He had not realised how hungry he was until now.
“Shireen arranged all this?” he asked, incredulous that she had gone to so much trouble for him. A bed of clean straw on a pallet would have exceeded his expectations.

Arya shrugged, the movement causing her fine silk robe to sway and shimmer in the firelight. “‘Twas Renly’s chamber. She had a new feather mattress brought up and made a few other changes. Do you like it?”

He looked around the room. Did he like it? He had never dreamed he would sleep in a room so fine, much less call it his own. “Aye, I like it well enough,” he said, finding it an effort to stop himself whooping and jumping around for joy.

“You should see the views in the daylight; Shipbreaker bay on one side and your beloved Stormlands on the other. No wonder uncle Renly chose this room.” Arya said sitting down on one of the finely carved chairs near the fire.

“Are you going to join me or are you going to stand there gawking all night?”

He could easily have stood there gawking for hours more, but his growling stomach plainly had other ideas. He sat down on the chair opposite Arya while she stood up and untied her silk robe.

“Tis too warm for this so close to the fire.”

She let the silk slide from her shoulders before folding it and stretching over to place it on another chair. Gendry could only stare, transfixed as she stood before him in only a gossamer thin shift. He had never imagined that a woman wearing clothes could be more enticing, more erotic, than one who was naked. What a fool he was.

With the fire behind her, every beautiful curve was visible through her shift. As she leaned across to place her folded robe on the chair her figure was silhouetted against the fire light. He gaped at the heavy swell of her breast, crowned by the hard peak of her nipple. He imagined the warm, soft weight of her breasts, heavy in his hands, her nipples straining against her shift as he rubbed his thumbs over them, bringing them to life. He imagined kissing the darkness of that triangle at the top of her thighs as she sighed and arched against him.

“Your cousin Shireen seems to have this castle running very efficiently,” Arya said, bringing his soaring thoughts crashing back down to reality.

“Aye,” he agreed, his voice husky with lust.

Tonight he would deny their pleasure no more. He would make her his, no matter what. ‘Chain her to your bed’ Lem had said. If he had to, he would, but he hoped to make her want this as much as he did. He would pleasure her over and over again until she screamed out her promise to marry him. He would not risk getting a bastard on her until he had her promise, but still, there were ways to avoid that which would not diminish her pleasure and barely diminish his. Aye, tonight. Tonight.

With his thoughts caught up in his plans for the night ahead, he automatically took the crusty loaf of bread she handed him. ‘Twas only when Arya picked hers up and began tearing a hole in the top and pulling out the soft centre that the smell of warm bread reminded him how hungry he was and not only for Arya. He followed her lead and, with the hollowed out bread acting as bowls, Arya ladled some of the delicious smelling stew into the centre.

Gendry had never developed a refined sense of taste, but he knew good food from bad and this was good; very good. He would need to make a point of visiting the kitchens and complimenting the cooks. While he ate with gusto, Arya was either not as hungry as he or more anxious to talk, as she
spoke while they ate.

“I think Shireen likes everything to be done her way and is quite…set in her ways.” Arya said.

Gendry, remembering the way his cousin had made him take a bath, mumbled his agreement through another delicious mouthful. If a book existed on how to do things the proper way, he was sure Shireen had read it and memorised every page.

“She did seem to be shocked when I told her there was no need to make separate arrangements for me. I told her I would be staying here with you.”

Gendry stopped mid chew and looked up from his bowl, pondering the implications of what Arya had just mentioned so casually. Why had he not considered this before? ‘Twas one thing to share furs under the stars, ‘twas quite another to sleep together in Storm’s End. His men would never mention such a thing, but he knew from experience, in a castle, everyone knew everyone else’s business.

“Mayhaps we should at least maintain the pretence of separate rooms.” He suggested half heartedly. He had been eagerly anticipating sleeping with her tonight. Truth be told, he had been hoping to spend the night engaged in activities that did not involve much sleep, but he did not wish Arya to be the subject of malicious gossip in halls all over Westeros. Such salacious tales seemed to be much loved, spread and embellished at every telling, by high born ladies and their servants the length and breadth of Westeros.

“I persuaded Shireen that there is no need to bother with separate rooms,” Arya shrugged dismissively.

“And how did you manage to do that?” Gendry wondered, genuinely intrigued. He imagined his cousin was not one to be easily persuaded.

“I told her that, as we are betrothed, ‘tis hardly scandalous.”

Gendry’s spoon stopped in mid air, half way to his mouth. Had Arya said what he thought she did? They were betrothed?

She had agreed to wed him?

His mind reeled, his heart pounded in his chest so quickly that it hurt just to breathe. He had dropped his spoon and bowl and slid to his knees next to her before he even knew it.

“We are betrothed?”

“Aye,” she said with a smile on her lips and a twinkle in her eye.

“Do not jape with me Arya,” he warned with a growl.

“Tis no jape,” she said, suddenly serious. He so wanted to believe her.

“So you will wed me in the Godswood immediately we return to King’s Landing?”

“I would wed you in the Godswood here if your uncle Stannis had not burned it down.”

There was no more need to wait. He had her promise. She was his.

He gathered the material of her shift that brushed the floor and pushed it up over her knees, sliding
up her silky thighs with an aching slowness. Her heart beat hard with anticipation. It was torture for her, but a sweet torture that left her breathless.

Once he had raised her shift until he could push it no higher, for it was trapped between the back of her thighs and the chair, she made to stand up. He urged her to remain seated by pressing warm hands firmly on the exposed, cool skin of her thighs and whispered, “Nae, stay as you are.”

As he slid one hand between her thighs, she opened them for him, moaning softly as his fingers grazed her curls, then holding her breath as he explored her sex with exquisite slowness. She closed her eyes to concentrate on the sensations he awoke with his fingers. She could hardly think as he spread the wetness her body produced for him around and over that sensitive place between her legs. She arched into his hand as he slid one finger inside her and then a second, stretching her to ease the way for their joining.

Unexpectedly she felt him caress her breast through her shift. She gasped breathlessly as she opened her eyes in time to see him draw her nipple into his mouth and suck, pulling, demanding, causing desire to pulse deep within her. He moved to lavish the same attention on her other breast. The wet shift rubbing against her sensitised nipple made it tighten against the fabric which was already drying in the heat from the fire. She arched her back, thrusting her breasts forwards, feeling them ache and grow heavier with his every touch. She heard herself, voice ragged with desire, demanding that he not stop. He obeyed, sucking harder on one nipple as an eager hand caressed the other. All the while his fingers danced inside her and between her legs.

He had almost forgotten he had intended to make love to her slowly. It was hard to hold a thought in his head with his fingers inside her and her teat in his mouth. When her hands roamed over his stomach and brushed against his cock, he stopped thinking entirely.

“The bed,” he heard her say. Mayhaps she shouted it as he thought he would be deaf from the sound of his blood pounding in his ears. As he eased his fingers out of her, the low moan from the back of her throat drove him wild. Cupping the firm globes of her arse, he lifted her to the bed. She wrapped her legs around him, wriggling as if trying to position herself so as to draw him into her. Not yet. Not yet.

He eased her down on the bed as gently as he could, pressing hot, urgent kisses to her neck. He wanted to taste every inch of her, but her legs were still locked around his hips and the way she arched up against him excited him so much he feared he would come before he even had a chance to bury his cock inside her.

“Arya…Arya,” he moaned as he reached behind and tried to loosen the hold her thighs had on him. He had forgotten how strong she was. “If you don’t let me go, I won’t last much longer.”

“I can’t wait much longer,” she whispered, looking up into his eyes, pulling on his hips, urging him down.

Fumbling with his sword belt, then the silk robe and finally the ties on his silk small clothes, he said breathlessly against her neck, “This will hurt.”

“I don’t care,” she moaned impatiently. “I want to feel you inside me. Now Gendry, now” she demanded.

“Where is Needle?” he gasped as her hand closed around his straining cock.

“Hmm…downstairs, with Ty,” she groaned breathlessly, rolling her hips against his.
Damn. The one time he needed it, she did not have Needle with her. With a murmured apology, that did not sound like he regretted this at all, he took hold of the top of her shift and tore it open all the way down.

Her high little squeak of surprise made him smile. He loved all the sounds she made, but that one was new.

When the tip of his cock finally pressed against that soft, wet place at her centre, desire surged through him like a wave crashing onto the rocks in Shipbreaker bay far below them. Arya pulled on his shoulders, urging him forwards. He eased himself into her, slowly, slowly until he felt her maidenhead halt his progress. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he strove to hold himself back, to save from pounding into her, as his body demanded. Do it now.

“Please now Gendry. Please.”

He had done all that he could to ease his way. Looking down at her, seeing his need reflected in her eyes, he gritted his teeth and surged forwards.

She cried out and clutched at him as he covered her body with his and her face with his kisses. Holding himself still he asked hoarsely, “Are you all right?”

She nodded, not looking so brave and fierce as she had been moments before. “Am I too tight?” she whispered.

By the Gods, she had no idea.

“Nae, never. It feels good Arya… so good,” he murmured, kissing her again, sliding his tongue into her mouth, moving it in and out as he began moving slowly inside her. His kisses became hungry, more urgent as he moved faster and harder against her. She lifted her hips and tightened the grip of her thighs around him while digging her fingers into his shoulders. The little gasps and moans she made drove him wild, drove him on. He wanted her closer, deeper. He had waited so long, he could wait no longer. She was his, only his.

He thrust into her faster and faster as she held on to him, needing him as much as he needed her.

“You are mine,” he gasped. She was so tight, so hot, now, now, now. He surged against her and she shuddered under him. She called his name as he called hers, his seed marking her at the climax of their ecstasy. Waves of pleasure crested and crashed over them both. He had claimed her at last and collapsed over her, spent.

She thought he would have been too heavy, but Arya loved the feeling of his body on her, inside her. She had never imagined it would be like this; the closeness, the oneness that she had never felt before. She could not tell where he ended and she began. She loved him, truly loved him. After so long alone, when she thought she could never love anyone, would never find love, she had found him and he had found her.

With a satisfied groan he drew himself out and rolled to face her. Her wild hair looked like a tangled storm, but her face was serene, flushed from their lovemaking and achingly beautiful. He reached out to tenderly brush the hair away from her forehead with the back of his hand. She had no idea how beautiful she was and that was one of the many things he loved about her.

He stroked her cheek. “I am sorry I was so rough, ’tis just that I… wanted this… wanted you for so long.”
“You were not rough,” she smiled, amused that he felt he had to apologise for bringing her such pleasure. In truth, she thought she would not have minded if he had taken her faster and harder. Mayhaps she could mention that next time. The thought of there being a next time widened her smile.

He pulled her close to him, so that her head rested against his chest and she could listen to his heart thud in time with hers.

“So you enjoyed that?” he asked, his breath warm against her ear.

“Yes,” she whispered, feeling flushed and embarrassed. Until she had met him, she had never expected to experience joining with a man, much less want him to do it again. Already.

“I love you Arya Stark,” he murmured, stroking his hands through her hair as their wildly beating hearts slowed together.

“Arya Baratheon,” she corrected, savouring the strange sound of it and the unfamiliar way it rolled around her mouth.

“Aye, Arya Baratheon,” he repeated, his voice deep and soft.

She moved out of his embrace so that she could prop her head on one arm and look down on him. His eyes looking back up at her were bright blue, sparkling like sun on water. His long, black hair hung in damp tendrils around the handsome face that she had known as man and boy. “I love you too Gendry Baratheon.”

She leaned over and kissed him slowly. He kissed her back and within moments their kisses were becoming more urgent, heated, his hands running eagerly down the long, strong sweep of her back to grab at her bottom while her hands snaked through his hair, pulling her closer, deeper into their kisses. She felt so good, so right. She was everything he ever wanted. She was…his wife.

Suddenly, without warning, he pulled away.

By the Gods, what was he thinking? What a poor husband he would make. She had just given him her virginity and already he wanted to take her again as if she was a common whore. He had not even taken his clothes off. She was to be his wife and he should treat her as a Lady. Cursing himself for his thoughtlessness, he pulled away from her and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

“What is wrong?” she asked. He heard the uncertainty in her voice. Seven hells, he did not mean to upset her. Could he do nothing right?

Turning back, he kissed her hair as she looked up at him with big, grey eyes.

“Wait, while I see to your needs,” he whispered, standing up.

Earlier he had noticed a bowl of water and herbs warming near the fire, a washcloth draped over the stand. Cousin Shireen certainly thought of everything. He walked over to the basin, soaked and then wrung out the wash cloth before bring it to their bed.

Realising what he meant to do, Arya parted her legs again for him and he washed her carefully, wiping away her virgin’s blood and his seed from the insides of her thighs. Turning his back to her, he wiped him self clean before dropping the cloth on the floor, swiftly followed by his clothes.

“Should you not tidy all that away and take the cloth back to the bowl? You don’t want to make a mess and upset Shireen,” Arya said, rolling onto her side so she could see him.
Sighing, he bent down to retrieve the pink stained cloth and his clothes.

“You don’t fool me Milady” he muttered over his shoulder. “You just enjoy looking at my bare arse.”

‘Twas true, she did enjoy watching him as he strode over to basin by the fire. Her eyes followed the lines of his broad, muscular back down to his narrow waist. She watched the muscles of his buttocks and long legs flex as he moved with the unconscious grace of a warrior. When he turned around she thought she had never seen anything, or anyone, more magnificent. The fire light flickered and danced on his skin, casting shadows on his chest and his cock, standing proud again against his stomach.

Back by the side of their bed, he grinned down at her.

“You are ready again,” she whispered, reaching out to touch him. He groaned appreciatively as she moved her hand slowly down his shaft and back up again.

“I fear it would take many more times tonight before my desire for you is satisfied.”

“But I do not want your desire for me to be satisfied. Ever,” she pouted, looking up at him, her own body reacting to his arousal, prickling with sensation, reading itself for another joining.

Climbing into their bed he covered them both before pulling her back to his front, the way they had slept together on the road, the way he knew their bodies fit perfectly together; his chest against he back, his thighs against hers, his cock against her arse.

“I dreamt you took me like this every night we lay together under the furs. At least, I think it was a dream.”

She could feel him chuckle behind her. “I dreamt the same dream.”

Biting her lip, she wondered how to explain this to him, “‘Twas more than a dream for me though. It felt…real.”

“I took your maidenhead only moments ago Arya. Of course ‘twas only a dream, no matter how much we both wanted it.”

Arya squeezed his hand to reassure herself as much as him. “I think Ghost and Nymeria are… having…you know…like we just did.”

She felt him still behind her. “Can you warg into Nymeria as Jon does with Ghost?”

It was her turn to be surprised. He had used the word “warg” that she had only learned recently. But she should not have been surprised. Of course Jon would have confided in Gendry.

“Not like Jon can. ‘Tis just in my dreams, like when Nymeria warned me of the outlaw’s attack in the night.”

He did not move, nor make any comment. The room was silent, save for his steady breathing and the crackle from the fire.

The silence seemed to stretch between them until Arya began to regret telling him. Was Gendry shocked? Angry? Did he think her a freak? Why did he not say anything?

“I hope Jon will teach me,” she added, hoping for some reaction.
Finally he said, “I hope their uncle Jon will teach our children too, for I pray they will be as much Stark as Baratheon.”

Arya’s heart swelled with love for him. She had a pack again; Gendry, Jon, Sansa, Nymeria, Ghost, even Ty and Bad Company. She could not recall being this happy.

“When you are not sore, I shall show you how much better being here with me is than your dream,” he whispered hoarsely into her hair.

She stifled a smile. All was well; save mayhaps she had wounded his male pride. She rubbed her bottom against him, “I am not sore my love and I would very much like you to show me.”

“If you are sure…”

She could feel his shaft stiffen and rise still further behind her and hear his need for her in his voice.

“I am certain,” she assured him, grinning to herself, enjoying the effect she had on him.

He shifted, holding her tighter to him and then she felt a hot, hard pressure as he guided himself into her from behind. Her being slick and wet and read for him eased his way, yet he filled her slowly, taking care to pause between thrusts, giving her time to stretch to fit him. When he was finally fully sheathed inside her, he slipped his arms around her and stroked the undersides of her breasts, his thumbs rubbing over her nipples that seemed to tighten and grow with every caress.

“I hope it does not hurt too much?” he asked, his breath warm and moist, against her ear.

“It does not hurt at all,” she lied; for she ached, but not with pain, with something else she could not name, some torment she instinctively knew only he could ease.

Slowly he withdrew before pushing in again and again. She quivered and arched against him, thinking she might die if he did not put an end to this exquisite ache that writhed and twisted and grew within her with every thrust. His heat surrounded her, pressed against her everywhere as they rocked together.

His breathing grew harsh and hers came in short little gasps as she felt herself teetering on the brink. She was so tight and hot, he was so hard and urgent. When she felt she was strung out so tight that she could take no more, he dropped his hand between her legs, seeking that slippery little nub, driving into her as his fingers worked their magic between her legs, causing her to shudder, crying out his name, pleading for more as her body clenched around him in a spasm of such intense pleasure, that wrested the seed from his body and left her shaking. He shuddered behind her with the force of his release.

“Was that better than your dream Milady?” he growled, his breath ragged, chest heaving and his cock still buried deep within her.

“Hmm, oh yes,” she sighed and ‘twas no lie.

Satisfied, he withdrew slowly and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight to him. Soon she heard his breathing change as he drifted off to sleep.

Arya knew sleep would claim her too, but she was not ready yet. She wanted to savour this new feeling. She wondered if this is what being safe felt like; lying warm in your lover’s feather bed, feeling drowsy and sated in his arms. Whatever the feeling was, she wanted this feeling to last forever. He was hers. She was his. Surely nothing could come between them now.
Ty had no idea where he was and truly, he was too tired to care.

Everything ached; a dull, constant, inescapable ache that threatened to pull him under into that dreamless sleep again. But, before he surrendered to it again, he wanted, nae needed to know what magic had roused him from his dreamless sleep. He had woken to the feeling of something wonderfully soft brushing against his face. His eyelids seemed to be made of lead, but with great effort he manage to open them enough to see a shape close by, hovering just above his face, something that moved, something out of his reach.

As the shape before his heavily lidded eyes rose and stretched, he recognised ‘twas an arm reaching out above him. The softness against his face had been the ripe curve of a woman’s breast as she leaned over him. Even through her clothing, he could feel the woman radiating warmth and her scent; the faint, salty smell of the sea, seemed strangely comforting, although he had never seen the sea. Or had he? Had he glimpsed it, shining in the sun, from atop a hill a long, long time ago? Mayhaps ‘twas only a dream.

Mayhaps he was dead and The Stranger had taken him to heaven? He watched in languid fascination as the womanly shape above him moved again and then slid back over him, that wondrous softness brushing against his cheek once more as her figure retreated. He should reach up and catch this vision afore it disappeared, but his arms would not obey his commands and even the effort of keeping his eyes open was beginning to seem too much.

Mayhaps this was not heaven, for if it was, surely the woman above him would be naked and those breasts would be swinging free. Mayhaps this was one of the seven hells where he would be tortured for all eternity by a woman he could not touch. Why, oh why had the Gods let him die without knowing a woman? He had wanted to do so much with his life. ‘Twas hardly fair he thought as his eyes fluttered closed and he slipped back into a fevered sleep. He knew he would dream only of his exquisite torturer.

The squire stirred. A sure sign that more milk of the poppy was due. Hurrying to his side, Shireen reached for the little blue bottle. As she had done many times over the past three days, she cradled his head in the crook of her arm and gently slipped the tip of her finger between his lips to open his mouth. Maester Pylos had warned her that the milky liquid must not spill, for then she might administer too little, and if she tried to rectify her mistake, too much.

Although she repeated this same ritual several times throughout the day and night, this time was different than the others. Mayhaps he was more awake than before, for this time his tongue sought the tip of her finger. Shireen stilled in shock as her body answered his touch with an aching pull from deep down in her belly. She remained as if frozen for what could have been one moment or a hundred of them, wondering what strange magic was at work here. When she recovered her wits enough to remove her finger, the squire groaned softly as if he too regretted its withdrawal.

Shireen held the little blue bottle to his parted lips and poured with shaking hands.
Phew. Don’t know about you, but I think I need a cold shower after that!

I reached an important personal milestone with the last chapter – 20,000 hits on Archive of Our Own. When I started this story that was my goal. So, having achieved my goal I’m just gonna stop now.

Hahahah. Of course I’m not, but I’m going to have next week off as I’ve done nothing else this weekend but pleasure you lot. See you all in a fortnight and thanks for all the great reviews on Friday. Hope you enjoyed this as much.
A Good Husband

Chapter Notes

Ok, I’m late. Technically it’s Saturday here, but each chapter seems to be taking me longer and longer. I hope you forgive the delay and enjoy this…

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gendry awoke to sunlight peeking around the edges of the curtains and Arya in his arms. He pulled her closer and kissed her wild hair. He loved her so much ‘twas like an ache deep inside of him. For the first time in his life he had everything he had ever hoped for, everything he had fought for. He was Lord Baratheon of Storm’s End, betrothed to Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell and he was surely the happiest man alive this morn.

Arya’s head rested on his shoulder, her arm flung possessively across his chest and the whole, exquisite, naked length of her lay against him. He stroked his fingers slowly down the graceful length of her back and over the swell of her hip, enjoying the feel of skin on skin. Hers was soft as silk, but he knew the strength that lay underneath. She was finally his; his wild, warrior girl. He had waited so long for her and last night had not disappointed.

The first time he had been so eager that he had worried he had let himself be carried away with the force of his need. But he could not have done too badly for she was as eager as he for their second joining. That time he felt he had something to prove; she had stunned him with her confession about Ghost and Nymeria. In truth ‘twas not the fact that she was a warg that troubled him; after all she was a Stark. He already knew Jon and Bran had the gift and Arya’s warning on the eve of the battle had come from Nymeria. Nae, that was not what vexed him; ‘twas rather the timing of her admission. He had taken her maidenhead moments before and she had chosen that moment to confide that she had warged into Nymeria as the she-wolf rutted with Ghost. He had to admit that the idea of Jon sharing in the experience had shocked and troubled him.

He could have chosen to ignore what he could never really understand or he could have let it irk him, let his jealously eat away at him. Instead he decided to prove to her that her dreams were nothing compared to what he could give her. Judging by the way she had writhed and moaned and begged him for release, he had been successful. That knowledge gave him a great deal of satisfaction.

‘Twas that pride that had made him make him think only of her pleasure when she woke him in the night by pressing her delicious, round arse hard against his cock. She had rolling her hips insistently while whispering his name, wanting what only he could give her. When he slid his hand between her thighs, he found her hot and wet for him and from the way she kissed him, her need was as urgent as his own.

After their first two wild joinings, he had promised himself that the next time he would take her slowly and he had. In the dark of the night he had lavished all the care and attention he could upon her. The candles had burnt down low and the fire reduced to mere embers in the hearth. In the faint, orange glow he had worshiped her body slowly and tenderly. The absence of light had left him relying on touch, sound and taste and he had tasted every inch of her. He had licked and sucked and stroked and taken her to the very brink of release, time and again, yet he had not let her over it until he knew she could take no more. Then they had fallen together in the dark in a climax so intense it
seemed near death and what came after felt like heaven. Lying in each other’s arms, sated and drowsy, ‘twas as if there was nothing and no one else in the world except them and their love.

He had listened to old men’s drunken talk of marriage and dismissed most of it, but one piece of advice, from Tom O’Sevens of all people, came back to him now; you can have sex with any woman, but if the God’s are good, you’ll know what it is to make love to a wife.

Gendry trailed his fingertips lightly over the swell of Arya’s breast and smiled as he realised that old rouge Tom had spoken the truth for once. It might be Arya’s maiden’s blood marking the sheet this morn’, but last night he had been as much a maid as she. Never before had he allowed himself to spill his seed inside a woman and never before had he wanted to stay after he had found his release. Aye, last night he had made love for the first time and, if the God’s were good, to his wife.

With a wry smile and a shake of his head, he banished any lingering doubts and negative thoughts from his mind. He had her promise to wed and he would see it done, even if he had to chain her to his bed as Lem suggested and have a Septon wed them in this very bedchamber.

Arya held to her father’s Old Gods and, after what he had seen north of The Wall, he could not believe in any others save them, however ‘twas still tempting to do it today. If only bloody Stannis had not burnt down the Godswood. He had still to visit the site, but he had no idea if a Godswood could be re-grown. Did anyone? Mayhaps Sam from his books or Willas Tyrell with his knowledge of plants.

So, in the absence of a Godswood, he would either have to wait or make do with a Septon. Surely there was one of them in Storm’s End? Gendry could call for him now and be done with it. A wedding in the Faith of the Seven was recognised in every part of Westeros. If anything should happen to him, Arya and any child she carried would at least have the protection of his name. He would be damned to the seven hells afore he would leave his son to grow up a bastard.

Seven buggering hells, he snorted. Where had these morbid thoughts come from? Moments ago he had believed himself to be the happiest man in Westeros and now he was contemplating his own death. He shook his head again as he traced light circles on Arya’s hip. ‘Twas obvious, even to him, that this sudden preoccupation with his mortality had been brought about as a result of his now having something to loose; Arya. Before, he had not even considered what would happen if he fell in battle, other than mayhaps who would care for his horse.

He would speak to her about it soon, but not yet. As much as he was tempted to kiss her awake, neither of them had much sleep the night before and the Maester said Arya needed more rest to recover from her ordeal. It had not been like her to ask him to slow down on the stair last night. Nae, Arya had always matched him step for step, blow for blow and mayhaps last night he should have let her rest instead of seeking pleasure with her. He chuckled to himself as he realised how futile any attempt to make her rest last night would have been. She had wanted their joining as much as he and he had been in no mood to deny her. But ‘twould be purely selfish to wake her now.

Gendry eased his arm from beneath her, smiling to himself as she made a little moan of displeasure when he moved away.

Once he sat up, his eyes were drawn to the tapestry hung on the wall directly in front of him. He had been vaguely aware of two figures engaged in some struggle, but, as he looked more closely, he could see that one was a stag and the other a knight. However, the positioning of the figures was all wrong. Gendry had seen enough tapestries hung in enough halls to know they were always the same; a celebration of some victory or other with the usual prancing horse, the demure maiden, the knight with sword or lance. But this was different. The knight seemed to be kneeling, as if in prayer while the stag leapt behind him. Intrigued, Gendry got up to examine the wall hanging more closely.
Instead of cold stone, bare wood, or even packed earth, his feet hit the softness of more tapestries, although not near the size or quality of the one hung on the wall that had caught his interest. He wondered if he would ever get used to such luxury. Tapestries on the floor – how many other boys from Flea Bottom had ever seen that? He could scare believe it himself. Padding over to the tapestry, he stood before it with his arms folded, contemplating the scene.

The kneeling knight wore golden armour, worked in the finest, shimmering threads. His blond hair curled and fell to rest on his shoulders in a cascade of brown and gold. The knight’s face was handsome and boyish. Although his eyes were closed, a knowing half smile curled his lips. He was obviously no Baratheon.

Up close, Gendry could see the craftsmanship and detail that had gone into depicting this beautiful knight. ‘Twas obviously a labour of love, but who had loved this knight so much and why?

Gendry searched for more clues as to the knight’s identity. He knelt on a field of small, blue flowers. Gendry vaguely recalled being told the name of these flowers; forget-me-nots, that was it! The knight grasped a sword in one hand and, strangely, an intricately worked, golden rose in the other. Gendry had seen that same rose recently, but where?

He stood for a while before the knight and stag, trying to recall why that rose was so familiar. When the answer finally came to him, ‘twas so obviously, he nearly laughed aloud. ‘Twas the rose of Highgarden as worn by Willas Tyrell. But there was no love lost between House Baratheon and House Tyrell. Mace Tyrell had laid siege to Storm’s End not once, but twice. Ser Davos and his onions had saved House Baratheon from starvation and defeat the first time and, much as it pained Gendry to admit it, Aegon and his bloody Golden Company the second.

Gendry resolved to find out what was so special about this Tyrell knight and why the fuck he was positioned so that Gendry had to look at him from his bed.

Putting that mystery aside for the moment, he wanted to see for himself the views that Arya had mentioned last night. Not wanting to wake her, Gendry lifted the edge of the curtain and stepped in front, letting it fall back into place behind him with a swoosh. The magnificence of the view from his bedchamber sucked the breath out of his chest with a similar sound.

The sea, the sky, and Shipbreaker Bay stretched out before him in all their morning glory. The sun sparkled on the water and on the rugged, vertical cliffs that formed the bay. Far below him, white crested waves broke on the rocks and half a dozen or so boats, so small as to look like toys, sailed the bay or were outlined on the horizon.

Gendry knew the power of the sea. He had experienced the cruelty of it at Eastwatch; standing helpless on the shore as the galley Storm Crow fought against the tempest for hours and lost, going down with all hands within sight of land. He had thrown up with every other soldier as they battled winter seas to take the Iron Islands and he knew his father’s parents had died in this very bay. But this morn’ the sea seemed to reflect his own mood; calm, content and at peace with the rest of the world.

Grinning, Gendry stepped out from behind the curtain, ready to face the challenges of the day ahead. Much as he wanted to stay abed and make love to his beautiful wife, she needed to rest and he had much to accomplish afore this bloody feast tonight.

Leaving Arya snoring happily, he gathered up his sword from the floor where he had discarded it in haste the night before. He also found new leather britches and a shirt that had been thoughtfully left out for him, no doubt by Shireen. After he was dressed, he went in search of his boots. Preferring to go barefoot than wear those ridiculous silk slippers from last night, he opened the bedroom door as
quietly as he could.

His boots were sitting in the corridor; at least he thought they were his boots, for he had never seen them clean. He had always presumed them to be a dull, matt black, but they were now so highly polished that they shone in the morning light. Shireen was no doubt to thank for this too and he would need to make a point of doing so. Smiling to himself at his all round good fortune, he took a last look back at his wife-to-be fast asleep in their bed and closed the door gently behind him.

As he strode into the hall, 'tis impossible to keep the grin off his face. He knew everyone would take him for a lovesick fool, but he did not care. The Great Hall of Storm's End could have been filled with The Others rather than men breaking their fast and still he would have faced them with a smile on his lips and joy in his heart.

Lem happened to be the first man Gendry saw as he walked in and, from the look of him, Lem did not share Gendry's enthusiasm for the day. His old friend cradled something in his arms and, despite his resolve to let nothing ruin this day, Gendry's heart sunk down to his gleaming boots. His view was blocked by Shireen, who stood with her back to him, but he could clearly see the grief etched on Lem's face. Was it someone or something Lem held in his arms? Was it Ty?

Gendry near ran in his haste to get to Lem. He sagged with relief when he saw over Shireen's shoulder that, rather than Ty hanging limp in Lem's arms, as Gendry had feared, his old friend cradled a bolt of cloth. It took Gendry a few moments to realise that the neatly folded material was Lem's old yellow cloak; only 'twas not so yellow any more.

Shireen was scolding a distraught Lem. "It stank, 'twas filthy and caked in that poor boy's blood. Of course I washed it!" She wagged one finger at Lem, while the other hand was fisting on her hip.

"But it ain't yellow no more woman!" Lem wailed before thrusting the cloak out to Gendry like a babe being presented for blessing. "See!"

Gendry did see. Instead of the filthy yellow he had grown accustomed to over the years, Lem's clock was now a very clean shade of...well...lemon.

Realising Gendry was behind her, Shireen immediately dropped her eyes and hung her head. Her black hair fell over her face, shielding it from view.

"Bleaching was the only way to remove the blood stains." Shireen muttered, clasping her hands nervously before her.

Gendry did not intend to let his friends' squabble spoil his mood. Stepping forwards, he clasped Lem by the shoulder.

"Old friend, do you not see that this new, lemon cloak actually suits you better? We have not called you Lem 'yellow' cloak afore have we? It has always been and will always be Lem lemon cloak."

"I suppose so," Lem admitted grudgingly as Gendry gave Lem's big shoulder a brotherly squeeze.

"See? Lemon is perfect!" Gendry winked at Shireen who was peeking up at him from under her hair. "Although I suppose we could yellow it up a bit if you really wanted. I'm sure every man in Bad Company would piss in a barrel for you. If we soaked it in that for a few days, it would do the job nicely, don't you think Shireen?"

"Yes My Lord." Shireen agreed brightly, playing along with Gendry's game. He decided to let her
‘My Lord’ pass unchecked on this occasion.

“Ach, there’s no need for all that…” Lem muttered, clearly unhappy at the thought of his beloved cloak being dunked in a barrel of piss.

“Then let’s leave Lady Shireen to get on with organising our feast and you and I shall find Davos. I have a pressing need to talk to him about a few things…” Gendry winked again at Shireen, before steering Lem off towards the dais at the far end of the room. Davos sat there with some other men he did not recognise, breaking their fast.

“Aye…all right then.” Lem muttered, still sounding aggrieved and cradling his cloak much as a mother might clutch a babe to her breast.

Men stopped talking, set their spoons down and turned to stare as Lord Baratheon and his companion walked through the long rows of tables. He could see men from Bad Company sat together, near the far wall and his right hand itched for the comfort of his sword as he made his way through the rows of silent men he did not recognise.

These must all be men of Storm’s End or mayhaps even Golden Company he thought. He saw little outright hostility on their faces, but neither did he see smiles of welcome. His good mood looked set to be tested yet further. Davos was right; he would have to assert his authority over every man here and soon.

Ser Davos made a show of standing and bowing low as Lord Baratheon approached the dais. The other two men beside him scraped their chairs back and stood with rather less enthusiasm, particularly the shorter, younger one who did not even bother to hide the contempt he obviously felt. He was a man to watch, Gendry thought grimly. Following their leader’s example, chairs all around the hall were slowly scraped back and men began to rise.

“I’ll go and sit with the rest of the boys…” Lem muttered under his breath, taking a step away. Gendry tightened his grip on Lem’s shoulder. Being careful to keep a smile plastered to his face, he hissed, “Nae. You had best stay by my side until we are sure where we stand with these men.”

“Aye.” Lem groaned under his breath. “I would rather fight a battle where I knew my enemy was the man coming at me with a sword in his hand. Instead I face these scheming cunts who would smile at me while they stab me in the back.”

“I doubt these ones would even bother with the smile,” Gendry murmured, his own forced smile fixed on his face.

Gendry and Lem walked up the steps to the dais. Davos introduced the two men as “Ser Marq Mandrake and Ser Tristan Rivers. Commanders of Golden Company.”

Without acknowledging their presence, Gendry turned to the hall, threw his arms wide and, in the voice he imagined his father would have used on such occasions, boomed, “Friends, your Lord commands you to be seated.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Gendry saw Ser Mandrake and Ser Rivers exchange glances, before slowly sitting down.

“Nicely done My Lord,” Davos muttered out of the side of his mouth.

Gendry made sure to let everyone else sit before he did so himself. As serving girls rushed to provide bowls of thick oatmeal and jugs of cream, Gendry finally turned to the two Sers. Ser Mandrake obviously had a hot head, for he was scarlet and looked fit to burst at what he perceived was a snub
from this upstart young Lord. Ser Rivers was taller, older and was regarding Gendry carefully, as if eyeing up an opponent before a tourney. Gendry saw a grudging respect for him in the older man’s eyes.

“I am grateful to you for your assistance here Ser Mandrake, Ser Rivers,” Gendry nodded to each knight. “I am sure that, as you are no longer needed here, you will be anxious to return to Golden Company.”

“And who says we are not needed here?” Ser Mandrake snapped. “We have defended this castle for three long years in the name of Aegon Targaryen.”

Gendry refrained from pointing out they had done nothing to defend The Stormlands from Edric. He was a fool if he expected anything more from sellswords.

“Forgive me, but I understand King Aegon has not paid for your services for several years? My understanding of sellswords was that they considered their employment to be terminated if their fees were not paid, but mayhaps I am wrong, for I have never had the inclination to sell my sword,” Lord Baratheon said coolly, drawing his magnificent Valyrian steel sword a few inches out from its scabbard, just because he could. Ser Mandrake looked as if he was ready to spit blood.

“In any event, one thousand Bad Company swords say you are no longer needed here.”

“And what say you, Lord Baratheon?” Ser Rivers asked, placing a warning hand on Ser Mandrake’s arm as the younger man reached for his own sword.

“I say that one thousand and one swords can be a very persuasive argument.” Gendry rested his hand on the bejewelled pommel of Oathbreaker and gave the two Sers a wolfish grin.

With his hand still on his companion’s arm, Ser Rivers stood up, closely followed by Ser Mandrake.

“If you have no need of us, we shall let you break your fast in peace Lord Baratheon,” Ser Rivers said, bowing low. Ser Mandrake made no attempt to bow and Gendry watched the two of them leave with narrowed eyes.

“What do you know of them?” he asked Davos once the Golden Company Commanders were out of earshot.

“That their fighting days are over, otherwise why would they stay here? Ser Rivers is smart enough to know a winning horse when he sees one. He will back you, but Ser Mandrake…he’s an arse and has treated Storm’s End like his own little Kingdom since he arrived. I don’t think you’ll get rid of him easily.”

“We’ll see,” Gendry mused, a plan to assert his authority at the feast tonight already beginning to form in his mind.

Lem had more immediate interests, digging into his bowl of porridge and asking Davos to tell them about Edric Storm and how he came to lead the band of outlaws. “And why no fucker lifted a finger to stop him,” Lem added with a growl.

Davos’ eyes flashed angrily as he held up his maimed hand, “If I could wield a sword, I would have hunted them down myself.”

“He did not mean to give offence Ser Davos,” Gendry said in an appeasing tone. “Edric had an army and even the Onion Knight who saved Storm’s End single handedly, is no match for an army.”
Lem nodded his agreement and kept eating as Gendry continued, “Lord Buckler told us he needed all his men to protect Bronzegate, although we suspect he did a deal with Edric, for Bronzegate seemed to be the only place in the northern Stormlands that did not suffer Edric’s raids.” Gendry leaned forwards, “But tell me Ser Davos, how did Storm’s End come to be untouched?”

Davos tugged at his greying beard, grimaced and shook his head wearily.

“I can assure you there was no deal done with Edric here. Edric stayed away from Storm’s End as he knew that, if attacked, our Golden Company friends would fight back. But providing Edric kept his distance – why would they bother? What do they care for the Stormlands? They only care for gold. After Renly and Stannis called their banners, there were not enough Stormlands men left to make up an army and, more importantly, no commander to lead them, save Edric.”

Gendry groaned, rested his elbows on the table and ran his hands through his hair. So many times he had wished he could have been here earlier. Years earlier. But he was not Lord Baratheon then and mayhaps Jon would not have fared so well without Bad Company fighting by his side. There was no point in wondering ‘what if?’ Gendry was here now and determined to make up for lost time.

“So why did Edric Storm turn against his own people?” Gendry asked wearily.

“I believe you are the cause of that Lord Baratheon…”

“Me?” Gendry repeated incredulously.

“Aye, you. Think back to the time we all spent together at The Wall.” Davos said pouring himself a cup of ale and settling back to begin his tale.

Gendry and Lem were both eager to hear Davos tell of what had transpired in the years since they last met.

“I hold myself responsible for taking Edric to The Wall in the first place and for much that transpired thereafter,” Davos sighed, tugging at his grey beard. “You will recall that after Stannis died ‘twas agreed I would escort Lady Selyse and Shireen back to Dragonstone.”

Gendry and Lem confirmed that was their recollection too and leaned closer.

“The way I remember it,” Davos continued, “‘twas not the plan that Edric would accompany us. However, I doubt anyone at The Wall was particularly sad to see him leave or anxious for him to stay.”

Gendry nodded. He had been too preoccupied with the life or death struggle against The Others to concern himself with Edric Storm. If he was being honest, his initial fascination with his half brother had quickly waned once he discovered they had nothing in common save their black hair and blue eyes.

“I recall Edric being jealous of you,” Lem said to Gendry, who raised his eyebrows in surprise.

The truth of it was that Gendry had been jealous of Edric when they first met, for Edric had been acknowledged and given everything a King’s son should have – save his father’s name. However, it was soon apparent that Edric had more interest in playing at war, than actually fighting one. He was keen to sit on the war council and rattle his sword, but preferred to hide behind the walls of Eastwatch or Castle Black while others fought and died.

“Do you not recall Stannis dismissing Edric as ‘a little bastard Renly’?” Lem asked.
“Aye, I do, but what has that got to do with me?” Gendry asked.

“Stannis sneered at Edric, but he took a shine to you,” Lem chuckled.

Gendry had fought side by side with Stannis against The Others, but he certainly did not recall ever thinking Stannis had “taken a shine to him” as Lem put it.

Davos also chuckled at Gendry’s confusion. “As Stannis didn’t give you to the red woman, didn’t compare you to Renly and never chopped your damn fingers off, I think we can agree Stannis liked you, or as close as he ever got to liking anyone.”

Gendry shrugged. ’Twas all in the past now and he could not see that it mattered whether Stannis liked him or not.

“Aye, Edric was jealous,” Davos said, “for although he had advantages you did not, you have never been afraid of any fight and you’ll choose the side of right, no matter the odds – just like your uncle Stannis.”

Gendry rolled his eyes. It never ceased to amaze him that Davos spoke so highly of Stannis, when the miserable old git had chopped the Onion Knight’s fingers off.

“’Twas because he could not compete with you in battle that Edric accompanied us on the long journey south,” Davos continued. “Mayhaps he hoped you would die at The Wall and The Others would rid him of his rival. During the journey I began to realise that Edric’s ambitions to gain a title and lands burned brighter than any of us thought. Because of his martial failings at The Wall, ’twas clear that, if Edric was to realise his ambition, he would need to rely on something other than the strength of his sword arm.”

“The Gods know he wouldn’t get far relying on that,” Lem snorted in disgust.

“So how did he propose to gain a title and lands?” Gendry asked impatiently.

“By wedding Shireen.”

“The little shit!” Lem exclaimed, banging his fist on the table, “Shireen was his cousin and a more innocent child did not exist!”

“Aye.” Davos agreed, rubbing his two hands over his face. One hand had long, strong fingers; the other only gnarled stumps. “And with that mad mother of hers not caring two figs about her and with Shireen being so naive, she was easy pickings for a scheming bastard like Edric.” Remembering the reprimand he had earned the last time he had used the word bastard, Davos nodded to Gendry and muttered, “Apologies My Lord, but you know what I mean.”

Gendry couldn’t help but grin, “’Tis quite apt in the circumstances Ser Davos. Please continue with your tale.”

“Aye, well, the bold Edric decided that marrying the only legitimate Baratheon heir was easier than fighting for lands or a title.”

Gendry raised his eyebrows at that, although Davos seemed oblivious.

“I didn’t realise what was going on at first. It never occurred to me he would try something like that, what with them being cousins and all.”

Lem snorted, “Cousin’s ain’t so bad. There’s been a hell of a lot worse going on with them
“Mayhaps if he hadn’t fucked every single one of Selyse’s handmaidens on the journey, I might have had more faith that his intentions towards Shireen were honourable,” Davos said. “He’d spend half the day in the wheelhouse with the woman and I’d hear them all giggling and laughing. Aye, he was working on Selyse too – not that she took much persuading. If I hadn’t kept the wheelhouse guarded at night by men I could trust, I dare say Edric would have ruined Shireen afore we made it to Dragonstone and then they would have had to marry.”

“I commend you on your vigilance Ser Davos,” Gendry said seriously. Davos dismissed the compliment with a wave of his maimed hand.

“Damage was still done. I tried to speak to Selyse, but I would have been as well speaking to one of those Dragonstone gargoyles she loves so much. All she was interested in was the King’s blood running through Edric’s veins. Edric had convinced her ‘twould be the start of a glorious new era for them all. She still holds to that damn Red God you know. I pity the poor bastards stuck down there in Dragonstone with her.” Davos sighed, gazing down at his cup of ale, oblivious to the fact he had used the word “bastard” yet again.

‘Twas Gendry’s turn to sigh, “And what did Shireen think of Edric’s plan to wed her?”

Davos groaned and lowered his voice to a whisper, as if afraid they were being overheard, “You must not tell Shireen I have told you this, for she is mortally embarrassed by it now. She thought herself in love with Edric then. He had what I believe was your father’s way with women,” Davos said darkly, while glaring at Gendry, as if he was somehow to blame for Edric’s charm. “She had never had a man show so much as a passing interest in her before and her head was easily turned by Edric and his silver tongue. He had her under his spell. All he had to do was snap his fingers and she would come running.”

“So how come they ain’t married and Edric ain’t Lord of Dragonstone right now?” Lem asked.

“On the last night afore we sailed for Dragonstone, I took Shireen for a walk along the beach where I knew Edric had arranged to meet two of Selyse’s handmaidens and, as I had hoped, we caught them in the act. Shireen turned and fled, but ‘twas enough to break the spell he had over her.”

“And Selyse? Did this break the hold he had over her too?” Gendry asked, for it was natural that an innocent maid like Shireen be shocked by finding her betrothed fucking the servants. But Selyse was another matter. She was a cunning bitch. Gendry remembered well enough Selyse’s schemes to marry Gerrick Kingsbloods’ three daughters to three of her knights. Shireen would not be the first daughter forced to wed a man who blatantly fucked serving wenches under his young wife’s nose.

“Ah, well…” Davos said with a grin, “I had a suspicion Edric was not only fucking the handmaidens but their Lady too. Selyse was quite happy to betray her own daughter by fucking Edric but she could not forgive Edric for betraying her.”

“Edric fucked old Selyse Florent?” Lem spluttered incredulously. “Mayhaps Edric had more guts than I thought.”

“Ambition will drive a man to do things normally considered beyond the pale,” Davos agreed.

Gendry had to nod his agreement. He would not have fucked Selyse Florent for any lands or title, but what had driven him to rise from the sewers of Flea Bottom if ’twas not ambition and principally his ambition to prove himself worthy of Lady Ayra Stark?
“That very night I stole a boat and took Shireen to Storm’s End. Edric found himself abandoned by both Shireen and Selyse, his plans to gain lands and wealth by marriage in ruins. He was going to take what he felt he was entitled to right way or wrong. He found support amongst the dregs of the Stormlanders, became an outlaw and stole what he could not obtain by any other means.”

“Why did you bring Shireen here?” Lem asked

“Where else was I to take a Baratheon Lady, during a war?” Davos growled. “The bast…men of Golden Company had no love for Stannis, but I hoped the smallfolk here would take Shireen to their hearts and so they have.”

“Aye, she certainly has Storm’s End and everyone one here under her thumb,” Gendry muttered, remembering how fear of Shireen had made him tidy up his clothes and that bloody rag last night even though ‘twas his room and he had Arya waiting for him, naked in his bed. The memory brought a smile to his face for several reasons.

“You need to arrange for her to wed as soon as possible,” Davos demanded finally.

“Me?” Gendry near yelped.

“Aye. As head of House Baratheon ‘tis your responsibility to ensure your House survives and thrives and that includes making marriage alliances for your kin as well as producing your own heir.”

“He was certainly doing his best to plant his seed last night!” Lem guffawed, slapping Gendry’s back so hard that ale from the cup he held in his hand sloshed over the table. When Davos also expressed his approval by slapping his back, Gendry was forced to accept their congratulations with good grace. This only confirmed what he already knew; in a castle there were no secrets. From the lowest kitchen wench to the highest Lord, everyone knew everyone else’s business.

“Shireen is well past the marrying age, but with the war and no father or uncles to arrange a match for her and a mad mother…”

“And that greyscale,” Lem added, to a snort of disapproval from Gendry.

“What?! I’m only saying aloud what we’re all thinking.” Lem huffed. “Your great lords are in short supply now seeing as we did for half of them during the war and the ones that are left ain’t exactly going to be falling over themselves to wed Shireen.”

“So you must give her Dragonstone as a dowry.” Davos said to Gendry. The old man’s eyes bored into him. Gendry suspected Davos was warning him not to oppose his plans for Shireen.

Lord Gendry Baratheon, the first of his name (but hopefully not the last) blew out a long sigh. His good mood was rapidly disappearing. Sellswords in his castle, marriages, dowries; all problems he had hoped never to encounter.

“I have no use for Dragonstone,” Gendry conceded. “Shireen can have it for her dowry.”

“Does that not mean you have to get rid of the mother first?” Lem wondered.

“Exactly.” Davos grinned.

Gendry blew out an even longer and deeper sigh. He had walked into that one. Sellswords, marriages, dowries and now he could add mad mothers to his list of problems.

“Let us find her a suitable husband first and then worry about Selyse.” He decided. He could only
cope with so much this early in the morning.

“So you’ll take Shireen back to King’s Landing with you, find a suitable husband for her there and gift her Drangonstone?” Davos asked, only ‘twas not really a request – more of a demand.

“Aye, she can return with us to King’s Landing,” Gendry agreed, trying to think of any eligible men who would make a good alliance for House Baratheon. If he had a choice, he wanted a strong lord who would hold Dragonstone for him. He came up with no one – not a single name. Lem had been right; seven years of war had decimated the sons and heirs of the Great Houses of Westeros.

Gendry decided he would put that problem off too. Mayhaps, when they arrived in King’s Landing, the Dragon Queen might take the matter out of his hands. He suspected Daenerys might even enjoy such an onerous task. He had more pressing problems to attend to.

“Now we are agreed how to deal with Lady Shireen, can we decide how we are going to deal with Golden Company…”

-o-

Arya was woken by sunlight flooding into the room, but ‘twas not Gendry she saw when she opened her eyes. Instead she saw Shireen bustling around, pulling open the curtains.

With a groan Arya sat up, dragged her hands through her hair, yawned and muttered “What time is it?”

“Time to get up.” Shireen said, as she yanked back another set of curtains to let even more light into the room. “I have arranged for food to be brought here as you have slept past the mid-day meal. Then you must bathe and prepare for the feast tonight.”

Arya yawned again and was about to protest when a maidservant appeared at the door bearing a tray laden with delicious smelling food. Arya’s growling stomach was quite ready to comply with Shireen’s demands even if Arya was not. She had not eaten much the day before and her stomach had been far too full of butterflies to manage more than a few mouthfuls when she sat down by the fire with Gendry last night.

The maidservant placed the tray on a table beside the bed, curtsied and retreated quickly. Shireen nodded a brisk approval to the woman before dismissing her.

“How is Ty?” Arya asked between mouthfuls of peaches and cream.

Did she imagine it, or did Shireen blush slightly as she answered, “He had a restless night, but Maester Pylos says that is a sign of his healing.”

“Good,” Arya said, watching Shireen closely for any other signs that something was amiss, but without seeing either her eyes or even getting a clear view of her face, ‘twas difficult to read Shireen. The Faceless Men taught that to know what a man was thinking was to know his weakness. Once you knew his weakness, you could exploit it. The emotions she had been taught to seek out were greed, envy, lust and pride. Mayhaps woman were harder to read, for Arya had little experience of them or mayhaps Shireen had none of those weaknesses. But she had others; there was no doubt about that.
“Why do you never meet my eyes when we talk Shireen?” Arya asked.

Shireen pursed her lips and looked up at the ceiling. “On this occasion, ‘tis because you are undressed.”

“Oh.” Arya said, surprised. “I had not realised bare skin made you uncomfortable.”

Arya recalled having a robe somewhere. She looked around the room, before finding it folded by the fire. She remembered telling Gendry she had been too warm last night. He had seemed to appreciate her removing the robe, but that was nothing compared to his reaction when she told him she agreed to a betrothal.

Smiling to herself as she recalled what happened next, Arya swung her feet out of bed and then moaned in pain as several parts of her body protested all at once. Her shoulders and arms still ached from the ride, but the more insistent pain came from her thighs, her bottom and between her legs. Parts of her body well used for the first time last night made their discomfort known as she walked stiffly over to the fireplace. Pulling on her robe produced another involuntary groan.

“Maester Pylos has provided healing herbs for your bath.” Shireen said as she walked over to the bed and picked Arya’s discarded shift up from the floor.

Arya muttered her thanks. Mayhaps a bath would soothe her aching muscles and…other places. Tying the belt of her silk robe around her waist, Arya walked back towards Shireen who held the shift up to fold it, then realised ‘twas torn straight down the middle. Her eyes flew open in surprise.

“Um…sorry about that,” Arya muttered. “Can it be mended?”

Shireen hastily rolled the ripped shift up in a tight ball, “It will make good polishing cloths,” she said, her voice high pitched and strained by her obvious discomfort.

“The sheet might be ruined too…” Arya muttered, pulling a face. Oh why did she have to have this discussion with Shireen of all people?

Shireen threw back the bedcovers and the two women stared at the bloody sheet. The maiden’s mark was at the very edge of the bed. Embarrassment flushed Arya’s face scarlet.

In truth, she was surprised they had made it to the bed at all that first time. In the heat of the moment, she had not realised Gendry’s feet must have still been on the ground. ‘Twas no wonder he had seemed angry with himself after. Bedding her while wearing a pink silk robe and his small clothes around his knees was probably not how Gendry had imagined their first joining. ‘Twas not how she had imagined it either, but all the same, she had not been disappointed. Remembering the hot, urgent passion of it made Arya’s toes curl and that place between her legs ache even more, but ‘twas an enticing ache, full of anticipation.

Arya was so lost in her lascivious thoughts that she was only vaguely aware of Shireen asking her a question.

“Pardon?” Arya managed to splutter.

“Your wedding night.” Shireen repeated as she pulled the sheet off the bed. “Do you wish to keep this sheet for the bedding?”

Although she was avoiding meeting Arya’s eyes, from the colour of her face, Shireen was as embarrassed by this as Arya was herself.
“Um…I think not. A little blood can be easily produced if needs be.”

Shireen was obviously horrified by that suggestion. Arya was not sure if Shireen was shocked by the idea of inflicting an unnecessary wound or by the thought of proclaiming oneself a maiden when ‘twas not true.

“Will you cut yourself?” Shireen gasped.

“I’ll not cut myself stupid! I’ll cut Gendry. Just a little. He’ll not mind. Mutch.” Arya chuckled. Shireen giggled, immediately covering her mouth with her hand, as if ashamed to be laughing at such a wicked thing.

Arya could not imagine Sansa laughing at that. Mayhaps Shireen was not as prim as Arya had first thought. Full of the joys of her first bedding, Arya wanted to share her excitement with someone.

“How about you Shireen? Is there a man you have dreamed of lying with?” Arya asked, sitting down on the bed and patting the space beside her.

Shireen looked at the bed where Arya’s hand rested, shook her head and clutched the bloody sheet closer to her chest.

Unperturbed, Arya continued, “Mayhaps you have not met the right man yet. I never imagined I would want any man until I met Gendry…well, met him again.”

Shireen said nothing and her eyes remained downcast. Her only response was to incline her head slightly towards Arya. Arya took that as a sign to continue.

“I knew him before, when we were children, but I thought he was stupid and smelly then.” Arya laughed as she remembered rolling around Lady Smallwood’s forge with Gendry and grinned as she recalled his recent confession that he had wanted to do more than just tickle her. “I suppose I liked him well enough, but I was too young then. Mayhaps the right person, but the wrong time? What about you?”

Shireen shook her head and turned away to gaze out of the window, still hugging the bloody sheet to her chest. Arya got up from the bed to stand beside her and, after a moment’s hesitation, put her arm gently around Shireen’s shoulder.

“You do not need to tell me, but I would like us to be as sisters. Goodsisters,” she said, giving Shireen’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze, “and mayhaps I can help?”

Shireen turned her shoulders ever so slightly towards Arya, lifted her head and for the first time, shyly met another high born lady’s gaze. Shireen waited for Arya to grimace as she saw the full extent of the greyscale or even recoil in horror, but Arya did not so much as flinch.

Shireen so wanted to be like Arya, to be bold and wild, to travel to exotic lands, to not care what anyone else thought of her and, more than anything, Shireen wanted someone to wed her for love. She had bottled everything up inside for so long, that this little sympathy from Arya was enough to make Shireen’s stoic facade crumble. Her breath came in ragged sobs as she told, for the first time,
how she had fallen in love with, and ultimately been betrayed by, Edric Storm.

-o-

Gendry’s breath caught in the back of his throat as he watched Arya walk towards the dais, her eyes never leaving his. She was wearing a dress; red like she had worn in King’s Landing. But ‘twas not the dress that made him unable to tear his eyes away, that made him oblivious to everyone and everything around him.

Nae, ‘twas the fire in her eyes that lit an answering one in his belly; ‘twas the proud curve of her neck, the lithe, deadly grace of her walk, the sensual roll of her hips. ‘Twas the memory of her legs around his hips, her tongue in his mouth, his cock and his seed deep inside of her that made him realise he was lost. If she asked him to follow her to the ends of the earth he would do it; anything to have her, to possess her and not lose her again.

He held his hand out as she approached. As she placed his hand in his, he bent his head to brush his lips across the back of her hand. “Milady” he murmured.

“My Lord,” she replied with a wicked smile that sent blood pounding through his veins and straight to his cock. After all those frustrated nights under the furs, he had not thought it possible to want her any more than he had, but he was wrong. He wanted her with an urgency and a need that both shocked and excited him.

He motioned for her to sit by his side. Arranged around them on the dais were various minor lords he had met only today and the sellswords Ser Marq Mandrake and Ser Tristan Rivers. Davos’ and Lem’s were the only familiar, friendly faces.

Not caring what anyone else thought, as he pushed Arya’s chair in behind her, he whispered against her ear, “’Tis a pretty dress, but I would prefer to see you naked,” The deep flush of her cheeks pleased him no end.

Sitting down, Gendry not only had to adjust his sword belt, which he had deliberately worn tonight, but he had to adjust his britches to accommodate his straining cock. Only when he was comfortably seated, did he notice that everyone else was still standing, awaiting his command, “Sit!” he bellowed, with more force than he intended.

Immediately the Great Hall was filled with noise; chairs scraping, people talking, cups being filled.

“How are you?” he asked, hoping Arya understood what part of her he was particularly concerned about. Gendry did not know how long it took a woman’s body to heal after the first time, particularly when that first time had been followed by two more times. He had already resigned himself to a few more nights of frustration, but still, he hoped she was a fast healer.

“How am I?” she repeated. “Well, this dress is so tight I can hardly breathe, my feet are pinched in these fancy dancing slippers and I swear Shireen was trying to stab me with hair pins earlier,” Arya said stiffly, pretending not to understand what Gendry meant.

“Oh.” Was all he said, but his face fell, disappointment writ large all over it. What woman would not want to do anything she could to bring the sparkle back to those sky-blue eyes of his? Arya was delighted to see how much he wanted her and ‘twas all she could do not to laugh.
“And how are you My Lord?” she asked, trying hard to stifle a grin and not entirely succeeding.

He shrugged and sighed, “My Lordly duties have taken up all of my day and I suspect tomorrow will be no different… and the day after that…and the day beyond that. There is a never ending stream of people who want something from me.”

Arya slipped her hand under the table to rest on the crotch of his soft leather britches. His eyes widened in surprise and his cock, already hard, twitched and rose higher under her hand.

She leaned across him on the pretext of lifting his wine cup and took the opportunity to murmur softly, “I want something from you too…” as she stroked her hand firmly up and down his leather encased cock.

“Aye,” he gasped gruffly. “Name it and it shall be yours.”

“I want you to find a husband for Shireen. A good one.”

“What?” he hissed. That was not what he had expected or hoped she would say.

“You heard me. A husband for Shireen.”

Gendry grunted and lifted her hand from his crotch to drop in back into her own lap.

“Davos beat you to that request. It seems my most pressing duty here is not to rid myself of bloody sellswords, to secure the castle’s defences or supplies, but to find a good match for my cousin.”

“Not a good match. A good husband.” Arya corrected him.

“I have already agreed with Ser Davos that she will return with us to King’s Landing. I will deal with the matter then, but until we are back in the bloody Red Keep, I don’t want to hear another word about it.” Gendry said through gritted teeth.

“But…”

“Arya,” he growled, “I need to secure my position, our position, here. Much as I want to see Shireen happily wed, if I do not attend to essential matters first, all our struggles, all my struggles, will be for naught.”

“But…”

“Nae,” he snapped, cutting her off. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and then spoke slowly, as if explaining something to a very small child, “Do not vex me on this. You have my promise that I will attend to it in King’s Landing. Until then …not…another…word.”

“Fine.” Arya huffed, crossing her arms, wishing she had worn her britches after all and not bothered with this bloody red dress Shireen had found for her. Why had she been so eager to please him anyway?

“Do you have Needle strapped to your thigh?”

Arya scowled at him, before muttering, “Of course.”

“Good. Be ready in case this does not go according to plan.”

With a deep intake of breath, Lord Baratheon stood and called for attention. As he had anticipated, the men of Bad Company and most of the men and woman of Storm’s End fell silent immediately
but more than a few of the men from Golden Company continued with their conversations, deliberately defying his command.

‘Twas for this reason he had ordered Davos to seat the loyal men of Bad Company at the sides of the hall. With their weapons hidden under their tables, they would be able to control every exit, if required.

“Friends, people of Storm’s End, brothers-in arms,” he began, raising his cup, “A toast to The Three Headed Dragon.” He was pleased to note that every person in the hall raised their cup.

“‘Tis by their command I am made Lord Baratheon of Storm’s End.” As expected, that provoked a rather more subdued reaction, the men of Golden Company being noticeably silent.

“As my father’s son and the rightful heir to House Baratheon, ‘tis my intention to make the Stormlands great again! I will do this with your support, with Lady Arya of House Stark by my side and the men of Bad Company behind me!”

Although he did not look directly at her, he was aware of Arya’s cup stopping halfway to her lips. A tremendous cheer went up from his men, positioned all around the hall. The men of Golden Company began to look nervous, belatedly realising they were surrounded.

“I wish to thank the men of Golden Company for their service to Storm’s End and House Baratheon. A toast to Golden Company!”

Although they raised their cups, by now the men of Golden Company were in a state of near panic. Gendry saw hands reaching for swords that were not there, for he had insisted every man remove their weapons before entering the Great Hall. Seeing the men of Bad Company comply, the men of Golden Company had reluctantly agreed. No doubt they were beginning to question the wisdom of that decision.

Gendry drained his cup before bringing it crashing down onto the table. “Men of Golden Company, I thank you and I relieve you of your duties. You are free to leave. Now.”

Gendry spread his arms and his hands wide, indicating the doors at either side of the hall, guarded by his loyal men.

There was consternation and confusion amongst the sellswords of Golden Company and on the dais Ser Mandrake and Ser Rivers were openly arguing. Gendry smiled as Lem and Davos moved into position behind the unarmed sellsword Commanders. Gendry rested his own hand on the pommel of his sword.

To Gendry’s surprise Tristan Rivers, shoved Marq Mandrake aside and strode towards him. Gendry’s sword was half way out of his scabbard and Lem’s hands were on Ser Rivers’ shoulders when the big man dropped to his knee before Lord Baratheon.

“My Lord!” the sellsword shouted above the confusion. Gendry held his hand up and the hall fell silent, expectation weighing heavily in the air.

“My Lord Baratheon,” Ser Rivers repeated, “I have a woman here, three children and another on the way. I will gladly swear my allegiance to you and to House Baratheon. If you grant me leave to remain, my sword is yours.”

Immediately Ser Rivers speech was finished, more shouts came from the floor of the hall, “I have a wife and child too!” “I will swear allegiance!” and some cries of “House Baratheon” from the men in the centre of the hall.
Gendry glanced towards Lem and Davos who both nodded their consent.

Sliding Oathbreaker, back into its scabbard, Gendry also nodded. “Very well. Those who bend the knee and swear allegiance to me and to House Baratheon are free to remain at Storm’s End.”

There was more confusion on the floor of the hall and a few scuffles broke out as a significant number of the Golden Company men pushed their way through the crowd to kneel at the front of the dais. Ser Rivers remained kneeling, but Ser Mandrake looked furious, his face scarlet with rage. Gendry could see from his position on the dais what the men on the floor could not. In addition to a restraining hand on Marq Mandrake’s shoulder, Ser Davos held a knife to the sellsword’s back.

“The rest of you are free to leave,” Gendry thundered. “Your weapons will be returned to you once you are outwith my castle walls.”

Amid grumbling and pushing and in some cases jeering, the rest of Golden Company, including Ser Mandrake, was herded to the doors in order that they could make their way from the hall.

Once they had cleared the room, Gendry asked Arya to stand by his side. Together they accepted the oaths of the kneeling men and only then did Gendry begin to accept that Storm’s End was truly his.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Brazilian Guy for saving my ass (again) and for always being there when I need him.

I’m intending to post next Friday and I hope not to have another week off until we’re done. I think we have 3 more chapters to go, but I always seem to find more I want to say, so that might turn out to be a rather elastic prediction.

Until next Friday…
Lady Shireen of House Baratheon

Chapter Notes

Dear readers, I’m late. Very late. I let you down and I’m sorry. I think this is the first time I’ve missed a deadline and it was Brazilian Guy’s fault. I wasn’t gonna go out with my friends, I was gonna stay in on Friday night, finish it and post it, but he persuaded me real life was more important. However he didn’t make me drink too much, dance too much and stay out too late (but I’m still blaming him!).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya’s heart pounded in her chest. Her heart was racing as fast as her mind. One quick scan of the room was enough for her to see it all; Anguy, Harlan and the rest of Bad Company grim faced and ready by the doors, the men of Golden Company alarmed yet defiant in the centre of the hall, Lem and Davos moving into position behind them and Lord Baratheon standing beside her. He was tense, excited, determined and so far from the boy of her childhood. He looked exactly the same. He looked totally different.

Her hand found Needle without conscious thought. Whatever happened, she would come out of this alive and no one would take Gendry from her, but what was he doing? He had invited these men to feast under his roof, in his hall. Surely he could not mean to spill their blood? But she could not forget the Red Wedding. Did honour and the ancient laws of hospitality mean nothing anymore? Even to Gendry? What of Ty? What of Shireen? They could not defend themselves if attacked. Had Gendry thought on them? Were they safe and why could he not have forewarned her?

Calm as still water

Arya forced herself to listen, forced herself to take deep, calming breaths, regulate her heart beat and clear her head. He had warned her he intended to assert his authority in Storm’s End, but so soon?

Beside her, Gendry was offering the men of Golden Company a choice and most of them took it. The rest were escorted or removed from the hall. The men who remained in the Great Hall men bent the knee. Gendry gripped her hand in his as the men of Golden Company swore fealty to him, to her, to House Baratheon and to the Stormlands. Relief washed over her in waves.

When she finally sat down and raised a cup of wine to her lips, her hand was shaking. She could not say if ’twas due to the release of tension or with anger, or mayhaps both.

Gendry was obviously delighted by the outcome. She was furious.

When he turned to her and said “That was easy,” ’twas all she could do not to fling her cup of wine in his face.

“You dare lecture me on securing our future and then you arrange this…this…” she was so angry she could hardly speak, never mind think of a word to describe what had just transpired, “…without having the courtesy to tell me!” She only kept from yelling at him with a great effort of will.

“We only made the plan this morn’…” he began to explain.
“We? We!” Arya spluttered, setting her cup of wine back down of the table for fear of spilling it in anger. “So everyone knew of your plan except me?!”

“Aye, well not everyone…” he trailed off, beginning to feel uncomfortable. Their ‘discussion’ was attracting the attention of a few of the other lords and ladies on the dais. However Arya seemed oblivious to the scene they were causing.

“Lem knew, Davos knew and it seems the whole of Bad Company knew. So tell me My Lord,” she said with all the icy sarcasm she could muster, “Who did not know?”

He was about to say ‘Golden Company’ and then thought better of it.

“We will discuss this later; when we do not have an audience.” He replied quietly through gritted teeth, so only she could hear.

Arya did not look as if she was prepared to wait a moment longer, but fortunately for him, a fanfare of trumpets abruptly ended their conversation. Doors at the back of the hall swung open to reveal a boat, a full sized boat, being wheeled into the hall. It seemed as every person gasped in amazement all at once. Gendry looked at Arya and she looked at him, obviously neither of them had been told of this plan.

‘Twas definitely a real wooden boat, running full sail with his black Baratheon stag prancing on the yellow canvas mainsail. ‘Twas being pushed down the wide central isle of the hall by four men costumed as sailors. They were followed by a seemingly endless procession of liveried servants.

The boat trundled to a halt in front of the dais. The ‘sailors’ who had been pushing the boat, bowed stiffly to Gendry as servants lifted silver platters from the bottom of the boat and from shelves hidden in the rigging.

The trays presented to them were groaning under the weight of oysters, mussels, crabs and other shelled creatures Gendry could not name, but whose delicate pink flesh and enticing aroma made his mouth water.

Gendry had not noticed Ser Davos return to the hall until he heard the Onion Knight behind him, proudly chucking, “The inexhaustible bounty of the sea harvested by your fishing fleet My Lord. I hope you will tell Lady Shireen you were well fed and well pleased.”

“He will.” Arya confirmed, before Gendry had even a chance to open his mouth. Gendry frowned while Davos laughed, no doubt used to his wife answering on his behalf too.

“Ser Davos, is that a real fishing boat?” Arya asked in awe, forgetting her anger with Gendry for the moment.

Davos could not contain his pride as he confirmed, “Aye, built by the best shipwrights in the Stormlands for Lord Renly. He might not have known how to win a war, but Renly damn well knew how to impress at a feast. I don’t doubt that pretty little boat would sail like a dream if I ever got the chance to take her out,” Davos said as he gazed at the sleek little boat with ill disguised longing.

“Not even for you Ser Davos,” Gendry chuckled, “not even for you.”

That boat would never see the sea. Gendry intended to treat that boat carefully. He hoped to impress Jon and Aegon with it when the time came to feast them at Storm’s End. He hoped ‘twould be soon.

With Golden Company gone, Gendry felt near drunk with relief. Ser Davos had arranged for a friend of his with a conveniently large boat to take the men back to the free cities. The payment had been
reasonable, so Gendry had asked no questions, although he suspected Davos’ ‘friend’ was most likely a pirate. All that mattered to Gendry was that he was effectively rid of Golden Company and his control of Storm’s End was assured.

His good mood seemed to rub off on Arya, for she did not mention his omitting to include her in his plans again. The evening passed in a blur of relief, good company and excellent food. However, Gendry knew his betrothed well enough to suspect that she had not forgotten about it completely. He was soon to be proved right.

As the last plates were cleared away, a band of minstrels appeared and Gendry groaned. He knew the inevitability of what came next, no feast was ever complete without it. Dancing. He had been so intent on ridding himself of Golden Company; he had given no thought to the feast itself.

His palms began to sweat as the minstrels began to tune their instruments. There was no point looking to Arya for help, as she sat back sipping her wine, smugly watching him squirm with a delighted smirk on her face. She knew he could not dance, for they had discussed it the first time he had kissed her in the Red Keep and she was enjoying his discomfort now. Damn her. No doubt she considered this payback for his failure to consult her about Golden Company earlier.

He wondered if, as Lord here, he could simply stand up and command these damn minstrels to depart. But the evening had been such a success and the mood in the hall so jubilant, that to end it now for his own sake would destroy much of the good will and respect he had earned this day. However, he doubted the occupants of Storm’s End would have much respect left for him once they saw him try to dance.

The first bars of the tune were struck. He knew everyone was waiting for him lead the first dance as was custom. With a strangled groan he pushed his chair back and stood up. Arya also rose. He barely had time to hear her whisper, “I will save you. Catch me!” before she shrieked dramatically, slapped the back of her hand to her forehead and collapsed sideways into his arms.

Chaos erupted all around him. Ladies cried out in shock and clutched their hands to their mouths as Lords yelled for Maester Pylos, for air, for wine, for space, for quiet and a hundred other things he could not hear for the mêlée surrounding them.

Scooping Arya into his arms, he pushed through the crowd that had already begun to form around them. Well meaning lords and ladies urged him to stay, to wait for the Maester, but he ignored them all, growling “Make way!” as he strode out of the hall with Arya hanging limp in his arms.

Maester Pylos was already rushing down the corridor, followed by an anxious squire, by the time Gendry was out of the hall.

“We must get her to my chambers!” Pylos cried, his usually inscrutable face flushed with concern.

Gendry ignored him and headed for the stairs.

As Pylos started protest, Gendry barked, “I know what ails her. I will take care of her. Ensure we are not interrupted until the morn!”

The mystified Maester, the squire who had acted as messenger and dozens of people who had begun to pour out of the hall all watched in disbelief as Gendry started up the stairs.

Sensing their confusion, he stopped, turned around and bellowed, “Get back to your feast. The lady is drunk!” He felt Arya stiffen in his arms at that. “’Tis nothing to concern yourselves with. Please
enjoy the rest of the feast,” he added rather more cordially.

Reluctantly, the crowd began to disperse and return to the hall. As he rounded the first corner in the tower stair he heard the music begin again. Hopefully they would all enjoy themselves into the small hours, but he had doubts about whether he would enjoy the rest of the night, as Arya was obviously furious with him.

“Drunk? Drunk!” she hissed now they were out of sight and sound of the crowd. She struggled in his arms, kicking her legs and pushing at his chest. “Could you not have thought of something better than that?” she demanded.

He chuckled, “You gave me no warning and the only other thing that came to mind was to claim you had fainted because you were with child.” The sudden look of horror on her face made him laugh aloud, “and I thought you would like that even less, given that we are not wed yet.”

She seemed to think about that, for she stopped struggling and said wickedly, “Aye, drunk was better, but nevertheless, I saved you and I will make you pay for that.”

“I look forward to it,” he growled, hoping she had something in mind that involved lying down together.

“You can put me down now.”

“I could, but I won’t,” he grinned.

She sighed resignedly and let him carry her all the way to their chambers.

Once again candles flooded the room with flickering light and the fire burned low and welcoming in the hearth. Was he to be treated to this every night? He had assumed it would only happen once, to mark their first night together, but mayhaps he could get used to it…given time he thought with a chuckle.

“I am glad you are in a good mood My Lord, for we must have words.”

Gendry had hoped she would have forgotten about their argument, but alas, no.

He had intended to lay her down on the bed and join her there himself, but as soon as he kicked the door closed behind them, she demanded he put her down in a tone he was loath to disobey.

No sooner had he set her on her feet when she rounded on him, hands on her hips and anger sparking in her grey eyes that reminded him of hammered steel.

“We did not finish our discussion at dinner for I would not embarrass you in front of your people…”

“Our people,” he pointed out quickly.

She ignored the interruption.

“…but do not think I will play the meek little wife who lets you make all our decisions without consulting me first. I will not sit obediently in your castle waiting for you to return while you ride off to fight your battles.”

“I know. That is one of the many reasons why I love you,” he said in a low, husky voice, reaching for her hips. She batted his hands away. He frowned.

Keeping his tone easy, he bowed to her and said, “Please accept my apology Lady Arya. I will not
presume to make such plans again without consulting you and please be assured there was never any real danger.”

She pursed her lips and furrowed her brow. “‘Twas Ty and Shireen I was afraid for, not myself.”

Arya admitting she was afraid? Gendry almost asked her if she had received a blow to the head she had not told him about. However, being afraid for Ty and Shireen was not the same as being afraid herself. Of course she would never admit that. He gave her a broad smile.

“I am not thoughtless you know and I have not climbed so high without knowing what I am doing. I included Ty and Shireen in my…our plans. I placed two guards at their door afore the feast.”

“Only two?”

He chuckled. “I think Direwolves in their room are worth a dozen men at least. Would you not agree?”

In her anger, Arya had forgotten about the Direwolves. At least Gendry had not forgotten about Ty and Shireen. She felt herself softening towards him, but she still wanted to teach him a lesson.

“Go lie on the bed,” she commanded icily.

He raised his eyebrows and grinned, but he did as he was told.

As he sat on the bed and started to swing his legs up onto the bed, she snapped “Take your boots off first!” Arya did not want to have to explain more ruined bed linen to Shireen.

Again Gendry did as he was told. Lying back on the bed he folded his hands behind his head and watching her as a sly old tom cat might watch a baby mouse; languidly, but still waiting for his opportunity to pounce.

She had other ideas.

“I am going to give the orders. I am going to what I want and think only of myself and we shall see how you like it!”

“I pray you shall go easy on me,” he chuckled, “but you do not need to be gentle.”

‘Twas all he could do not to thank her and make her to promise to punish him like this every time they had an argument. If this was her idea of punishment, then she would make the worst torturer Westeros had ever seen.

“Stop laughing,” she demanded, “‘tis not supposed to be amusing.”

“Of course not,” he agreed, schooling his face to remain serious, but ‘twas hard. ‘Twas not the only thing that was hard either. Ever since she had told him to lie on the bed, his cock had been stiff and ready. ‘Twas a pity she would still be sore from last night, but mayhaps she would let him find his release in another way. ‘Twas sweet torture imagining it already.

“And you are not allowed to touch me until I say you can.”

He tried not to grin. Sweet torture indeed! When she walked towards him, with hips swaying and intent on having her way with him, he decided to whip off his shirt. He threw it as far from the bed as he could. Whatever she had in mind for him, ‘twould be better if his skin was next to hers.

“I did not tell you to take of your shirt,” she huffed as he lay back down on the bed.
“Do you mind?” he asked.

She shook her head but she was chewing nervously on her lip. She probably did not even know she was doing it. He could tell that she had almost reached the limit of her experience, that she had not planned much more than to make him lie on the bed.

Then she surprised him some more by climbing onto the bed and, to his surprise and delight, hitching up her skirts before placing one knee on either side of his thighs, straddling him.

If she intended to torture him, he had every intention of assisting her by whatever means he could. But first he needed her closer and higher.

He quickly slid his hands under her voluminous petticoats intending to reach further up, but she grabbed his wrists, stopping him.

“Remember, this is about me. Not you. And you are not supposed to touch me.”

“I forgot,” he said, his voice deep and hoarse with lust.

She pushed his wrists far above his head, stretching over him so that her breasts pushed up high and together by her tight, red dress, bobbed in front of his face. He thought he could even see a hint of rosy nipple escaping from the confines of her bodice and he gave a groan of frustration.

“But I can touch you,” she whispered as she eased back and lowered her lips to his.

She kept her mouth closed and the kiss chaste, despite his attempts to seek her tongue with his. When he lifted his hips up, seeking, needing more, she pushed herself more firmly down on his thighs.

“This is about me, not you,” she murmured, looking down at him with heavily lidded eyes.

Of course he could have had her flat on her back and under him in moments, but where was the fun in that? He was intrigued to find out what she intended to do next.

Again, she seemed to have no idea herself, for she simply stared down at him, her breath hot and sweet on his face and in his hair, her lips just tantalisingly out of reach.

He lifted his head and shoulders up, desperate to kiss her again. She was not having that. Letting go of his wrists, she rested her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back on the bed. He offered no resistance but growled in frustration.

“We need to discuss terms.”

“Terms?” he echoed, puzzled.

“Aye. The terms of our marriage. We must have terms,” she declared tartly. His heart sank. She was straddling him on their bed, her breasts were within licking distance and she wanted to discuss a marriage contract. Mayhaps she would make a better torturer and negotiator than he had given her credit for.

“Like what?” he eyed her suspiciously. Why did he feel she had set a trap and he was walking straight into it?

“Like fuck another woman and I’ll kill her. Then I’ll come for you.”

“I would expect nothing less,” he agreed, nodding seriously. He knew he would never want another woman as long as he had her. Mayhaps this would not be as bad as he thought.
“I shall only wear a dress when I want.”

“Agreed,” he smiled. She could wear whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted to, as long as she was naked in his bed at the end of the day.

She pushed his shoulders down further into the bed and stared him straight in the eye.

He waited, eager with anticipation, sensing he was about to hear the crux of her demands and anxious to be done with them, so he could make love to her any way she would let him.

“And we are equals. In all things. You cannot tell me what to do and I will not tell you what to do. We will discuss all matters that affect us both and you will make no more plans such as you made today without consulting me first.”

He drew in a deep breath. Equals. In all things. Who ever heard of such an idea? A woman belonged to a man when they married. That was just the way it was. ‘Twas true that some men were swines and treated their wives worse than their animals. He was not such a man, but still…equals? ‘Twas simply unheard of. But then, who had ever heard of a Faceless Man who was a girl? A high born lady who wore britches and could warg into a Direwolf? A beautiful warrior girl who was fiercer, more stubborn and more determined than any man?

Looking up into her steely grey eyes, he realised he had made his decision a long time ago. Mayhaps when The Hound had taken her. He had sworn then that he would do anything, give anything, to have her back and make her his. He knew the time had come to make good on that promise.

“Agreed,” he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Now where were we…?”

He slid his hands up under her skirt again and this time she let him. He did not stop at her knees and continued up the backs of her thighs, over the leather straps that held Needle in place until he cupped her bare bottom.

“No small clothes?” he asked huskily.

She had known he would like that. She had hoped they might have had an opportunity to sneak away during the feast, although she had not expected it to end so soon. She had to admit, joining was much easier in a dress than britches.

Unexpectedly he pulled her forwards, settling her on his erection which felt harder and bigger than she had remembered against her still tender flesh.

She gave involuntary little gasp of surprise and pleasure. He gave her a slow, knowing grin.

He took her hand and guided it down between them, holding it on the hard muscles and warm skin of his stomach as he undid the laces of his britches with the other. Belatedly she remembered she was supposed to be taking control of this, not him. She tried to pull her hand away, but he was too strong and she found she did not really want to remove her hand anyway. Once his laces were free, he moved her hand lower, down inside the soft leather. Her fingertips tentatively explored his warm skin, silky hair and then found the wet tip of his cock. The low growl of pleasure he gave made her burn hotter with longing for the pleasure that awaited them both.

‘Twas time to take back control. She began to roll her hips in time with the movement of her fingers up and down the length of his cock, finding a deliciously slow rhythm, enjoying the feel of his hardness under her and in her hand.

“If you wish me to last, you had best stop that now.” He said in a strangled voice. She loved the
feeling of power she had over him and ‘twas wonderful for her too, with his warm hands kneading her buttocks as she moved on top of him. So she did not stop.

“At least let me see you naked,” he whispered hoarsely.

She paused momentarily, wondering what he was doing as his left hand dropped down along her thigh and found Needle.

“Lean forwards,” he urged. She did and quicker than seemed possible, he had cut through the laces at the back of her dress. She had to clutch her hands to the bodice to stop it falling.

“Take it off.”

So much for her being in control. She did as he commanded and the two of them struggled on the bed, her out of her dress and him out of his leather britches. As he kicked them away, she dropped her dress on the floor and there was nothing between them, only skin on heated skin.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered as he settled her on top of him again, sweeping his fingertips over her thighs, her hips, her stomach, until they closed over her breasts. As he rubbed his thumbs over her nipples, the feeling was so hot and intense, that it sucked the breath from her. She squeezed her eyes shut, wanting to concentrate only on the tempest of sensation his callused thumbs and clever hands wrought on her aroused flesh. She began to flex her hips. She could feel him under her, hard and ready, waiting for her.

She had heard women talk about riding a man as you would ride a horse and how a woman was in control of the man as much as she was a horse. That had been the basis for her plan, such as it was, to teach him a lesson. She wanted to prove to him that he was not the only one who could take command.

The problem was she did not feel in control of anything tight now. She was trembling in anticipation. Her only consolation was that he seemed to have no more control than she did. His breath was coming in ragged gasps, and his hands were moving faster, in time with the quickening thrusts of his hips.

“Are you too sore?” he asked. She could hear the hopeful, pleading tone in his voice and in it the power she could wield over him. She liked it.

“Maester Pylos gave me healing herbs for my bath. I am ready,” she whispered breathlessly. Never had an ache been more delicious. She needed him as much as he needed her. Gendry filled the empty places in her life and inside her that she had not known were there. He made her feel whole.

“As long as you are sure,” he murmured. She nodded. Nothing was going to stop her now. “If you are on top you can take me in at your own pace.”

“Like this?” she asked, lifting herself up and positioning the blunt, wet tip of his cock so it pressed against her. His hands were on her hips and she could feel him hard and solid beneath her, waiting.

“Aye,” he moaned in a low, gruff voice as she pushed herself down so that he was barely inside her and no more. “Like that.”

Her flesh burned already, both in need for him and from their love making last night, but she could not deny herself this. She held her breath and lowered herself down further, feeling him slowly fill her, inch by inch until she had all of him deep inside her. His entire body was quivering like a bow string drawn tight.
“Are you alright?” he asked, his voice gravely with desire.

She answered him by lifting herself up until she was nearly empty, before slowly sliding back down, fulfilled. There were no words for the excruciating pleasure as his hands on her hips helped ease her up and down, in and out, advance and retreat. She moaned at the sensation of being stroked deep inside and he moaned too.

Faster, harder, they moved together and apart as she felt that sweet, desperate tension build inside her. Gendry’s fingers dug into her hips as she rocked and he strove upwards to meet her on the downwards thrust. She was so close, so close, as pleasure spiralled inside her. She wanted it, needed it faster, harder, deeper. “I can’t…I can’t…Gendry help me,” she cried, desperate for release.

He pulled her to him and rolled them over and ‘twas all she could do to wrap her legs tight around him and hold on. He drove into her hard, once, twice, three times, holding her so tightly it hurt before he shuddered suddenly inside her. And then she could not think or feel any more as waves of pleasure overtook her, crashing over her, drowning her in pleasure that somehow felt like death.

He lifted his head to bestow a breathless kiss on her nose. “You and me, together in all things,” he said with a ragged, contented sigh.

“Yes,” was all she could manage in reply.

-o-

For the next three weeks, Arya’s days and nights passed in a blur of happiness. ’Twas as if years of loneliness and pain were washed away by the waves in Shipbreaker Bay, along with the walls she had built up to protect herself. A mindless, aching need now took over every part of her. For all those long, empty years she had felt nothing and needed no one. Now all Gendry had to do was walk into a room and all the pent up desire of their years apart could steal the very breath from her. And the wonder of it was – he felt the same way.

The two of them were like ravenous beasts, filled with hunger for each other. If they had a spare moment, they would end up in bed. If they happened to exchange glances as they went about their different tasks during the day, they would each find an excuse to go to their chambers, where they would make love until they could not move.

On a few occasions they had not even made it to their chambers. When he happened upon her in the stables, they rutted in the hay while a bemused Thunder and Lightning looked on. When she wore a dress to greet some visiting lord, they had run up the stairs together, to the highest tower, with the sole purpose of his tossing up her skirts and taking her against the battlements.

No doubt everyone in Storm’s End was scandalized by their undignified behaviour, but they could not keep their hands off each other and were too in love to care who knew it.

Amidst all of their passion, they were also putting down roots, building a home for themselves and the ones they cared about.

Gendry’s days were filled with learning about crops and fields and stores and how many cow’s Storm’s End needed to sustain its occupants. ’Twas not as exciting as battle, but much more productive. He was discovering that being protector of the Stormlands involved much more than swinging a hammer or a sword. He took to his new tasks with gusto, as did most of his men.

Already many of them had found Stormlander women. With able bodied men being a rare commodity after the war, the arrival of Bad Company had been treated as a gift from the Gods by the
women of Storm’s End. ‘Twas spring after all and Lord Baratheon had no doubt he would be presented with a wealth of new born babes come the summer. If the God’s were good, he might even have one of his own and the future of House Baratheon would be secure.

Arya’s days were no less productive, but in a different manner. She had been a lone wolf for so long, had shunned contact with others for so many years, that she was surprised how much she enjoyed the company of others.

With Shireen as her guide and protector, she was introduced to the other ladies of Storm’s End and through them, their husbands, children and smallfolk. Shireen might seem shy and unsure, and mayhaps she was with people she did not know, but she managed Storm’s End and everyone in it with staggering efficiency.

She knew just how to cajole the grumpy old head cook (who was as round as one of his turnips) into preparing anything she could lay her hands on to feed the castle’s occupants. She handled drunken, argumentative soldiers and squabbling children with the same quiet authority and, merely by following her around, Arya got to know Storm’s End’s inhabitants, their likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. In return, Arya taught Shireen how to water dance.

Shireen had never been given the opportunity to hold a sword as a child, having nearly died from the greyscale in infancy, both her mother and father treated her as something too fragile to be allowed beyond the confines of her chambers or Dragonstone’s solar.

Arya had never appreciated the freedom her parents had given her until she heard tell of Shireen’s restricted, cloistered childhood. Mayhaps having four brothers was even more of a blessing than Arya had originally thought, for with them there was always the possibility of sword play or riding ponies or fighting. Her parents had not tried too hard to make a proper lady of her. They had certainly not locked her away as Shireen’s mother and father had.

While Shireen and Arya learned from each other, their young patient continued to heal and grow stronger everyday.

Ty remembered the first time Shireen asked Arya to teach her how to wield a sword.

He had come to think of the soft woman who took such good care of him and who smelt of the sea as his angel, for he did not know her name then. Night or day she was always there with her soothing words and gentle touch that both comforted him and made him ache for something more, something that he could not explain, but needed so badly.

That day he had heard voices, Arya’s and his angel’s, and had managed to turn his head to see them both, standing in a patch of sunlight with wooden practice swords raised. Until then he had thought Arya to be his perfect woman. But that was before he had known Shireen.

He had heard Arya say his angel’s name while handing her the practice sword. Shireen. Even the sound of it made him smile, while her smile seemed to light up the room even more than the sunshine. He felt as if he knew her already.

Afore he even knew her name, he had committed the ripe curves of her breasts to his memory. He knew what her silky black hair felt like against his cheek, how her hands felt cool and soft on his heated skin. He had inhaled her scent, tasted the sweet and salt of her fingertips and he knew that he needed more of her and ‘twould never be enough until she was all his and his alone.
He had watched them that day, unnoticed as they worked through first and second positions, until Arya called a halt and his angel came to watch over him again and what a sight she was. Her blue eyes sparkled with excitement, her cheeks were flushed and strands of dark hair clung to her face and neck. He would remember that first time as long as he lived. The first time he said her name. Shireen. His voice was little more than a hoarse whisper, but she heard him and her sudden, surprised smile spilled over him like a burst of summer sun. When she leant over him and pressed her warm, soft lips to his forehead, he knew his heart was forever hers.

Three weeks he had been at Storm’s End. Three weeks with Shireen almost all to himself.

She was everything he had dreamed of and so much more. She was kind and sympathetic when he hurt, she was firm and encouraging when he tried to move and, best of all, she treated him as an equal.

Although she felt it shamed her, he was glad for her greyscale. Had she been perfect, he would have lost her afore he even had the chance to know her. Some high born lord would have claimed her years before.

Also, he was smart enough to know that beautiful woman, the ones who had men swooning at their feet, whether high or low born, did not often stop to consider others; they had no need to, for everyone always thought of them. But Shireen always put herself last. He saw that in her dealings with Arya and Maester Pylos, with the other people who came to visit him, even with the servants. She deserved someone who would put her first and he was the man to do it.

When they were alone together, he would compliment her on the way she had styled her hair, or her dress or something she done for others. She would blush most fetchingly and tell him to stop teasing, but he meant every word and hoped that, if he told her often enough, she might one day believe it.

He grew stronger each day and for the past eight days he had been able to remain out of bed for longer and longer periods. Maester Pylos would shake his head and declare Ty’s recovery remarkable, except for one side of the wound that stubbornly refused to close. If Maester Pylos knew he was swinging a sword with Shireen for hours every afternoon, then he might not be so mystified as to why the wound kept opening. Ty had no doubt the pain and blood and the hiding it from Shireen, was worth the pleasure.

Arya insisted he perch on a stool when he practiced the Braavosi sword forms with Arya and Shireen every morning. Then he would return to his bed, exhausted. But nothing would keep him from rising and practicing again in the afternoon with only Shireen. His head could have been hanging off and still he would have climbed out of that bed to stand behind her, press his hand over hers and his body behind hers as they moved the practice sword through the air together.

As it was, he had to bind and pad his wound with cloths to staunch the bleeding and be careful to conceal them from her. Shireen would never have agreed to it, had she known how his wound bled after every session. After she was gone, he would bury the bloodied rags in the laundry for the maids to remove. But there was nothing he would not do to be that close to her, to inhale her scent, feel her laughter against his chest and bathe in her smiles that lit up the room.

While Arya stuck to basic techniques and drills in the morning, Ty taught Shireen everything he had learned about fighting hard and dirty in the afternoons and, of course, he used every excuse he could think of to touch her. And he grew bolder every day.

On the eighth day, as he stood in front of her, one hand behind his back and his sword arm extended,
he said “If your opponent is stronger and more skilled than you, you must use every advantage you have.”

“I would not be so dishonourable as to stoop to tricks,” Shireen said scathingly as she came hard at him with her wooden sword. Seven hells, for all she was older than him, he had never met anyone as naive, as innocent, as Shireen. ‘Twas one of the many things her loved about her. But, as a Flea Bottom bastard, he could afford no such scruples. For that reason alone, she would never beat him, but he wished she would at least consider fighting outside the rules. He kept trying to convince her,

“If you find yourself in a real fight, remember, being a woman could be an advantage. If you were to lift your skirts, for instance and show me your legs, then I might even drop my sword in shock,” he teased, but he was only half joking. If she ever lifted her skirts for him, ‘twould not be shock that made him drop his sword; ‘twould be gratitude and desire.

However she did not take that teasing well. She lunged at him, blue eyes sparking with fire. He easily anticipated and side stepped her attack.

“Do not mock me!” she hissed as she came at him time after time. She fought harder angry, he thought, but he was still better. Much better. He forced her to step back again and again. Was it wrong of him not to point out the Direwolf lying on the floor behind her? One more step back and her heel hit Ghost’s flank. She staggered and threw her hands up, sending her sword clattering to the floor.

Ghost eyed them disinterestedly as Ty dropped his own sword in order to grab Shireen. The next moment she was in his arms, hair loose about her shoulders, chest heaving and cheeks flushed.

He could not move. He could not even breathe as he clutched her tight to his chest.

They stood like that for a moment before she threw her head back and laughed. Not a girlish giggle, but a full-throated, joyful laugh that made his heart soar. But he did not laugh. He focused on her lips, full, red and parted. He could not stop himself. With one hand on the back of her neck, he guided her lips towards his own. Her eyes were wide with shock, but she did not try to stop him.

The moment their lips touched, ‘twas like wildfire raged between them. She was kissing him back and he felt drunk with the wonder of it. Somehow their mouths were open and his tongue was seeking hers. He wanted her so much that he could not think of anything other than her mouth on his, his hand in her hair, her hips against his and his hand seeking the soft fullness of her breast.

‘Twas the touch of his warm fingers on the bare skin of her breast that froze her; shocked her out of her wild abandon.

“No!” she cried, putting her hands on his chest and shoving him back. He took a step back, no longer touching her but he looked as dazed as she felt. He was breathing heavily while she trembled so much she thought her legs might give way. Weak as she felt, she wanted nothing more than to slap him across the face. Hard.

“What do you think you are doing?” she managed to hiss.

He looked bewildered, his green eyes wide with confusion. “’Twas not only me doing the kissing Shireen.”

She had to turn her face away. He was right. In that moment, she had wanted those kisses as much as he had, but he had taken advantage of her when she near fallen. He had taken advantage of her? Who was she trying to fool? She was as much to blame as him for allowing it.
But still…his kisses bore no comparison to the dispassionate, practiced seduction of Edric’s. Mayhaps that was the first time Ty had kissed a woman, at least with open mouths. That would explain why he got so carried away and touched her…her breast. Even yet her skin tingled where his fingers had caressed her skin. He was so much younger than she and a lowly squire to boot. What had she been thinking? She hadn’t been thinking at all – that was the problem.

“I am sorry Ty. It will not happen again,” she said sternly as she bent to retrieve her sword.

“Are you sorry that it happened? Or sorry it will not happen again?” he asked. Was he teasing her again?

She could not look at him, but she imagined his green eyes sincere and questioning, mayhaps his mouth curved in a slight smile.

“From now on, our practices will be confined to mornings with Lady Arya.” She said firmly as she picked up his sword and shoved past him, still unable to meet his eyes.

He reached for her, but she shrugged off his hand.

“I was hoping we could practice kissing as well as sword play.”

Shireen near dropped the wooden swords again at his boldness.

She must remember he was her cousin’s squire and that a marriage was to be arranged soon for her to some high lord. Shireen had no expectations for a love match, but she intended to make the best of it. She had no room in her life for Ty, no matter how tempting the thought might be. Nae, ’twas best if she ended this before it began.

Gathering up all her courage, she stood ramrod straight, looked him square in the eye and said coldly, “If you touch me again Lord Baratheon will hear of it.”

Turning her back on him, so she could not see the tears welling in her eyes, she left him standing there, bewildered.

She did not want him to know that he had made her cry, for then he would only try and comfort her. If he showed her any more tenderness her already weak resolve to resist him would crumble entirely.

By the time she walked out of the room, tears were streaming down her cheeks, blinding her. As the door closed on him, she dumped the practice swords and ran.

She did not even know why she was crying. Were they tears of sorrow for what she wanted and could not have? Or were they tears of joy for something she never thought she would experience? Even if her new husband was a pig, at least she had been kissed passionately one time in her life. Even if she never got to experience that again, at least she would know that that once, one time, someone had truly wanted her.

-o-

Ty stood at the foot of the winding steps, rested his left hand on the smooth stone wall, took a deep breath and began the climb.
It had become his Lord’s habit to take in the view from the top of the tower after the evening meal, usually alone and Ty wished to speak to him alone.

He had to stop after the first three turns to rest, then he had to pause after every turn to catch his breath and by the top he could only manage six steps afore pausing. By the time he pushed open the turret door, his hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat and his legs were shaking with effort. But ‘twas worth it, for Lord Baratheon stood looking out across the Stormlands. Alone.

This was Gendry’s favourite time of day. It was the only time he had to himself, to reflect on the day, plan for the next and anticipate the night ahead.

He would watch the shifting light played across the wide open vistas of land and sea, enjoying the feel the evening breeze in his hair. Then, as the sun began to set, he would make his way down to his room. Arya would be waiting for him there and he could forget his responsibilities and burdens in her arms. At night he was just a man abed with the woman he loved.

All his life, he had strived to be better than he was; to be a better ‘prentice for Tobho, to be a better man, a better knight, a better lord. But with Arya he could just be himself, for she had know him as man and boy and thought he was enough, just as he was.

Usually his gaze lingered longest on the sea, for ‘twas ever changing. He suspected he could stand here every night for the rest of his life and never once see the same combination of wind and water, sky and sun. But tonight his gaze was drawn to the land; to the king’s road snaking off into the distance, to the Kingswood and all the obligations and trials awaiting him beyond.

He had anticipated that, once he claimed Storm’s End, he might never wish to leave, but he could never have imagined the strength of his feelings. For the first time in his life, he truly felt at peace. He was home. Mayhaps other men felt like this all their life. Why else would they be prepared to spill their blood and die for some patch of land? He was two and twenty by his best reckoning and yet this was the first home he had ever known. ‘Twould also be the last.

Although he did not want to leave, he knew he must. However, he had every intention of making this visit to King’s Landing his only one and also making it as short as possible; wed Arya, reforge Ice, leave Shireen with Daenerys if he could (although he suspected Arya might not agree to that part of his plan), return to The Stormlands as fast as Thunder could carry him.

He was trying to calculate how many days he must suffer away from home when he heard the turret door being flung open. He turned to see Ty stagger out onto the battlements. The boy promptly sat down on the nearest piece of stone, his head hanging, and his chest heaving from the effort. A week ago the boy could barely get out of bed, yet today he had climbed the highest tower in Storm’s End. Gendry had to admire Ty’s tenacity and his will to succeed at whatever he set his mind to.

“You must be feeling better.” Gendry said, with a smile, leaning back against the nearest crenellation.

“I was. Until now,” Ty grimaced as he drew in shallow, panting breaths.

“If you can walk all the way up here, mayhaps I should put you to work mucking out the stables – where you should be, instead of water dancing with the Lady Shireen.” Gendry tried to sound stern, but he was having a hard time trying to keep the amusement from his face, particularly as Ty looked so shocked.

“You…you know about that?” Ty stammered.
Gendry raised one eyebrow. The boy had a lot to learn.

Sighing, Gendry sat down beside his squire. Ty was still far too thin, but he looked different, taller mayhaps. In the evening light Gendry could see a soft, blonde growth on the boy’s upper lip and chin that he didn’t recall noticing before. The boy needed to shave, Gendry thought, suppressing a chuckle. Ty would not be a boy for much longer.

“I make it my business to know everything that goes on in my castle,” Gendry growled, narrowing his eyes and fixing Ty with an icy glare.

The boy’s eyes were wide with alarm and his adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard.

Gendry let him squirm for a moment before he slapped the boy’s back. “Do not look so scared boy! Arya told me of your morning practices. She says ‘tis good for both you and Shireen.”

So Shireen had not revealed what had transpired between them. Ty near sagged with relief.

“Now why did you climb all this way? Just to prove to me that you are fit to return to the stables?” Gendry teased.

Ty’s bravado nearly deserted him. It had seemed a good idea to ask Lord Baratheon’s advice while he lay, frustrated, in his bed last night, but now he was not so sure.

“Well?” Gendry prompted.

Ty could think of no other excuse for being here and besides, Lord Baratheon was the only person who could give him the advice he sought.

“Umm…’twas about Lady Shireen actually,” Ty muttered, rubbing his hands over his knees and avoiding his Lord’s enquiring eyes.

“Hmm, Arya says she is a studious pupil.”

Gendry decided not to add anything more to that. Arya had had also confided in him that Ty was a natural; ‘twas as if he was born to wield a sword and he was already better than half the men she knew. ‘Twould not do to let the boy hear that though. Ty’s own opinion of himself was high enough already.

Shireen however, was another matter. Arya considered her to be a most obliging pupil, but too cautious by far. Arya doubted Shireen would be able to bring herself to hurt anyone in a real fight, no matter how much she trained. Mayhaps ‘twas just as well not all women were as blood thirsty as Arya, Gendry thought with a chuckle.

“What do you wish to discuss about Lady Shireen?” Gendry asked eventually as Ty stared off into the distance.

“Oh…um…Shireen…” Ty muttered as if waking from a dream. He rubbed his hands nervously down the front of his britches again.

“That’ll be Lady Shireen to you,” Gendry pointed out. He was growing impatient with the boy’s inability to come to the point.

Gendry reminding him of Shireen’s title did nothing to ease Ty’s nerves, quite the opposite in fact. But he had not climbed all the way up here to leave without Lord Baratheon’s advice.
“What do you think about Lady Shireen and me?” Ty asked, kicking some loose stones at his feet.

“I think you have both been keeping Arya far too busy with this water dancing nonsense, that’s what I think. Why a lady and my bloody squire want to waste their time with that Braavosi posturing is beyond me. ‘Tis no match for a broadsword in a fair fight and you know it.” Gendry grumbled.

‘Twas selfish he knew, but he would not have minded Arya spending some of that time with him. While he had no interest in learning to water dance, mayhaps another kind of dancing with Arya might have been an enjoyable waste of time. Very enjoyable, he thought with a grin.

“You misunderstand me, My Lord” Ty said, his voice suddenly sounding much thinner and higher, “I meant…what do you think about Lady Shireen and me together – like you and Lady Arya.”

“Eh?” Gendry asked in his confusion, before the realisation of what Ty was really asking began to dawn. His lady cousin with his squire? Together? Like he was with Arya?

If Ty had not looked so hopeful and earnest, Gendry would have thrown his head back and guffawed with laughter.

His bastard squire fancied he had a chance with Lady Shireen? But Shireen was at least five name days older than Ty, she had Dragonstone as a dowry, she was born into one of the Great Houses of Westeros and, apart from all that, Gendry had promised Davos, Arya and Shireen herself that he would arrange a good match for her in King’s Landing.

Schooling his features to remain impassive, Gendry shook his head and gave an emphatic, “Nae.”

Ty frowned. That was obviously not the reply he had hoped for.

“I do not mean right now. I mean to ask her to wait for me. You waited for Arya didn’t you?”

Aye he had. He had waited seven long years for her and, by The Gods, it had been worth every day.

“But that was different.” Gendry said.

“How?” Ty demanded with a scowl.

“Well…” said Gendry, trying to think on how his situation had been different to Ty’s. He knew it was, obviously, but right now he was finding it surprisingly difficult to think on the many ways ‘twas different. “My father was a king,” he eventually answered.

“But you didn’t know that then, did you?” Ty said stiffly. “You thought you were just a bastard from Flea Bottom like me and yet you set your heart on Lady Arya.”

“Aye, well…I suppose so,” Gendry conceded. By the Gods, he must remember never to get into another argument with Ty, for he felt as if he was losing this one. The boy was too clever for his own good.

“You believed you would one day be worthy of Arya as I believe I will one day be worthy of Shireen.” Ty said defiantly, his chin raised and green eyes flashing, “The only difference is, I do not intend to waste seven years as you did.”

It took a great effort of will for Gendry to refrain from clouting his squire around the ear.

“That is not the only difference,” he said through clenched teeth. “Seven years ago we were in the midst of a war, and war has no respect for a man’s birth or rank. Great lords and lowly bastards bleed
just the same. In war, strength and success matter, blood does not.”

Ty’s black look told Gendry that this was not welcome advice. Gendry blew out a long, exasperated sigh and held his hands open to Ty, beseeching the boy to understand.

“If you work hard and if the Gods are good, you will someday make a great knight. I have no doubt about it. However, I pray there shall be no more wars in my lifetime and that means you will not have the opportunities I had.” Gendry paused in order to let Ty digest this information, before continuing, “Mayhaps you will obtain lands and titles in the future, but at the moment...you have nothing to offer Shireen and she is already beyond the usual marrying age.”

Ty stood up in great haste and looked down at Gendry, his green eyes wide and blinking as if he had entered a brightly lit room and could not comprehend what he saw there.

“But I love her.” Ty said simply, as if that would win him the argument. As if that was enough.

“She is not for you Ty.” Gendry said gently, for he knew he was breaking the boy’s heart. “Not now. Not ever. She will be wed afore summer…and not to you.”

Without replying, Ty turned and ran for the door.

“There will be other woman Ty. Many other women!” Gendry yelled after his squire as he disappeared, banging the door behind him.

Seven buggering hells. The boy really believed himself to be in love and that made him liable to do something foolish.

Gendry raked his hands through his hair. Suddenly it seemed he could not get to King’s Landing fast enough. He needed to hand Shireen over to Daenerys and ask the Dragon Queen to arrange a suitable match. Until then, he would need to keep a close eye on both Ty and Shireen, for if she should fancy herself in love with the boy, then he would have one huge problem on his hands.

Nae. He reassured himself that would not happen. Shireen had learned her lesson with Edric. Hadn’t she? She was older now and wiser. She would not be so naive as to fall again for a landless bastard…would she? Damnation, but she was a woman. What man could anticipate what a woman might do if she believed herself in love?

He would end this afore it had begun. Shireen was coming to King’s Landing with him; Ty would stay here. By the time they returned, the boy would surely have found another girl to moon over and this time Gendry hoped ’twould be some wench and not his cousin.

-o-

Three days later Gendry sat mounted at the head of Bad Company and watched Davos hand Shireen up into the wheelhouse. He could still not quite believe he had been outmanoeuvred on this.

Ty sat up beside the wheelman trying not to look smug and failing miserably. His damn squire looked like the cat that got the cream.

Arya was clutching a bag of ointments and potions and listening intently to last minute instructions from Maester Pylos. Ty’s scar stubbornly refused to heal over and nothing would do but the boy be sent to see the Grand Maester at King’s Landing. Ravens had been passing back and forth between the two Maesters and Arya would not hear of Ty being left behind when he might receive further healing in The Red Keep.
Gendry had shared his concerns about Ty and Shireen with Arya, but she had merely scoffed at his fears and assured him that Shireen had never once shown the slightest interest in his squire. Gendry argued that, while Arya might be right, given Ty’s interest in Shireen, ‘twould be prudent to leave the boy behind. Still Arya would not agree. Gendry then accused her of being blind to what was going on right under her nose and had downright demanded that Ty stay.

None of it had worked of course. Arya was the only person he had ever met who was more stubborn then he and her threat to sleep in Shireen’s room had ended the matter instantly. Winning the argument was not worth the cost.

So he sat astride Thunder, resting his elbow on the pommel of his saddle, watching and waiting for Shireen and Arya to tell him when they were ready to leave. The Direwolves lay dozing in the shade of the wheelhouse and even Thunder seemed to know there was no point in prancing excitedly as he normally did. Nae, everyone, man and beast, knew who was in charge today.

Finally, Shireen was settled in the wheelhouse and Arya finished with Maester Pylos. As she swung up onto Lightning’s back, Arya gave him leave to begin their journey. Gendry nodded a final farewell to Lem and Davos who would hold Storm’s End for him in his absence. There were no men he trusted more, save Jon himself.

Raising his hand, Lord Baratheon gave the signal for Bad Company to ride. The Direwolves rose and stretched, the wheelhouse creaked into motion and they were off. Gendry was already counting the hours until he could return.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, I know we’ve still not got back to King’s Landing, but I was enjoying writing Ty and Shireen too much. Hope you enjoyed them too.

Thanks yet again to Brazilian Guy. I’ve had to pester him a lot about this looooong chapter. But he’s always patient, always gives astute, manly advice and is always there for me. “Thanks” doesn’t seem nearly enough Ser.

Confession time. Much as I want to, I simply cannot write 9 or 10,000 words in a week and keep the standard up (and have a life). I don’t want to skip weeks and I can’t always make the chapters shorter, but I’m going to have to.

I’ll stick to Fridays from now on, but probably not the next one. I hope you’ll be patient and wait for me.

See you all soon. In the Red Keep. With Brienne.
For Love or Honour

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lord Baratheon had left Storm’s End behind reluctantly and, by mid morning, his mood had worsened considerably. The pace was achingly slow due to the cumbersome wheelhouse, ‘twas the first time in years he had ridden out without Lem by his side, his bloody golden helm was making his neck ache and, the simple truth of the matter was, he wanted to turn around and ride back home again.

He wished he could say bugger Tobho, bugger Jon, bugger finding a husband for Shireen and suit himself, but he could not. He had given his word to all three of them. He had never broken an oath afore and he would be damned if he would break one now.

With no Lem to talk to too, Gendry had to listen to Harlan discussing his plans for Fellwood Keep with Arya. They were bringing barrels of salted fish, coils of rope and much more, even bolts of cloth for Lady Fell. ‘Twas Shireen who had insisted they include the material, after hearing about the hardship the women had suffered.

Even having Arya beside him did not help. She was excited at the prospect of seeing Sansa and Jon again and had even told Harlan and Anguy about some servant girl’s babe she hoped to visit. But there was nothing in King’s Landing for him. He hated the place, for it reminded him of his childhood and, Gods forgive him, he was dreading seeing Tobho again, for he knew ‘twould be for the last time.

Gendry caressed the hilt of Oathbreaker absentmindedly. Re-forging Ice would be their greatest achievement together, their masterpiece. Tobho would certainly never see its like again and he did not expect to. There was also the matter of the Valyrian steel Tobho had promised him for his own sword. House Baratheon would finally have its own sword, to be passed down to his sons and, Gods willing, grandsons, but the prospect did not thrill him as it should.

Oathbreaker had saved his life, had won him battles, even won him the war and, first and foremost had won him his name. He had Brienne to thank for that and therefore for it all. Yet in a few days the sword would no longer exist and all that would be left were memories. ‘Twas as if he was facing the loss of not one, but two old friends. First he would lose Oathbreaker and then, inevitably, Tobho.

Gendry would honour his promise to Tobho to take care of his wife, but once Tobho was gone, who would be left to continue working steel in the old ways? ‘Twas no another armourer in the Street of Steel worthy of licking Tobho’s boots. Sam could read the spells that were needed to work Valyrian steel, but he was no master craftsman.

In another life Gendry might have been content to devote his life to the mastery of metal, but he had not swung a hammer since that day in Tobho’s shop. A hammer was a tool to create, to transform, not a weapon of war. As soon as he had taken up his Baratheon name, it had been expected that he would wield a war hammer as his father had and he did – for show. But his father had never known the joy of bending metal to his will, of hearing it sing under his hand as if ‘twas alive, of teasing forth something new and beautiful from the fire. Gendry had no love for a hammer as a weapon. It meant so much more to him than that.

He grasped the hilt of Oathbreaker and was sorely tempted to unsheathe the blade and watch sunlight glint on the Valyrian steel while he still could. Instead he turned in the saddle and took a final look at
his castle retreating into the distance. If Oathbreaker represented his war filled past, hopefully Storm’s End was the symbol of his peaceful future.

When was the last time he had known peace? ‘Twas as a ‘prentice with Tobho. Since then, all he had known was war, but he had always hoped there would be more to his life than that. He had tasted ‘more’ in these past few weeks and found he had a hunger for it. He wanted a hearth and home more than he could have ever thought possible. His future lay not with Oathbreaker or in wielding a hammer in the searing heat of the forge, but by the sea, in the castle of his ancestors, with Arya by his side.

Yet here he was, turning his back on it and leaving it all behind. Thinking on that only blackened his already dark mood further. And he had had enough of this snail’s pace. Barking orders at Harlan and Anguy to take the lead, he wheeled Thunder around, kicked his heels to the destrier’s flanks and galloped down the line. It felt good to have the wind in his face, to be able to smell the sea and still see Storm’s End in the distance. He felt as if he was heading in the right direction again.

Thunder seemed to sense it too as he surged and pranced as if he was a young colt again.

As he rode down the line, the diminished size of Bad Company made Gendry feel unsettled. Never before had they ridden out with so few men; two hundred left in Storm’s End, another two hundred waiting for them at the Wendwater. Then there were those who had fallen in the battle with Edric. He was leading half the number back who had ridden out from King’s Landing. And their numbers were set to diminish still further. Harlan had sought leave to stay in Fellwood Keep with his cousin Lady Fell; leave Gendry had not hesitated to give. If the Stormlands were to grow strong again, he needed men like Harlan to hold such Keeps, to farm the land, to sire sons and replenish all that had been lost.

Davos had already suggested that grants of the abandoned farms be made to men of Bad Company in exchange for their promise to pay a tithe to Storm’s End from every harvest. ‘Twas an opportunity to acquire land of their own which would not have been possible, save for the war. ‘Twas a sensible idea and Gendry had readily agreed. Already several men (admittedly mostly prompted by their new Stormlander woman) had expressed an interested in exchanging their swords for ploughs.

Shireen had been tasked with keeping a record of the abandoned farms and dwellings they came across as they traversed the king’s road. They would not come across any on the first day – given that Edric and his raiders had kept their distance from Storm’s End, but Gendry wanted to speak to Shireen about taking a note of the fields unploughed too.

But what he saw as he galloped towards the wheelhouse did not please him at all. Ty was missing. His seat beside the wheelhouseman was empty and, as the Maester had proclaimed him unfit to ride, there was only one other place he could be – in the damn wheelhouse with Shireen.

The boy had deliberately ignored his orders and Lord Baratheon’s anger increased with every beat of Thunder’s great hooves as they pounded the earth. Was Edric’s seduction of Shireen destined to be repeated? Gendry was livid by the time he hauled on Thunder’s reins.

“I warned you Ty!” he bellowed as he threw back one of the curtains designed to shield the occupants of the wheelhouse from prying eyes.

What Gendry saw was not entirely as he had expected. Ty and Shireen both looked up at him, eyes blinking in fright, but to Gendry’s immense relief only Ty lay on the bed in the wheelhouse while Lady Shireen sat cross-legged beside him, a book in her hands.

‘Twas Shireen who recovered her composure first and asked most innocently,
“Warned him about what My Lord?”

Gendry glared at Ty, who said nothing, but smirked as he lifted one side of his boiled leather jerkin to reveal a fresh blood stain the size of Gendry’s fist.

“I have replaced his dressing My Lord, but I fear another shirt is ruined.” Shireen said apologetically, “I told Ty to rest in the hope that lying here rather than getting shaken around up there with the wheelhouseman, will ease his suffering.”

Easy his bloody suffering?! Gendry would make his squire suffer if he so much as laid a finger on Shireen. Gendry jabbed a finger at Ty, “Do…not…touch…her!” he ground out through clenched teeth.

Thunder whinnied bad temperedly as his reigns were jerked by his angry rider. Ty’s face remained impassive, but Shireen’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Annoyed at himself for jumping to the most dishonourable of conclusions, Gendry took his frustration out on them both, growling at Shireen, “And don’t you let him touch you either!”

“Yes My Lord,” Shireen said, bowing her head in acceptance and acknowledgement.

“And keep these damn curtains tied back!” Gendry ordered.

No sooner had Shireen rushed to carry out his order than Arya galloped up. Gendry was in no mood to discuss this or indeed anything, and he urged Thunder away as Arya slowed Lightening to match the pace of the wheelhouse.

“What was all that about?” Arya asked as she watched Gendry leave in a mood as black as his horse

“I truly do not know,” Shireen said as she fastened the first curtain to the nearest post.

“Then why are you red as tomato from Dorne?” Arya asked arching one eyebrow.

Ty answered for Shireen, hoping to save her further embarrassment.

“I am bleeding again and thought it best to lie down.” He held open his jerkin as he had before.

“Lord Baratheon ordered us to keep the curtains tied back.”

Arya raised both eyebrows.

“I was only reading to Ty,” Shireen said blushing even redder. In order to prove their innocence, she held up “Tales of a Hedge Knight” for Arya to see.

Ty had ‘liberated’ it from the library at Storm’s End in the hope that Shireen would read it to him, for of course he could not ready. But he liked the drawing of the bold Knight on the front.

“Ah I see,” Arya replied, wondering why Gendry was so annoyed. They were only reading and Ty was not a rouge like Edric. “’Tis a good book and Ty will learn a lot from it about how to be a good squire.”

Arya laughed as Ty drew his brows down to glare at her.

“I think he is hoping to learn more about becoming a Hedge Knight than a good squire,” Shireen said, giving Ty a shy little glance from underneath her hair.

’Twas Ty’s turn to blush. That made Arya laugh even harder.
“Do not mind Gendry. He cannot help himself. ’Tis the Baratheon in him - Ours is the fury. And he thinks ’tis his duty to protect us all. Just smile at him when he rants like that. “Tis what I do. I smile and I listen and I nod...” Arya pulled a comically serious face and bobbed her head frantically up and down, much to the amusement of the other two, “…until he calms down and then most times I do what I want anyway.”

Shireen giggled and Ty grinned, never taking his eyes off Shireen, enjoying seeing her relaxed and happy. He suspected she had not had nearly enough laughter in her life. He intended to change that.

“Best to keep the curtains open though and that way he has no excuse to rant!” Arya chuckled as she turned Lightning, gave them a cheery wave as she headed off after Lord Baratheon.

Gendry did not head back the way he had come, to join Harlan and Anguy. Instead he left them behind and rode east, towards the sea.

Despite the head start, Lightning caught up with Thunder easily. Gendry slowed his destrier to a walk when he heard the pounding hooves heralding Arya and Lightning’s approach.

“What ails you My Lord?” Arya asked breathlessly as she pulled her white horse alongside his black.

Gendry gave her a dubious sideways glance. She never called him “My Lord” unless she either wanted something or was angry with him. He was in no mood to indulge either sentiment today.

“I wanted to see Shipbreaker Bay once more afore we leave it behind,” he said bad temperedly.

Arya followed his gaze out to sea. The king’s road had begun to turn inland and this was indeed their last opportunity to see the bay.

The coast here, half a day’s ride from Storm’s End, was gentler and less rugged. The forbidding cliffs that protected the great Baratheon castle had softened into coves that sheltered white sandy beaches where sapphire water sparkled in the sun.

“I am going to walk and rest Thunder a while afore I return.” Gendry said, dismounting. He was in such a foul mood that he would not have minded if she had returned without him. But Arya followed his lead and they walked towards the sea together, leading Thunder and Lightning behind, but ’twas hard to stay angry when the salty breeze was blowing in his face, the sun was on his back and Arya was beside him.

“Look there!” Gendry pointed to an island on the horizon, "That is the southern tip of Tarth. Mayhaps we shall visit Evenfall Hall when we return.”

“I would like that very much,” Arya said thinking on Brienne for the first time in weeks. Her stomach lurched. It seemed so long since Brienne had found her in Braavos; another time, another life.

Arya had returned to Westeros consumed only with the desire for revenge. Had she the chance again, would she have asked Brienne to track down The Hound? Arya had never considered it before, never allowed herself to think on anything less than total victory, the absolute annihilation of everyone on her list. But now she found herself wondering if ’twould be better to walk away and let the ghosts of the past lie.

Could she? Could she strike them all off her list save The Hound? Could she let him live, let him breathe, drink, shit, whore and kill again while Mycah lay cold in the ground for all these years? If
she did not fulfil her promise and complete her list, the past would never be laid to rest. Could she have a settled future if the past was unresolved?

Nae, she had sworn an oath; sworn it over and over again until it had become part of her and of who she was. Many times she had wondered if that was all she was. Arya underfoot or ‘Arry the boy headed for The Wall, Nan, Salty, Beth, No one, Cat of the Canals or even Arya Stark – it made no difference for all of them demanded revenge.

She was so lost in her memories and thoughts that she did not realise they were now walking through grassy dunes until her feet began to slip and slide in the sand.

“You looked both unhappy and angry there.” Gendry asked, looking at her strangely.
“What were you thinking?”

Arya shrugged and did not answer. Gendry did not need to concern himself with her past.

Changing the subject back to the one which had brought her here in the first place, she said,

“Shireen likes your squire. He is easy company. They were only reading and you should not be so hard on them.”

Gendry merely grunted.

“I am sure she has no other interest in him. He is only a boy.”

Gendry grunted again.

“You are not convinced?”

“I am convinced he is far from the innocent you think him to be. The little water dancing bastard seems to be able to get you two ladies to dance to his attention.”

Seeing the shocked expression on her face, he said, “Do not try and deny it! He is my bloody squire, yet he has Lady Shireen pandering to his every need. She’s even reading to him now! And he has you giving him sword lessons. By the Gods, you cluck around him like a mother hen.”

“I do not!” Arya protested vehemently, but even as she said it, she realised Gendry was right, only he had the wrong animal; not a hen, but a wolf.

Damn him, but Gendry was more perceptive than she had thought.

Arya was not sure when or how it had happened, but Ty was part of her pack. She could visualise herself even now as Nymeria, standing over his broken, bleeding body, snarling, determined, and ready to give her all to protect him.

Arya had not hesitated in risking her own life to carry Ty to Storm’s End and she would do it again and again and again if she had to. She had told herself ‘twas guilt that made her do it – for if she not left him in the heat of the battle, he would not have been wounded, but ‘twas more than that. Much more. Guilt was not enough to drive a person on beyond hope and endurance. Only two emotions were strong enough for that; love…and the need for revenge.

Gendry was warming to his theme. “That boy has you both thinking the sun shines out of his skinny little arse and, if he had his way, he’d have Shireen under his…under his thumb!”

Arya shook her head. “You worry too much about Shireen. Honestly, you remind me of my old
Septa sometimes.”

Gendry snorted disdainfully at that comparison.

“And would it really be so bad, so long as Shireen was agreeable?”

Suddenly it seemed right, inevitable even, that Ty and Shireen should be together, for Shireen was part of her pack too; Ty and Shireen, Jon, Sansa and Bran, Ghost and Nymeria and of course Gendry. Gendry had always been part of her pack, it had just taken her a long while to realise it. Whether he would admit it or not, Gendry felt the same. Oh, he would not call them ‘his pack’ of course, but they were. He felt responsible for them all. Why else would he be going to all this trouble over Shireen?

“I would have married you, Lord or no,” she said to him, smiling, feeling her heart soar with the realisation and acceptance of it. ‘Twas inevitable, ‘twas meant to be. Why had she fought it for so long?

Gendry stopped walking and stared at Arya in something akin to disbelief.

“Arya, I had to wait seven years,” he said with an exasperated sigh.

Sensing this could go on for some time, Thunder dropped his head and began to chew on the rough salt grass sprouting from the dunes.

“I had Brienne of Tarth scouring Westeros and all of The Free Cities to bring you back to me and even then I had seven hells of a task to convince you to wed.”

Lightning followed the destrier’s lead and began to graze.

“Pah! You also exaggerate like Septa Mordane. I was too young to wed you seven years ago and you know it!” Arya grinned, beginning to enjoy this. “Anyway, I would have probably returned to Westeros after the war and found you myself.”

Gendry was standing looking at her incredulously, his mouth hanging open. She resisted the urge to reach over and shut it for him. Instead she started walking away, towards the beach, hoping Gendry would follow, but Lightning had no intention of leaving her tasty snack and Arya found herself swiftly tugged back. Huffing in frustration, Arya gave another useless tug on Lightning’s reins. The horse was in no mood to move now.

Giving up and dropping Lightning’s reins, Arya decided there was more fun to be had in teasing Gendry. She folded her arms and pouted at him.

“And I do not know what you mean My Lord. ‘Twas not hard at all to convince me to wed you.”

“Was it not?” he asked, a hint of a smile beginning to tug up the sides of his mouth.

“Nae. I knew ‘twas inevitable after…after…that first lord’s kiss.” Arya found herself grinning and growing rather hot and flustered by the memory.

“So you agreed to wed me for my tongue?” Gendry asked, remembering how Daenerys had foretold that very thing and trying to stifle a grin of his own.

“Not just your tongue My Lord,” Arya teased, “I quite like your big castle too.”

“My big castle,” he repeated, wagging his eyebrows at her while gauging the distance between them
and his chances of catching her if she ran.

“Aye, and your big sword.”

“My big sword,” he echoed slowly, taking a step towards her while letting Thunder’s reins slip through his fingers.

Anticipating what he was about to do, Arya made a dash for the sea. But the sand was deep and soft and not ideal for a swift escape. They both slipped and stumbled and laughed as he gave chase. His longer strides gave him the advantage and, before she could get to the damp, hard sand that would allow her to outrun him; he had his arm snaked around her waist, pulling her down.

Arya shrieked as he spun her around and threw her on her back in the soft sand. His golden helm was discarded and he was kneeling above her, his long hair blowing in the sea breeze before she could think about escape. Not that she really wanted to.

His blue eyes reflected the sun on the sapphire sea, sparkling with merriment as he looked down at her. Tilting his head to kiss her, he stopped and gasped as she gave his cock a hard squeeze through his britches.

“I nearly forgot about that,” she giggled wickedly, rubbing her hand up and down the hard length of him, “I am marrying you for that big thing too.”

“And I am marrying you for your gentle, forgiving nature and your perfectly ladylike behaviour,” he teased before kissing her hard. “We will both be shaking sand out of our britches for weeks if we do this.”

But it did not stop them and they were.

-o-

Back in the wheelhouse, as soon as Arya was out of earshot, Ty pushed himself up into a sitting position, grimacing with the pain of it.

“You know I would never do anything to shame you Shireen,” he said earnestly.

And Ty meant it with all his heart. He would do anything to preserve her reputation. A true Knight was chivalrous and honourable and protected his Lady above all. Whether Shireen realised it or not, Ty thought of her as his Lady. He desired to claim her as his own in the most idealistic and chivalrous of ways; to present her with a crown of flowers after winning a great tourney, to make her his Queen of Love and Beauty, to proclaim to all of Westeros that she was his. But he was not a Knight yet and despite all of his noble intentions, his desire for her was so fierce that the pain in his side was as nothing compared to it.

Shireen stared down at the open book in her lap. She used to wonder if she could ever trust another man after Edric, but she knew now she could – if that man was Ty.

“I do know it Ty,” she whispered. Why did there have to be so much more to this than what he wanted, than what she wanted, “…but Lord Baratheon is right; you should not touch me and I should not let you.”
He wanted to reach out and touch her right there and then to prove to her that ‘twas what they both wanted, but a Knight respected a Lady’s wishes, so he kept his hands stiffly by his sides. Yet he wanted to do so much more than just touch her; he wanted to take her into his arms and comfort her, to hold her and whisper into her silky hair that he could make everything alright, that he could make her happy. Instead, he balled his hands into fists.

“If you do not want me to touch you then I won’t, but you cannot tell me you didn’t enjoy our kiss, for I know you did.”

He fixed her with a look that seemed to burn right through her. Biting her lip to try and distract herself from memories of their first and last wondrous kiss she said nothing, instead turning away and gazing out of the window of the wheelhouse towards the distant sea.

“And you cannot tell me that you don’t like the way I touch you, because I can tell you do.”

Honour be damned. He was not a Knight yet and wanted to let her know how he felt about her. He reached out and stroked the back of her hand.

The heat from that gentle touch burned her skin and also sent a bolt of heat shooting low into her belly.

Shireen was scared by the strength of her reaction to him and ‘twas that fear that gave her the strength to bring to a halt what they both wanted. She knew that if she let this continue then there would be no going back; there would be no marriage alliance to a great lord to please Davos, Gendry would have no strong lord to hold Dragonstone for him and he would have troubled himself to bring her all the way to King’s Landing for naught. All her life she had put others before herself and ‘twas no different now. She would marry for the good of House Baratheon and that left no room in her life for Ty.

“Y…you are mistaken,” she said, trying to keep her voice from wavering. Arya declared a warrior should be ‘calm as still water’ and Shireen tried to think on that now as she saw the confusion on Ty’s earnest, hopeful face. But she must not weaken; she must be strong as a bear.

Turning ice cold eyes upon him, she said, “You are young. You are a squire and I am a Lady of one of the greatest Houses of Westeros. You do not know what you think, much less what I think and I do not want you to touch me again.” She nearly choked on the words, for they were lies and she never lied, but ‘twas done now. She had broken his heart.

He leaned forward and reached out to touch her face, her greyscale face that no one had ever loved before, not even her mother and Shireen’s heart broke apart too. But she made herself turn away and get to her feet. She made herself say, “I need some air. I will ride beside the wheelman for the rest of the day to give you peace to rest.”

“I don’t want peace,” Ty said raggedly, sounding as if he was terrible pain, sounding the way he had during those nights she had nursed him, not knowing if he would live or die. “I don’t want anything but you.”

The hurt she saw in his emerald eyes almost made her weaken. She dropped his book beside him. “You want to be a great Knight Ty. Mayhaps Arya will read your book to you. Do not ask me again.”

“Do not do this Shireen,” he pleaded, “This is not what you want.”

His pleading only served to strengthen her resolve. He was still so young, so idealistic and naïve. He
still thought that what she wanted had anything to do with this.

She really did need some air. Quickly. The wheelhouse felt as if ‘twas sweltering, the air vibrating with the tension between them. If she did not get out of here, she might faint, or worse she might weaken and tell him ‘twas all a lie. She made herself walk past him and not look back.

-o-

Arya had no recollection of the places they passed, so ‘twas as if she saw The Stormlands for the first time and in all of their spring glory as they made their way slowly up the king’s road. She enjoyed the leisurely pace of their journey, for it was in such contrast to her frantic, desperate ride to Storm’s End.

Gendry sent word ahead to Bronzegate that they had sickness in the wheelhouse, that they could not stop on their way to consult the Grand Maester in King’s Landing. Gendry’s messenger declared they did not wish to impose on Lord Buckler’s hospitality for fear of spreading the mysterious ailment. ‘Twas not much of a lie.

Ty was ordered to groan loudly all the while they travelled through Bronzegate and, to Gendry’s relief, Lord Buckler agreed to his request and even insisted on providing an escort to whisk them through the streets of Bronzegate and out the other end as quickly as possible. While Gendry was relieved to have avoided speaking directly to any one of the traitorous Bucklers on this journey, he ordered everyone to try and think on suitably convincing excuses that would enable them to dodge House Buckler on their return.

The scene of the final battle with Edric’s forces was marked by a great cairn of stones. Each man who survived the battle had gathered the largest stone he could find and they had all been piled one on top of another at the side of the king’s road to forever mark the location of the battle and to commemorate the fallen men of Bad Company.

Gendry brought their procession to a halt beside the towering cairn and every one of them kneeled afore the monument and said a prayer to their own Gods. Even the Direwolves stood still and silent as the prayers were said.

While the rest of the party slowly and solemnly remounted, Gendry took Arya and Ty aside. “You did not have the opportunity to lay your stones after the battle. Would you care to do so now?” Of course they did.

While the rest of Bad Company waited patiently, Lord Baratheon and Shireen accompanied Arya and Ty into the king’s wood. The four of them had to wander some distance into the trees and Ty was clutching his side and beginning to limp by the time they found stones of a suitable size.

When Ty gasped in pain as he bent down to collect his stone, Shireen was immediately by his side offering her assistance, which Ty sharply declined. In the end ‘twas Lord Baratheon who carried Ty’s stone back to the cairn and Arya who scrambled to the top to place each one there in turn.

Ty had to retreat quickly back to the wheelhouse, but before Shireen returned to her usual seat beside the wheelhouseman, she quietly asked Gendry if there was a marker for Edric Storm’s grave. He shook his head.
“I considered leaving him out for the animals to dispose of, but decided even animals did not deserve to have to stomach him. So we burned him; threw him on a pile with the rest of his vermin and burned the lot.”

Shireen nodded pensively but her lower lip quivered and she had to blink back tears.

Gendry grimaced, not knowing what to do or say. Did she still carry a torch for Edric after all these years and after all that Edric had done?

“I could show you were we piled the bodies afore we burned them,” he offered warily.

Shaking her head Shireen whispered, “It makes no matter. I only wanted to spit on his grave anyway.”

Gendry stared in surprise at Shireen’s back as she walked slowly towards the wheelhouse.

-o-

Harlan was as excited as new puppy to be returning to Fellwood Keep. He had regaled them all with his ideas for the Keep since they set out from Storm’s End; for strengthening the defences and trading woven goods with Bronzegate. Apparently the Fells in years gone by had been weavers of renown and Harlan had great plans to encourage some of the women to take up the craft again, now they would have men to hunt and tend the fields. For ‘twas not only Harlan who intended to remain at Fellwood Keep. He had spent his time in Storm’s End extolling the virtues of his family (who’s motto happened to be the rather apt “that torn down re-grows”), of the Keep, of the richness of the surrounding land and of the prospects that awaited men who were prepared to work hard. By the time they reached Fellwood Keep he had managed to convince a dozen of the men to remain in Fellwood Keep with him. It seemed Bad Company’s numbers were destined to fall even further.

Harlan had taken Gendry by surprise by asking for Lord Baratheon’s blessing to wed his cousin. Harlan was not the obvious heir to House Fell, being only a nephew to the deceased Lord Harwood Fell, but he was the only surviving male heir of marrying age and, as Lady Fell held The Keep, ‘twas a neat solution to two problems. It would ensure the protection of the Keep and secure the future of House Fell.

Gendry had been on the cusp of agreeing immediately afore he remembered his promise to Arya to consult her in such matters. So, telling a disappointed Harlan he would need to ponder the request, Gendry did as he had promised and sought Arya’s advice that night. As dusk fell, Gendry walked her away from the camp, deep into the forest where they could talk without fear of being overheard.

While this was not the sort of matter Arya had in mind when she made him promise to consult her, she appreciated his seeking her counsel for Arya held much stronger opinions on such things than Gendry. She had resisted Jon’s attempt to force her to wed and she felt ‘twould be hypocritical now to condone the same thing happening to Lady Fell.

“Mayhaps she will see ‘tis for the best for her House,” Gendry said hopefully during their discussion, wanting only the easiest way out of this dilemma.

“Mayhaps she does not want a man whom Bad Company calls ‘Hairy Harlan’ and who looks as if he has a ball of red wool instead of a head.”

Gendry looked at her aghast, “Harlan is a good man!”

“I never said he wasn’t,” Arya said sharply, “but lying with a man you do not desire for the rest of your life is a fate worse than death. And I would rather die!”
“Hmmm. Then ’tis a good job not all women are like you, for if they were, the Great Houses of Westeros would have withered to nothing long ago. Would you have Ladies jump from their towers rather than marry a good man just because they did not desire him?”

Arya stood up and pushed a stray strand of black hair from Gendry’s forehead before taking his face in her hands and whispering softly, “’Tis exactly what many Ladies have done. But I say - better to do away with a bad man than yourself. A pillow held to the face of a drunken man while he slept would solve the problem easily enough and who would ever know?”

“Should I take this as a warning of what will happen to me should I follow my father’s path?”

Gendry asked in mock horror, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Mayhaps you should refrain from drink just in case,” Arya said, before she grinned wickedly and kissed his forehead.

He closed his eyes, enjoying their easy banter, her warm hands on his face, the unique, wild scent of her, and the promise of where this might lead.

“And do not think of marrying Shireen to a man she does not love either.”

He groaned and opened his eyes to see Arya giving him one of her stubborn-as-an-aurochs stares.

“So I am to not only find a Lord of marrying age who will make a good husband but she had to love him too? Do you want me to hatch a dragon egg for you while I am about it?”

“Hmmm…” Arya rolled her eyes skywards and pretended to consider that request until he started tickling her. He loved it when she giggled and squealed for they were the most un-Arya like sounds. He also loved to have her squirming in his arms, preferably naked, but alone in the dark, in the woods, beneath the stars would do.

However, Arya was not in the mood for play. After trying to tell him to stop but being too breathless with giggling and wriggling to sound as if she meant it, she simply bit his wrist; not hard enough to draw blood, but hard enough to make him yelp and stop tormenting her.

“She wolf!” he growled as he examined his throbbing arm in the starlight.


“What?” he muttered, rubbing his poor wrist, hoping she had not left yet another set of teeth marks on him. The marks she made during their rough bed play were becoming harder to explain away as bruises acquired during sword practice. He had never been that careless or that easy to hit afore.

“Shireen deserves to marry for love and, as long as he is a good man, why does he need to be a lord?” Arya asked petulantly.

“Because I promised Davos and because they are the only ones left with any gold.”

Arya folded her arms across her chest and the aurochs was back. “But you have promised her Dragonstone, so she has no need of gold.”

“Everyone needs gold,” he snorted, wondering how he could turn things back to when she was cradling his face and kissing him.

“But if she has Dragonstone, she need not marry for a title nor for gold,” Arya pressed.
“Aye,” he muttered reluctantly, getting the feeling he was being argued into a corner again.

“So she can marry for love?”

He shrugged. “If it means we can stop talking about this; aye, Shireen can marry any bloody man she wants.”

“Ty?”

Gendry guffawed. Had he not just said any man she wanted? ‘Twas a good job Ty was only a boy.

His laughing only made Arya narrow her eyes and glare harder at him. He blew out a deep sigh.

“My squire fancies himself in love ‘tis true, but Shireen is not fool enough to want the boy.”

In the twilight he could see Arya’s lips were pressed together, her chin tilted up defiantly and her foot tapping. Seven hells, surely not? Surely Shireen did not want a penniless, landless, bastard squire when he had promised to find her a Lord?

“Mayhaps you should ask her?” Arya said tightly.

“But you said she had shown no interest in him,” Gendry grumbled.

“True. But that was in Storm’s End. Mayhaps she has changed her mind.”

He was about to scoff and say “Already?!” but thought better of it. Women seemed to change their mind as often as Septa’s said their prayers. Running his hand over his unshaven chin he decided that a thousand men had given him less trouble in seven years than two damn women had in a few weeks.

“I shall ask her,” he said reluctantly, already knowing he would put that awkward conversation off for as long as he could.

“And you shall not stand in her way whatever man she wants?”

“Whatever man or boy she wants she can have,” he agreed.

Arya threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. “You are a good man Gendry Baratheon,” she whispered huskily.

He would let The Gods judge whether he was a good man or not, but he certainly knew he was a fool for Arya Stark.

-o-

Fellwood Keep as approached from the south looked no different that it had from the north. The same tattered black and green flag flapped in the spring breeze, but Arya was different. Last time she had not known what to expect or even if they would find friends or foes behind the Keep’s walls. This time they all knew what awaited them and this time they brought hope with them in the form of food, other necessities and, of course, Shireen’s cloth.

Yet Arya still felt sick with apprehension as they rode towards the Keep. Although the fields were ploughed and in one or two the first green shoots of crops could be seen, Arya was haunted by memories of the ragged, starving children and what Edric’s men had done to them. Killing them once was not enough. She wanted to kill them again and again and again for the suffering they had inflicted and even then ’twould never be enough.
Gendry, sensing her unease tried to lighten the mood.

“At least you will not have to pretend to be my betrothed this time.”

The memory of her behaviour on their first visit made Arya cringe. She had been so arrogant and selfish then, pretending that her furs and jewels were all packed away, mistaking the misery and hunger they found in the Keep for poor hospitality and manners. Arya resolved to apologise to Lady Fell the first chance she got and to apologise to Gendry now.

“I was so stupid then, thinking only of myself. I will ask Lady Fell’s forgiveness, but I would like your forgiveness also.”

He smiled at her, with that knowing smile of his, the one that told her he understood her better than she knew herself.

“You had no one to depend on in Braavos for all those years, ‘twas natural to think only of yourself,” he shrugged and grinned, “But now you are my lady love and I shall be your lord, I’ll always keep you warm and safe…”

“…and guard me with your sword,” Arya finished for him, rather more sarcastically than she had intended.

He did not seem to think she was mocking him, for he continued mournfully, “Aye, just like in the song. Only ‘twill not be with this sword.” He closed his fist around Oathbreaker’s hilt.

Arya felt shame prick her conscience again. She had thought only of her own return to King’s Landing; of her wedding, of Jon, Sansa and Brienne. She had not thought on what their return held for Gendry. He would have to surrender his sword to re-forge Ice with that old armourer who treated him like a son and who had one foot in the grave.

“Your old Master…”

“Tobho,” he reminded her with a sigh.

“I saw Master Tobho give you a Valyrian steel Arakh for your own.”

“Aye,” he sighed again.

“And that does not make you happy?” she asked, genuinely puzzled, for Gendry loved all swords and armour and steel; especially Valyrian steel.

“I intend to re-forge that too, at the same time as Ice,” he confirmed, yet his voice was still flat, his expression glum.

“While you have dragon’s blood?”

He turned to her in surprise. “So you heard everything that day you eavesdropped on us in the Street of Steel?”

“Umm…well…yes.” She admitted reluctantly.

He frowned, pulling his thick, black eyebrows together and she was reminded again of that Baratheon motto.

“’Tis no guarantee we shall get the dragon’s blood, so do not mention that to anyone.”
“You shall get it.” Arya said confidently. “If Jon thinks ‘twill make him a better sword then you shall have it – I have no doubt about that.”

Gendry shrugged and grunted before asking, “How close have you ever been to a dragon Arya?”

“Umm…well…to be honest I have never even seen one.”

“See that Keep?” They both looked up at Fellwood Keep, now almost upon them. Arya nodded.

“Drogon’s wings extended are the same size as the Keep is tall.”

Arya craned her neck to look up at the massive walls looming above them. “Oh,” she murmured, awed.

“Aye, ‘tis a brave man who will try and take blood from a dragon.”

“Jon will do it.” Arya said, a proud grin appearing on her face when she thought on her brother, the Dragon King.

Gendry chuckled. “There is none braver than Jon, I will allow you that, but he is no fool and, in my opinion, only a fool would go near a dragon with a sword and a bucket!”

“How close would the dragon be scared?” Arya asked, impressed that Gendry appeared to know so much about dragons.

He threw his head back and laughed this time. “Who in seven hells would want to find out?!”

Seeing her frowning at him, he shrugged and continued more thoughtfully, “I do not think a full grown dragon would be scared of anything, but it would be angry and defensive. Believe me you do not want to go anywhere near an angry dragon. They are sly, smart fuckers. They know full well what a sword in the right place can do, even to them.”

“And where is ‘the right place’?” Arya asked. Mayhaps she should have had her fill of it by now, but killing had always fascinated her and killing a dragon…well, there was no prize greater.

“Ahh…” he mused, “Should I be revealing such secrets to a Faceless Man?”

Although his eyes were twinkling in amusement, Arya was taken aback. ‘Twas the first time Gendry had acknowledged her past so openly and she did not like to hear him talking about it, for he had stuck a chord with her, whether unwittingly or not.

How much would the Kindly Man pay for such information? How to kill a dragon? And how much was it worth to him to have one of his assassins in place - her - to kill one of the only three dragons in the world? Or mayhaps one of the Dragon Kings? Arya shuddered. She did not want to think on such things. She tried to close her mind to it, shut that part of her life back into the dark box in her head where she had stuffed it weeks ago. But try as she might, she could not rid herself of the image of the Kindly Man leering at her, his bony hand outstretched, grasping for her secrets, grasping for her.

“I am japing with you Arya,” Gendry began, “there is a soft spot…”

“Nae!” Arya said quickly. “Do not tell me.”

“Why not?” he asked, his face turning stony as he saw how serious and tense she was.

“I do not need to know. What use would I ever have of such information?” She gave a shrill little
laugh intended to make light of the conversation. Instead it had the opposite effect and shook his head slowly as he looked at her.

“Do I need to remind you that you gave me your solemn promise that you would not risk your life again?” he demanded.

She was about to remind him that her exact promise had been against ‘risking her life for nothing again,’ but she decided that was hardly like to help her cause now.

“Of course you do not have to remind me,” she laughed, or tried to. Why was she now imagining the Kindly Man smirking in the shadows at them both?

Mercifully they were interrupted by a crowd of raggedy children running from the Keep and the one at the front was waiving her arms excitedly shouting “Lady Arya, Lady Arya!”

’Twas the little girl she had given all her apples too. Despite the awful conversation she had just been having, Arya found herself grinning with delight at such a hearty welcome. She swung out of her saddle and landed on the ground just as a swarm of children descended on her all shouting her name; or at least she thought they were shouting her name until she saw the first little girl diving into Lightning’s saddle bag. Only then did Arya realise every one of them was cheering not for “Arya” but for “Apples, apples, apples.”

“I have no apples today,” she laughed, holding her empty hands above her head, “but I have other things…”


“Umm…salted fish and rope and wax candles and…”

She felt too cruel when all the little faces fell.

“And biscuits and cakes! Come this way and meet my friend Shireen who has been keeping them safely for you.”

Shireen had already climbed down from her perch beside the wheelman and was rummaging in the back of the wheelhouse. Through the open curtains, Arya saw Ty and Shireen exchange some words which appeared to please neither of them and then Shireen emerged with a box of iced biscuits cut into all sorts of interesting shapes and baked especially for this occasion by the cook at Storm’s End.

The ragged children descended on Shireen in a storm of dirty hands and eager, hungry mouths. Much to Shireen’s delight, they “Oohed” and “Aahed” over the biscuits and then all fell silent as two score of children munched in heavenly unison.

Arya watched Shireen offer Ty a biscuit through the window of the wheelhouse, which he declined with a sullen shake of his head. Ty refusing something sweet? Something was very wrong there, but she had no time to ponder it as Gendry rode up beside her.

“Harlan is eager to speak with his cousin. We should go. Lady Shireen will you join us?” Gendry held out his hand to Shireen, “Come, ride with me.”

Shireen handed out the rest of the biscuits and then gave Gendry her hand. He pulled her up in front of him as if she weighed nothing. Shireen gave a surprised and terrified little squeak. Arya smiled as she remembered the first time she had sat on Thunder with Gendry. It had seemed an awfully long way to the ground.
As she wore a dress, Shireen had to sit sideways in front of him. She gave another nervous little shriek and clutched at Thunder’s mane as Gendry turned the warhorse back towards Fellwood Keep.

Gendry still looked none too pleased with Arya, but she gave him a bright smile and mounted Lightning in order to follow him into the Keep. Once in the saddle herself, she turned to wave goodbye to Ty, but he was too busy giving Lord Baratheon’s back a look that would slay a dragon at a hundred paces. Arya shook her head in puzzlement. Something was definitely not right with Ty.

Lady Fell was much cheerier and looked a good deal less thin than the last time they had visited. She maintained her usual dignified poise, as she led Gendry, Arya, Shireen and Harlan into the Keep’s solar. Harlan however, was even redder than usual and was actually hopping from foot to foot in anticipation.

“I am pleased to see your fields are planted Lady Fell,” Gendry began as they all sat down.

Lady Fell smiled proudly as she explained in great detail all the works they had been able to undertake with the gift of horses and materials Bad Company had left on their first visit.

Arya noticed they were still not offered wine, but some kind of tea. Nettle tea. Urgh, she thought as she sniffed it. But she was careful to keep her face schooled in a polite smile as she sipped the bitter brew. She also managed not to laugh and splutter into her tea as Harlan grew ever more frustrated at Gendry and Lady Fell’s small talk. Septa Mordane would have been proud of her, Arya thought as she stifled another giggle.

Arya did try to catch Shireen’s eye in order to share her amusement, but Shireen kept her eyes downcast and her long hair shielding her face from view.

Eventually Harlan simply interrupted his cousin midway through a story about repairs to the west wall of The Keep.

“Dorethea! I can contain my self no longer,” he near yelped, the words all coming out in a tumble.

Gendry looked towards Arya and raised his eyebrows in surprise, but Lady Fell took her cousin’s outburst in her stride and remained as calm and serene as ever. Did she anticipate what Harlan was about to ask? Arya imagined if she had any idea at all she would not look quite so composed.

To everyone’s shock, Harlan dropped from his seat to one knee in front of Lady Fell.

Taking her hand, Harlan stammered, “I…I know I am just an ordinary soldier Dorethea and you were promised to a Grandison Lord afore the war took him and I am not nearly good enough for you, but the truth is that I always admired you and if I thought I ever had any chance afore I would have told you and I so admire the way you took care of our people all alone and I don’t want you to be alone ever again and if you will have me, my heart is yours.”

It all came out in such a rush that Harlan had to take a deep, gulping breath after he had said it all. Even Arya was impressed by the sincerity of his feelings, if not the delivery.

Lady Fell said nothing for what seemed like a long, long time as they all sat (or in Harlan’s case kneeled) in silence.

Gendry cleared his throat. “Lady Fell, as your liege Lord, ‘tis my duty to arrange a marriage for you, but I…” he looked across at Arya, cleared his throat again and amended that to, “We do not wish you to feel obliged to accept Harlan’s offer, for you should have the husband you…ah…desire.”
Gendry finished awkwardly and then glared at Ayra as if ‘twas her fault he had to give such a ridiculous speech, which, in truth it was.

Harlan looked up with hope filled eyes at his Lady cousin, awaiting her answer.

“Don’t marry him if you don’t love him!” Arya blurted out. Hairy Harlan looked so ridiculous kneeling there before the icy Lady Fell that she could not help herself.

Everyone turned to Arya in horror, but only Lady Fell spoke, “I am surprised to hear you of all people say such a thing Lady Stark. Were your mother’s words not ‘Family, Duty, Honour’? In accepting Harlan’s offer I will be fulfilling all three.” She turned back to Harlan looking as regal as any Queen.

Arya felt like a silly little girl who had just been told she had her dress on back to front. That had actually happened to her once, in front of a whole hall full of guests. Mayhaps that was one of the reasons she did not like dresses. The memory of the humiliation still stung and she felt the same now.

“You may get up now Harlan.” Lady Fell said coolly, “I accept your offer.”

Harlan near bounded to his feet and sat beside his betrothed, with a grin on his face that, even Arya had to admit, lit up the whole room.

Gendry gave Arya a smug “I told you so,” look and stood up. He drew Oathbreaker out of his scabbard and, with the Valyrian steel shimmering in the light of the solar, pointed it at Harlan.

“Would you kneel again for me and arise as Lord Harlan Fell?”

Harlan looked as if he was about to weep with joy and dropped to his knees before Lord Baratheon.

Gendry tipped his sword on each of Harlan’s broad shoulders afore resting it on his mane of red hair.

“Harlan Fell, The Stormlands, the people of Westeros and I all owe you their gratitude for your efforts these past seven years. No man could have asked for a better brother-in-arms at his back or friend by his side. As reward for your steadfast support and as a wedding gift to you and your Lady wife, I grant House Fell all lands for twenty leagues in every direction…”

Lady Fell gasped at the generosity of the gift.

“…to hold for me as your liege Lord on condition of payment of a tithe from each harvest. Do you accept my gift?”

“Aye,” Harlan replied, his voice thick with emotion.

“Then arise Lord Harlan Fell.”

Lady Fell flew to his side and they clutched at each other, seemingly unable to believe their good luck. Despite her reservations, Arya felt a lump in her throat as she watched the two Fells hug each other and she even started to imagine a row of children trailing behind them; all steps and stairs and all with that fiery red hair.

“With your leave Lord and Lady Fell, I will announce your betrothal to the Keep.”

Harlan and Dorethea nodded in unison. Harlan looked as if he was about to burst with pride. Mayhaps ‘twould be a better match than Arya had supposed.

The five of them walked out of the Solar onto the balcony to find everyone from the Keep and Bad
Company crammed into the central yard below them.

“I am delighted to introduce the new Lord Harlan Fell!” Gendry bellowed in his father’s voice. A deafening cheer filled the Keep. Lord Baratheon had to waive his hands for silence. Then he nodded to Harlan to step forward.

Harlan held Dorethea’s hand tightly as they took a few paces towards the edge of the balcony together.

“I am betrothed! She said yes!” Harlan shouted and the whole Keep erupted again with whoops and hollers and much general excitement.

Harlan picked his betrothed up and twirled her around so fast her skirts flew up, another raucous cheer went up from the men directly below who must have glimpsed Lady Fell’s stocking clad legs. She was a red as his hair and flustered when Harlan finally set her back on her feet.

“How many barrels of ale do we have left?” Gendry asked Shireen out of the corner of his mouth.

“Six,” Shireen whispered back.

Blowing out a hasty sigh of relief, Gendry stepped forward again and bellowed,

“Bring the barrels of ale so we can toast our friend’s good fortune and future success. May they be blessed with many children and may they all be kissed by fire!”

A roar to drown out all the others went up from the crowd. From the delighted way Harlan and Dorethea were looking at each other, they would be wasting no time in making those children.

Arya looked from them to Shireen, who was grinning out at the crowd, so caught up in the excitement of it all that she had completely forgotten to hide behind her hair. Arya hoped Shireen would be as happy in her marriage, whether she married for love or for Family, Duty and Honour.

-0-

“King’s Landing ahead!” Anguy cried out.

“Archer’s eyes - sharpest ones in Westeros,” Gendry said to Arya.

Arya stood up in her stirrups but failed to see anything beyond road and trees and sky.

“What do you think, Anguy?” Gendry asked. “I reckon we should arrive on the morrow. Around late afternoon?”

“Take a couple of fast horses and you could be there afore midnight,” the archer replied.

Gendry looked to Arya and raised his eyebrows, wordlessly asking do you want to?

She badly wanted to see Sansa and Jon, but she knew everything would change in King’s Landing; by The Gods, ‘twas changing already and she wanted to lie one more night under the stars with Gendry.

So she shook her head. Gendry seemed pleased with her decision, for he had his own reasons for wanting this last night together.

Arya knew he felt the loss of his brothers in arms. He missed Lem, now Harlan was gone and this very morning Tom O’Sevens and Jack-be-lucky had approached Gendry with their plan to take the
gold road to Acorn Hall without stopping in King’s Landing. Old Tom had finally decided to find out if Lady Smallwood might have him after all and Jack seemed to want to tag along for the ride. Mayhaps seeing Harlan settle down had made them think being wed might not be so bad after all. Mayhaps soon there would be none of the old Brotherhood Without Banners left in Bad Company.

’Twas near time to stop for the night and make camp when the Direwolves, who, if not away hunting, usually padded along beside them, both stopped dead in their tracks at the same time and lifted their noses up, sniffing the air. Ears went back, hackles were raised and Nymeria began to growl deep and low in the back of her throat.

Gendry immediately gave the signal to stop and Arya heard Anguy curse softly under his breath. The hairs on the back of Arya’s own neck stood up. What in seven hells was going on?

Gendry turned in the saddle and bellowed down the line at the top of his voice,

“Dismount! Dragons!”

“Arya, hold Lightning’s bridle as firmly as you can. Horses do not like this.” Gendry said quickly as he jumped down from Thunder.

“I don’t fucking like it either,” Anguy hissed beside her.

Arya did as she was told; copying Gendry and Anguy and smoothing her hands over her horse’s neck and whispering reassuring words beside Lightning’s now twitching ears.

The Direwolves suddenly set off at a fast pace, heading for the shelter of a wood to their left.

“What is happening?” Arya whispered to Anguy who was nearer than Gendry.

Anguy was watching the sky and he replied without looking at her, “Dragons are coming. Let’s hope ‘tis only one. If we see three of them, that means trouble. Or war.”

Arya lifted her own face up to the sky. Even the wind and the birds seemed to have stopped. ‘Twas as if everything was holding its breath, waiting. And then she heard it, a sound like nothing she had ever heard before. The only thing she could liken it to was a slow, dull drumbeat.

“Here they come,” Gendry said softly.

“One from the north east!” Anguy shouted down the line, breaking the silence. All eyes turned that way. It took a moment or two for Arya to find it amongst the clouds, but sure enough there was a black shape, moving faster than anything she had ever seen and heading straight towards them.

The horses began to blow and skitter nervously. Arya tried to soothe Lightning by stroking her neck, all the while never taking her eyes from the sky.

“Which one is it?” Gendry asked Anguy.

There was a pause before he replied, “Not Viserion. ‘Tis dark.”

Arya heard Gendry curse inventively under his breath.

“Why does it matter which one it is?” Arya asked Anguy, but ‘twas Gendry who answered, “It means ‘tis most likely Aegon, come to give us his idea of a ‘Welcome Home’,” Gendry spat
angrily.
Beside her Anguy rolled his eyes.

The shadow in the sky grew larger and the alien sound louder until Arya could make out the upwards ‘woosh’ of wings, like an intake of breath, followed by the powerful downwards drumbeat of the dragon’s immense wings. Arya remembered looking up Fellwood Keep towering above her. Could a living thing really be that massive? She was about to see for herself as the black shape in the sky was hurtling towards them now at an alarming speed.

“‘Tis Aegon on Rhaegal!” Anguy called out. How he could see a man up there Arya had no idea.

Gendry cursed again but this time his words were drowned out by the dragon’s scream. The horses heard it first for they all began to whinny and buck together, then a moment later Arya heard it too; a sound so high and loud and terrifying, that ‘twas all she could do not to throw herself on the ground and cover her ears. If she had ever been more terrified in her life she could not remember it. Only the fact that the men all stood so calm and still around her, kept Arya from running to the trees after Nymeria.

In another moment more, the creature was upon them and the horses went from panic to suddenly still, as if frozen to the spot with terror. The nightmarish shadow came swooping down at them faster than anything should have been able to move, blocking out all of the light, sucking the very air from their lungs. Arya could hear its rasping breath and feel the wind from its wings beat against her face, as it pulled those immense wings up and then down. The stomach churning stench of charred meat threatened to make her vomit. Then ‘twas so close that she could see evil looking claws and emerald green scales and leathery wings.

And then the heaving mass of dragon was away and gone. As quickly as it came, the shadow was behind them, becoming smaller and smaller as it soared higher towards the sun.

Arya blew out the breath she had not even realised she had been holding.

“Fucking horse’s arse!” Gendry ranted at the retreating shadow.

“I thought I heard him call out your name as he passed,” Anguy said mischievously, winking at Arya. Hearing that enraged Lord Baratheon even more and he unleashed another torrent of abuse.

Arya winced at some of his language.

“Does Aegon do that often?” she asked Anguy as they began to climb back on to their still shaking horses.

The archer shook his head, but Gendry was already replying for him, “Far too bloody often. Once was too much! And he will have some excuse no doubt; Rhaegal needed exercise and he was so distracted by a passing eagle that he did not notice us until he was ten feet above our very heads!”

“Only ten feet?” Arya gasped.

Anguy shook his head and rolled his eyes, whispering to Arya, “By the time we get back to The Red Keep he will swear ‘twas only five, but I would say, twenty really. And if you think that was bad, you should see them breathing fire. I pissed myself the first time and I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

Arya was still in too much shock to laugh at Anguy’s crude admission. She had not only seen a dragon, she had been within twenty feet of one. It already seemed like a dream. She was overcome with a sudden urge to run and tell her father and her mother about it, to share her childish excitement.
with them, but of course she would only be able to do that in another kind of dream.

Twilight was upon them and Gendry could put it off no longer. He had promised to speak to Shireen afore they returned to King’s Landing and they would arrive on the morrow. He could delay no longer.

He asked her to walk with him and together they followed a wide path that led away from the camp. No doubt it went somewhere people wanted to go, but they would never find out, for Gendry hoped this would be a short walk and an even shorter discussion.

“We shall be dining in the Red Keep and sleeping in feather beds on the morrow,” he said conversationally.

Shireen merely nodded. She no longer felt the need to hide her face from him, but she still seemed unwilling to speak when he was around. He wanted to put her at her ease, but was at a loss how to begin.

“You shall like Lady Sansa. She is nothing like Arya.” He said, then releasing that had not come out quite as he meant, he muttered, “They both have excellent qualities, but none in common.”

She made no comment on that either.

“And Queen Daenerys, I have no doubt you will like her and King Jon too. But you should keep out of Aegon’s way.”

“Why?” Shireen asked softly.

Gendry groaned. How did he answer that? Because Aegon took great delight in seducing any lady he should not and that women in general, from the lowliest scullery maid to the highest born ladies, seemed helpless to resist his charms? Resist? Nae, they all came clamouring back for more. ‘Twas a wonder he had not worn his cock out years ago. Gendry also worried that, as Shireen was his closest living kin, Aegon might seduce her just to annoy seven hells out of him. However, he could not tell Shireen any of that, so he settled for, “He is a horse’s arse.”

“Oh.” Was all Shireen said to that.

Having no skill at small talk with ladies, unlike bloody Aegon, Gendry decided to come straight to the point. Clasping his hands behind his back and slowing the pace even further, he fixed his eyes on a distant point on the horizon and just came out with it.

“You know why you are here Shireen. We are the last of the Baratheons. You are past marrying age and we have a duty to our House to produce heirs. Davos and I agree that you should wed someone of the same standing as yourself; a lord of one of the Great Houses of Westeros. Your father was a King and a great man. If he were still alive, you would have made a marriage alliance to strengthen our House a long time ago.”

Taking her silence as agreement, he ploughed on, “I have promised Ser Davos that you shall have Dragonstone as your dowry and that should be incentive enough for any lord.
She murmured something indistinct. He suspected it might have been, “Thank you.”

Good. Shireen seemed pleased by his gift. Dragonstone should have been hers by right anyway. He was rather concerned about removing her mad mother from it, but that was a problem for another day.

“I intended to ask Queen Daenerys to find you a suitable husband because…well…she is good at that sort of thing.”

He was again met by silence and he did not dare look at Shireen in case she was going to ask him awkward questions or cry or do something else that ladies did that he felt equally ill equipped to deal with. Arya was not like any other lady, so even knowing Arya was no practice for dealing with proper ladies like Shireen.

“I will not interfere.” He said. In truth he hoped to never hear anything about this again until he received an invitation to the wedding. “I trust that the Queen to find you a good match, but you must not hesitate to tell her…or me I suppose…if anything…I mean any lord…is not to your, um…liking.” Seven hells this was excruciating. Give him a sword in his hand and a battle to fight any day.

They walked on a while more in silence. Damn he had to finish this – just say it.

“Arya wants me to tell you that you do not have to marry any man you do not …” he nearly choked on the word, “…love.”

Silence. But merciful silence this time.

“So, are we clear on all that?” he asked gruffly, stopping and having to look at her as he turned around to head back to camp.

He saw her nod in the gathering dusk, but her head was down and her hair was back over her face and he could not see her expression. Was it wrong to be glad of that? He did not want to see anything for then he could pretend ‘twas all alright. Seven hells, what if she was silently sobbing? Never once in his life had he thought himself a coward until now, when he would have quite happily run away.

“One last thing…” he paused, wondering how he was going to say this? Everything he had planned to say seemed to have deserted him. They walked on a bit further in silence while he tried to remember if he had said everything he was supposed to before he spoke about Ty.

Eventually she whispered, “You said there was one last thing.”

“Hmmm. Yes. Ty.”

Did he imagine it or did he just hear her sharp intake of breath?

“I know he is charming, I know you two get on well, I know he is just a bastard boy from Flea Bottom, but then…so was I.”

He sighed. He was not painting a very good picture of his squire here. He owed it to Ty and Arya to try a bit harder with this.

“Although Ty has nothing to give you at the moment, one day he will be a great Knight. Have no doubt about that, for he is the most naturally skilled swordsman I have ever seen. Mayhaps he will be the greatest Knight in all of Westeros as he claims…but please don’t tell him I said that, for he will be insufferable if you do.”
Did he imagine it again or was that another sound coming from Shireen? Something akin to a squeak? He was almost done; the fires of the camp were in sight again, he could get back to his furs where Arya was waiting for him if he just got this over with.

“What I am saying Shireen is that you shall have Dragonstone and if you want Ty, that is…if you love him…then….you should follow your heart. You will have my blessing no matter what path you chose.”

Silence. And then a “Thank you,” so quiet he could barely hear it.

She sounded choked, but if it was with gratitude or some other emotion he could not say and ‘twas now too dark to see anything except her outline in the dark. He felt suddenly overwhelming protective of her and, if he could have seen where her hand was, he would have reached for it, but he could see nothing. Surprising himself, he reached for her shoulders and tugged her into an embrace. She was only the second woman he had ever held like that and she felt so different to Arya; shorter, softer, more hesitant and she smelled of the sea. He wondered absentmindedly how many times Shireen had been hugged in her life. Not much more than him he would wager and if could kill that fucker Edric all over again he would.

He rested his chin gently on the top of her head and said softly, “You are the only family I have Shireen and you know I am no good at this sort of thing. I am only good with war and steel.”

“And Arya,” she said against his chest, taking him by surprise.

He chuckled, and hugged her a bit tighter. “Yes, war and steel and Arya. Whatever Arya and I can do for you, whether now or in the future, you must not ever hesitate to ask.”

He felt her nod, so he stepped back and let her go.

“King’s Landing on the morrow then?”

She nodded and, satisfied, he turned and walked quickly away, anxious to find Arya and make the most of this last night under their furs.

Shireen stood and watched her cousin go, wishing she could be more like Arya, wishing she could demand and take and do whatever she wanted. Instead she had listened meekly to Gendry talk about her father and her duty and tell her a lord would take her because she had the ‘incentive’ of Dragonstone. She had been so angry she could cheerfully have clunked Gendry’s big, stupid sword over his big, stupid head

What about me?! She wanted to scream. My face might be ugly, but I can run a great castle, I am clever and kind and loyal and I have so much love inside of me that any man should be grateful to have me as his wife and mother to his babes. I want a man to love ME! Not wed me for my name, or because my father was a great man or for the ‘incentive’ I bring to the marriage.

But when Gendry had hugged her at the end, she could have sobbed. She had resigned herself to it all; to being an unloved bride, to sacrificing her virginity for a marriage arranged to strengthen her house and if that was to be her lot in life then she would have accepted it and made the most of it, as she had with everything else in her life.

But then Gendry had gone and ruined it all for her by giving her a choice, by caring, by talking about Ty and love and hugging her.
Shireen imagined that Gendry’s hug would have been much like her father’s; big and hard and awkward. But her father had never hugged her. Not even once. No one had; not her father, not her mother, not Edric, not even Ty really and yet Gendry had hugged her and all her anger had just drained out of her in one sudden ‘whoosh’ and now she didn’t know what to do.

Loyal, dear old Davos had saved her from one landless, bastard Knight. What would he say if she threw herself at another? Davos was always reminding her that her father was a King and that she was King’s daughter. What would he say about the King’s daughter and the squire? She wrung her hands together, for she knew exactly what he would say, for she could see it now; Davos with his grey head bowed in disappointment, all his great plans for her in tatters, saying gruffly, “Your father wanted more for you than this.”

She wanted to run and roar at the injustice of it all at top of her lungs, yet she also wanted to throw herself on the ground in a heap and sob. She wanted to be hugged but she also wanted to have no man touch her or to be nice to her ever again, for it just made everything too...complicated. She wanted order and she wanted to work so hard every day that she could collapse into her bed exhausted every night and not dream that there might be more to life. She wanted her old, uncomplicated life back, but she also wanted more.

Standing in the darkness, she took a step towards the camp, then a step back into the darkness. She did not know which way to turn, where she wanted to go or what she wanted to do.

“Shireen.”

She heard her name spoken as a whisper and a promise in the dark. Her heart raced as Ty stepped out of the shadows and stood before her.

“Is aught amiss? You had been gone so long I came to find you.”

How much had Ty heard?

“What did Lord Baratheon want?”

Shireen breathed a sign of relief. If Ty had to ask, then he not heard any of it.

“He wanted to speak of my marriage.”

Ty said nothing, but she could hear his sharp exhale of breath and she could imagine his face as he stood before her, furious, jealous and hurt.

“Will you hold me Ty?” she asked impulsively.

“Tis not right.” He gritted out. She could imagine his green eyes blazing and his jaw clenched with tension. “I cannot touch you if you are to be wed to another man.”

Was she? She did not know. She did not know anything except that she wanted Ty to hold her now.

“If it is never to happen again, then let us have one last kiss before we part.”

’Twas an outrageous request she knew, for she had made him promise not to touch her and now she was asking him to not only break that vow, but to go against all the chivalrous codes he held so dear.

“Please?” she whispered as she closed the distance between them. She could only see his outline in the dark, so she put her hand against his face and felt the tension in his jaw, just as she had imagined.
She titled her face towards his and found his lips, brushing them softly with her own. For a heartbeat he did not respond, then he groaned and gathered her into his arms, holding her so tight to him she could hardly breathe. Then they lost themselves in deep, mindless kisses. When they finally broke apart, they stared at each other, breathless.

“I must leave now,” Ty said, backing away.

She caught his arm, not wanting him to go, but not knowing what she did want. “I do not know what to do,” she whispered.

“We cannot do this,” he said harshly, shaking her hand from his arm. “You are soon to be betrothed and it will not happen again.”

The thought of his never holding him again, of never being kissed with passion like that again was like a knife in her heart. But what would her father have said? What would dear Davos, who had protected her for so long, think?

“Ty…” she gasped, at a loss for words, wanting only for her to hold her again. But he had spun around and disappeared into the darkness and she was alone.

Chapter End Notes

Phew! Sooooo long I know, but a lot to cover and a lot to set up for…King’s Landing! I know it’s been coming for almost as long as winter has, but we’re finally there. Unfortunately not ‘on the morrow’ – but soon.

I felt really bad, posting that “author’s note” (did you notice I even changed the bit I posted?) on Friday and seeing all the views that got – feels like cheating somehow. But I wanted to let you know what was going on and that I hadn’t been slacking (well, not much). Arian Eripmav on Fanfic suggested I post updates on my profile page there to let you know when then next chapter will be up, so I’m going to do that from now on, as I can’t seem to stick to Fridays any more. Thank you for the idea Arian Eripmav.

I already know that, having posted this on a Sunday I’m unlikely to get another chapter done for Friday…but we’ll see. I do try.

Thanks again to Brazilian Guy for taking time out from his ‘futeball’ to help me – even if I didn’t always take his advice this week. Doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate it BG! You know I do.

See you all again soon and meantime…GO BRAZIL!

Hahaha – if you happen to be reading this in the months or years to come. The 2014 World Cup has just started and seeing as Scotland aren’t in it (sobs – but no surprise) I’ve gotta support Brazil now don’t I?! Hope you enjoyed this and enjoy the futeball.
‘Twas their last night under the stars and it should have been perfect. They had made their own fire and spread their furs far away from the rest of Bad Company. With no moon to dim their brilliance, the stars twinkled happily above on this clear, crisp spring night.

Arya had been looking forward to returning to The Red Keep, to seeing Sansa and Jon and to wedding Gendry since they left Storm’s End, so why did she feel anxious and apprehensive now? When she should be looking to the future, why could she not stop thinking of the past and all the mistakes she had made?

She sat beside the fire, hugging her knees to her chest, trying not to think of Braavos or Brienne or her list. She tried to think on Sansa and Jon, but even that did not ease her mind, for it only brought to mind the events leading up to her fleeing The Red Keep. She had never told Sansa she was leaving, she thought guiltily. Having lost each other once before, she owed it to her sister not to disappear again. She vowed to apologise to Sansa on the morrow.

Jon would be smugly delighted that she was to wed Gendry, for that was what her brother had wanted from the outset; a Baratheon alliance. Had he not promised she would like the Lord he had chosen for her and, seven buggering hells, had he not been right? However hearing Jon say “I told you so,” was the least of her worries.

She had been such a fool with Sansa, thinking her sister would try and take Gendry from her. But in The Red Keep nothing was as it seemed. ‘Twas no wonder Gendry hated the place and she had even more reason to hate it than he. Her father had been murdered there and the closer they got to it, the more the events of the past seemed to be weighing on her mind.

She would simply not think about Braavos or Brienne or her list or The Red Keep or anyone in it she decided. But not thinking about all the problems that seemed to be gathering around her like storm clouds, left her with little else she could think on. Her mind wandered back to the Stormlands. So many wonderful, joyous things had happened there, yet tonight she only seemed to be able to dwell on the bad.

When Gendry appeared suddenly from the darkness she blurted out,

“Do you think Lady Fell thinks I’m a fool?” afore he had even sat down.

Gendry groaned inwardly. If he told her the truth would she still let him into her britches tonight? He had thought about little else all day save making love to her tonight; except when Aegon had near landed Rhaegal on top of their heads. He was still seething about that.

“Why do you care what Lady Fell thinks?” he asked as he unbuckled his sword belt and laid it down carefully beside where they would sleep tonight. He never liked having his sword out of reach. How many more nights would he have Oathbreaker to hand?

“You will be wed to her liege Lord when we return and we do not have to stop at Fellwood Keep on the way home if you do not want to.” There. He thought he had side stepped that question quite neatly.
"Aaargh. You might as well just say it. She does. I know she does."

He shook out their furs, using the time to consider his reply carefully. "You apologised. She
accepted. I doubt Harlan will even remember. ‘Tis the end of it."

Arya grimaced and groaned and messed her hair up with her hands. "Why can I not be like Sansa
and always know the right thing to say and when to say it?"

"Because if you were like Sansa, you and I would not be here." Gendry said as he shrugged off his
boiled leather jerkin, balled it into a pillow and lay down in the furs.

"And I want you here," he growled, lifting the top fur in an invitation for her to join him.

To his intense frustration, she made no move away from her seat by the fire. He dropped the fur and
rolled onto his side, head propped on his elbow to watch her. Even after all these years, seeing a
woman bathed in firelight reminded him of that witch Melisandre. He pushed that unpleasant thought
to the back of his mind before it could threaten his tumescent desire for Arya.

Arya looked morosely into the flames. "I had better tell you this before we return to The Red Keep
and before you find out from someone else…"

He frowned, concerned. He did not like surprises and Arya’s surprises tended to be more shocking
than most.

"Someone else? Like who?"

"Daenerys or Jon… or Sansa."

Gendry sighed with relief. At least bloody Aegon wasn’t in on this ‘surprise’, whatever it was. If he
heard that Targaryen’s name mentioned once more today, ‘twould ruin his day altogether.

Arya let go of her knees and kicked at the edges of the fire with her boots. In the firelight he could
see her biting her lip and ‘twas unfortunately not in a flirtatious or amorous way. She was nervous
and he realised he was probably not going to like what he was about to hear.

"Well, are you going to tell me or not?" he asked wearily.

"‘Tis embarrassing now, but…before you left for the Stormlands, I saw you and Sansa together
outside her room."

"And…?" he asked, relieved, but puzzled. He had not thought Sansa would have revealed the secret
of the new clothes he had commissioned for Arya and, in any event, new clothes were hardly worthy
of the aguish Arya seemed to be suffering.

But if ‘twas not about the clothes, then what did Arya have to confess?

Arya took a deep breath and let it all come out, "…the two of you were laughing and she hugged
you and she is so beautiful that I thought you wanted her and not me and that’s why I never came to
you the night before you left."

Gendry shook his head, held up the furs again and, in his most commanding voice, gave her an
order.

"Come here."

He half expected her to do the opposite of what he asked, as she usually did, but she hurried over
and meekly slunk under the furs, lying on her side, facing him but not touching or even looking at
him.

He took her chin gently between his thumb and forefinger and titled her head up until she had no
choice but to look him in the eye,

“From the first time I laid eyes on you, I have never imagined spending my life with another woman.
I want only you, I always have and I always will.”

“I know,” said Arya in a small, miserable voice.

“Then you must never doubt it,” he said as he grazed his thumb over her bottom lip, wanting to kiss
her senseless and show her how strong his love for her was. But she seemed in the mood to talk
rather than kiss, so like the good husband he wanted to be, he listened.

“When we are together here and in Storm’s End, I can believe it…” she said hesitantly, “…but in
The Red Keep with all those beautiful, sophisticated ladies like…like Sansa and Margaery
Lannister…I…well…I still feel like little Arya horseface with her dress on back to front.”

Gendry rolled his eyes. Why was Arya even mentioning Margaery Lannister? Why in seven hells
did Arya think that scheming bitch Margaery could ever hold a candle to her?

“You must trust me when I tell you that you are the most beautiful…” he kissed her forehead, “…the
most enticing…” he kissed her nose, “…the most mysterious…” he kissed her chin, “…woman I
have ever met.”

Taking her full bottom lip between his teeth, he tugged lightly on it. Her involuntary sigh, told him
she was beginning to relax.

“Tell me you trust me,” he whispered as he nuzzled her neck.

“I do,” she said breathlessly, titling her head to give him easier access to her neck.

Gendry intended to do his best this night to prove to her how wonderful she was and how perfect
they were together. He reached for the laces of her britches and began to untie them in the dark,
under the furs, with practiced ease.

She pressed her hips forward, urging him to hurry.

“There is something else…”

He made a low sound in his throat as his fingers found the smooth, skin of her stomach and grazed
the soft curls at the top of her legs. Why should they care now what had happened in The Red Keep?
Matters were settled between them and besides, ‘twas hard to concentrate on what she was saying
when his cock was so eager to concentrate on other parts of her.

She pushed his shoulders back so he had to cease kissing her neck. He groaned in frustration.

“There was other reason I left the Red Keep to follow you,” she said in a strained voice,
“……Aegon.”

What?! Bloody Aegon?! He knew it. This day was destined to be ruined.

Blood pounded in his ears as he asked, “What…about…Aegon?” through gritted teeth.

“I had to get away from him afore I murdered him.”
‘Twas a good job Aegon was still half a day’s ride away – or was it? If Gendry was going to have to kill the Targaryen himself, he would prefer to get it over with sooner rather than later.

“What…did…he…do…to….you?” Gendry asked, anger building in him like a kettle, ready to boil over.

“The night you were leaving, he tried to kiss me and…said he wanted to wed me himself.”

‘Twas not as bad as Gendry feared, for he had no doubt Arya was well equipped to resist Aegon’s advances. But the bloody horse’s arse knew how Gendry felt about her. Although they would never be friends, Gendry had not thought the Targaryen would stoop so low as to pursue Arya the moment his back was turned.

He was outraged that Aegon would try to take from him what was his. The thought of Aegon touching her filled him with a jealous rage and he felt as if his blood was boiling in his veins.

“Wait until I see that fucking cu…” Gendry began,

Arya grabbed his face with both her hands and pulled his head to hers, crushing her mouth against his, swallowing his words, intent on swallowing his anger. He quivered with rage, but as she kissed him greedily, his balled fists uncurled and he grabbed for her arse, pulling her tight to him, grinding his hips into hers.

When Arya finally let him go, his red hot rage had been replaced by an icy cold determination to leave Aegon in no doubt as to what would happen to him and his balls if he came near Arya again.

“I’ll be damned before any other man shall touch you again, King or not,” he growled from deep in his chest.

She was his and he would make her and Aegon and everyone else in the fucking Red Keep know it. He had never wanted to take her and claim her with such a deep and primal need.

“I want you and only you,” she breathed against his neck, driving him wild with wanting as her hands sought the laces of his britches.

As she made short work of his laces, he lifted her bottom up so he could drag her britches off and throw them out of their furs. Grabbing two handfuls of the material, he ripped her shirt apart, exposing her shoulders and breasts to the chill night air. Her teats were hard and dark against the creamy softness of her breasts. He took first one teat and then the other in his mouth. The high pitched pleading sounds she made as he sucked and nipped at them with his teeth sent new surges of desire pulsing through him.

Looming over her, he seized her hips with both hands and pulled her up towards him. Her surprised little gasp sent heat pumping to his cock. Growling her name as he exhaled, he drove into her. She was so wet and so ready for him. She was his and only his and he needed to make her come, to claim her in a way that he never would.

“You are mine. Say it Arya. Say it.”

“I…am…yours” she panted with every stroke and then “Yes, yes, yes” as he pumped into her over and over, faster and harder. Never before had he taken her with such violent, animal abandon. ‘Twas all she could do to hold on; her legs wrapped around his hips, her heels digging into his thighs and fingers digging into the straining muscles of his back as his body slammed against hers in a delirious frenzy. His jealousy and his hunger for her thrilled her in a deep and primal way.
Somehow he still had the presence of mind to know that their cries, even of ecstasy, would bring men running. He was close and so was she. Covering her mouth with his hand he bit her shoulder, not hard enough to draw blood, but enough to smother his wild cry of pleasure as he arched above her, erupting suddenly, filling her with his seed as she shuddered under him and around him. His release crashed over him in wave after heart stopping wave. ‘Twas so intense that he thought he might die with the pleasure of it.

Spent and trembling, he collapsed on top of her, trying to get his breathing under control, feeling her heart slamming against his. They lay like that for a while, with him still inside her, not wanting anything to come between them, until he felt he had to roll off for fear of crushing her.

“I am sorry. I was too rough and rushed,” he said in a ragged voice as he lay, panting beside her.

“I liked it. ‘Twas… exciting,” she whispered breathlessly.

He chuckled and pulled her towards him, tucking her close beside him. “By the Gods, you are the only woman for me.”

“I had better be,” she teased, wriggling closer to him, knowing that even skin to skin was not enough and ‘twould never be enough until he was buried deep inside her again.

“We can sleep on the morrow, after we are wed, for I do not intend for us to sleep much tonight,” he said, running his hand through her hair.

Tomorrow they would return to The Red Keep and they would be wed.

Arya shivered. She dismissed it as the effect of their sweat cooling rapidly in the chill night air and pulled the furs up around her shoulders.

-o-

Arya did not know if ‘twas the animal way they had joined or her fear of being caged again in The Red Keep, but that night she dreamed that she was Nymeria once more.

She had not had such a dream since she and Gendry had become lovers. Although the rational, human part of her brain knew she was asleep somewhere, tonight everything was so vivid, she almost believed this was the real world; all scents and shadows, hunger and the chase.

There was no need to see him in her dream, to know instinctively that he was there. In wolf form he needed no name; not Ghost, not Jon, not Gendry, just the one who always knew what she was thinking, what she needed, what she was.

Hunting and feeding they had done countless times before, yet something had changed. They both knew it and felt it, something a wolf had no name for save pack; primal, irrational, all encompassing. ‘Twas everything already and yet held the promise of more to come.

Feeding, tearing, ripping, she bolted down chunks of their fresh kill while he stood silently by. He watched her eat her fill before finally taking his as she rolled onto her flank, full, sated and ready to sleep.

The heavy feeling in her belly, replete with meat and sex was familiar, but this time ‘twas something
new, something subtle yet undeniable, something she had never experienced before; the miracle ghost flicker of new life in her womb.

-o-

Arya woke up with the taste of venison in her mouth and a hunger for more. Unsure of which memories were hers and which were Nymeria’s, she shifted and stretched. Gendry’s hand remained resting protectively on her flat stomach.

Was any of it real or had she imagined it all?

She still did not know when she sent Anguy and his archers out to kill a dozen deer for their wedding feast that night.

-o-

Shireen had not expected any of this. As they drew closer to King’s Landing, she saw that the dark circle around the city walls was not scorched earth as she had assumed, but rather an army of men, tents and horses spread out for what seemed like miles before the walls of King’s Landing.

How many men? How many horses? Her sharp, castle warden’s mind was already calculating the amount of food, hay and water required to maintain such a force. She gave an involuntary gasp as she came up with a huge figure. Who could maintain such a force and why were they here?

She turned around, looking back into the wheelhouse, wanting to ask Ty. He had come from King’s Landing and as Lord Baratheon’s squire, he must know. But Ty was asleep on the pallet on the floor of the wheelhouse; or at least he was pretending to be asleep. The road was so rutted here, worn down by thousands of hooves and wagon wheels, that the wheelhouse was bouncing around more than ever. Shireen could not see how Ty could possibly sleep through it, but then she did not know if he had slept at all the night before. He had not spoken to her, nor even looked at her since their kiss last night.

Shireen was no clearer about what she wanted this morn than she had been last night. She wished Davos was here; for he had been her adviser and her support all of her life. But she already knew what dear Davos would say – that a bastard squire was not good enough for the daughter of a King. Mayhaps she did not want Davos here after all.

Oh, she did not know what she wanted.

Shireen dragged her eyes away from Ty and back to the army surrounding her. ‘Twas as if all their attention was focused on her. She was acutely aware of men standing watching her with hungry eyes as the wheelhouse trundled slowly passed. She wished Ty was beside her, for she felt safer with him than with any man save Davos, but she would not slink off and hide herself in the wheelhouse. She was a Baratheon and would not let herself be intimidated by a hoard of unwashed soldiers.

Squaring her shoulders, she forced herself to stare straight ahead. She knew no man would dare touch her while she travelled under Lord Baratheon’s protection, but she was beginning to realise
that life in The Red Keep might not be as safe and predictable as life in Storm’s End. At least Arya and Ty had taught her how to defend herself, she thought with a weak smile.

By the time the wheelhouse arrived in the bailey yard, Arya and Gendry were already dismounted and talking with the other lords and ladies.

Nervous butterflies fluttered around Shireen’s stomach as she considered the scene before her; the Great Lords of Westeros stood to one side, the beautiful, high born Ladies to the other. All were laughing and talking, the men clasping each others shoulders in welcome, while the women were huddled deep in conversation.

Gendry was a head taller than all the other men, save one. Shireen realised with shock that the next tallest in that group was a woman! Blonde and freckled, with coarse features and a fierce, determined look about her, the woman looked more like a farm hand than a Lady or a Knight. But when she smiled as Gendry greeted her, ’twas as if her face was lit up by the sun. Neither Ty nor Arya had ever mentioned this giant of a woman, scandalously dressed in armour, but Shireen knew there was only one person this could be; Brienne of Tarth.

Shireen had grown up hearing the tale of The Maid of Tarth. Accused of killing her uncle Renly, The Maid had secretly been in love with him and had eventually killed the Red Woman to avenge her love. Shireen had thought the whole story achingly romantic, but this was not how she had imagined Renly’s Brienne the Blue would look. Shireen sighed. Why was real life never like the stories?

She thought about Ty and his book about Knights. If life was like such tales, Ty’s father would be a Great Lord and not some Flea Bottom bastard and Shireen herself would be a princess, untouched by greyscale, death and deceit. Ty would win a great tourney and crown her his Queen of Love and Beauty. As if that could ever happen, she thought with a derisory and most unladylike snort.

Shireen was a practical girl and would not let herself ponder such silly notions; at least not for long. All anyone could do was make the most of the hand they had been dealt by The Gods and Shireen knew hers was far better than most. She sat up straighter. Whatever happened in King’s Landing she was determined to make the best of it – as she always did.

Amongst the group of men, two were instantly recognisable. Jon she had met before; at The Wall. Despite the years that had past, she could still recognise him, for he was the male image of Arya, tall and dark and serious.

The man standing shoulder to shoulder with King Jon was as tall and as powerfully built, but as fair as Jon was dark and more… elegant. His clothes were of beautifully tailored green and purple silk, in complete contrast to the functional boiled leather the other men wore.

Only one family had hair of spun silver and such exquisite, noble features. Shireen had no doubt she was looking at King Aegon Targaryen. He was trading words with Lord Baratheon and, even from this distance, Shireen could tell that the words spoken were angry ones. Then, to her surprise, King Aegon threw his head back and laughed which made Gendry scowl even more furiously. Ours is the fury. Lord Baratheon certainly seemed to be experiencing their family words today.

Gendry had described Aegon as a ‘horse’s arse’. If he was, then Shireen thought he had to be the most striking, magnificent, horse’s arse she had ever seen, but she also sensed he was dangerous and unpredictable. Shireen had every intention of heeding her cousin’s warning to steer well clear of King Aegon Targaryen.

Shireen turned her attention to the ladies and immediately her eye was caught by Queen Daenerys.
Her hair was as striking as her nephew’s and, with her petite frame and voluptuous curves, Shireen might have her thought The Dragon Queen quite the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, if ’twas not for the statuesque lady standing beside her. With intricately braided auburn hair, a demure expression and a figure that would make grown men weep, she could only be Lady Sansa Stark.

Arya cut such a contrasting figure; clad in britches, sword at her hip, hair shorn. There were other ladies in the group, but they all faded into the background compared to these three striking and so very different women, all three of whom were surely destined to play a part in Shireen’s immediate future.

-o-

“Oh Sansa!” Arya cried as he flung herself onto her sister.

Sansa’s eyes flew open in surprise as she returned Arya’s bear hug with a more gentile hug of her own. While there was no doubting her sister’s joy, such a display of affection was previously unheard of from Arya and Sansa was unsure quite what to make of this new, demonstrative Arya.

Sansa caught Daenerys’ eye over Arya’s shoulder as the sisters embraced. Daenerys shrugged and smiled, as surprised by this new turn of events as Sansa.

“Let me see you,” Sansa said, stepping back and holding Arya at arm’s length. “You look happy and…different.”

“‘I am,” Arya grinned, “I mean…I am happy.”

“So you reached an arrangement with Lord Baratheon?” Sansa asked tentatively.

Arya giggled, leaving the two ladies dumfounded. Daenerys had never heard Arya make such a carefree, joyous sound before and if Sansa had, then ’twas so long ago she could not remember it.

“Yes, we reached an ‘arrangement’, ” Arya said happily, “We are betrothed and I have agreed to wed him this very day!”

“Oh, not today! You cannot do it today!” Sansa wailed, taking one of Arya’s hands in hers.

Arya frowned. “I can do anything I want and if I want to marry Gendry today, then I shall!”

Daenerys reached for and caught Arya’s other hand. “Listen to your sister afore you make your decision,” Daenerys implored.

“’Twould only be for a short while,” Sansa pleaded.

Arya shook her head. However, she was not feeling quite so certain about her decision now. Her sister and the Queen were up to something.

“I will not have a spectacle before the whole of King’s Landing if that is what you think to arrange. Gendry and I have already agreed to marry in the Godswood and ’twill be today. I have given my word.” Arya said, raising her chin in the air and intending that to be the end of it.

Sansa dropped Arya’s hand and with a resigned sigh said, “We meant to keep it a surprise, for you, but as usual you have spoiled it.”
“Sansa!” Daenerys said sharply.

“‘Tis true.” Sansa pouted, “She always ruined all of my surprises.”

“I did not!” Arya hissed, “And even if I did, ‘twas only because they were stupid surprises in the first place!”

“Sisters!” Daenerys said in dismay, “‘Tis a happy occasion we all wish to celebrate and there is no need to argue.”

“She started it!” Arya declared, “She always thought she could tell me what to do and now she thinks to dictate to me when I can wed!”

“Stop this! Both of you!” Daenerys snapped, aware that their conversation now had the rapt attention of all the ladies around them. She continued in a harsh whisper, “You are not little girls now. Please act like the ladies and representatives of House Stark that you are!”

“Hmmmph,” Sansa said, folding her arms across her chest.

“I’m no lady,” Arya muttered under her breath.

Daenerys took a deep breath, finding it hard to refrain from reaching up and knocking both of their heads together. There was nothing else for it; they would have to tell Arya why they wished her to delay her wedding.

“Jon has sent ravens to Winterfell. Bran travels south as we speak to attend the wedding.”

“Oh!” Arya said, pulling a guilty face.

“See!” Sansa said smugly.

Arya stuck her tongue out at her sister.

Daenerys took another, deeper breath, “‘Tis obviously a decision for you and Lord Baratheon to make Arya. We shall all respect that decision; whatever it is.”

Sansa opened her mouth to object, but shut it again as The Queen gave her a hard stare.

“When did Jon send the ravens?” Arya asked, looking at Ghost, standing patiently by Jon’s side, her brother’s fingers absentmindedly stroking the Direwolf’s pelt.

Arya rubbed the scar on her hand left by Ghost’s bite outside the walls of Storm’s End. She understood how Jon knew, but she wanted to know when he knew.

“You and Ty arrived at Storm’s End first,” Daenerys recalled. Arya nodded.

“A few days later, we received another raven confirming Lord Baratheon had arrived. I believe ‘twas the day after that when Jon sent the raven to Winterfell.”

Arya groaned and rolled her eyes. She and Gendry had made love for the first time the night he had arrived, after she told him they were betrothed. Jon must have known almost immediately.

‘Twas just as Gendry said – there were no secrets in a castle, even from Direwolves. Mayhaps especially from bloody Direwolves, Arya thought, glaring at Nymeria who was contentedly rubbing herself off Gendry’s hip. Most disconcertingly, Nymeria turned around at that very moment and fixed Arya with knowing golden eyes. Arya gave a groan from the back of her throat that came out
as a growl.

Damn, but she needed to speak to Jon about all of this, but that would need to wait, for there were more immediate matters to attend to. The wheelhouse had arrived and was squealing to a halt beside them.

As the wheelhouse trundled to a stop, Shireen was shocked to find every curious face turned towards her. She immediately dropped her head and hid behind her hair, but not before she had seen Arya running towards the wheelhouse, extending her arms intent on helping Shireen down from the high seat.

Shireen was not sure this was appropriate; ‘twas certainly not ladylike for either of them. With a sigh and a final look back at Ty, who was still pretending to be asleep, she took Arya’s hands and allowed herself to be lifted down from the wheelhouse seat. Arya did it with a flourish and even gave her a little twirl before setting her down on her feet.

Shireen wished the ground would open up and swallow her. Through her hair she could see the disapproving glances of the other ladies. The Queen and Lady Sansa were laughing. Shireen hoped ‘twas at Arya and not at her.

Arya dragged her by the hand towards the assembled Great and Good of Westeros.

“Come meet my friend and my kind-of-good-sister-to-be, Lady Shireen Baratheon!” Arya announced to the crowd.

Shireen was so nervous, ‘twas all she could do to stare at the hem of her skirts. Almost instantly, two of the most exquisitely embroidered gowns she had ever seen appeared beside her feet.

“I’d like you to meet Dany and Sansa,” Arya said excitedly.

Shireen used her lowest, longest curtsey to avoid meeting the gaze of The Queen and the famous Lady Sansa.

One of these Great Ladies seemed to know what she was up to, for she said gently,

“Please do not be shy Lady Shireen. We do not bite.”

“Indeed we do not,” said the other voice playfully, “We have Arya for that!”

Arya cursed under her breath while the other two voices chuckled softly. Shireen thought the sound of their laughter was as musical and bewitching as the mermaids Patchface used to sing about.

Shireen peeked up from under her hair to see the two greatest and most beautiful ladies of Westeros smiling back at her.

“’Tis…’tis an honour,” she managed to stutter.

“’The pleasure is all ours,” Queen Daenerys smiled and Shireen found herself smiling shyly back until Lord Baratheon appeared out of nowhere and placed his heavy hand on her shoulder.

“I see you have been introduced to my cousin Lady Shireen. Can you find her a good husband?”
Arya thwacked Gendry’s bicep, which only resulted in a grunted, “What?” from that Lord.

Shireen was mortified, but The Queen looked delighted, clapping her hands together in her excitement.

“Another wedding! How wonderful.”

Something seemed amiss with Arya, for she scowled and pulled Gendry off to one side, whispering in his ear. Shireen had no time to dwell on that, as The Queen and Lady Sansa each linked an arm through hers and, chattering excitedly, led her towards the imposing entrance of The Red Keep.

Shireen had time for one last, brief look over her shoulder before she was bustled into the castle. For as long as she lived, she would never forget what she saw; Ty’s golden head resting against a window post, his expression heartbreakingly sad, as the wheelhouse trundled away.

Gendry’s day was getting worse. His brief conversation with Aegon had nearly resulted in a treasonous fight with the King. ‘Twas only Jon’s intervention and an agreement to settle their disagreement later that prevented a duel on the spot. And now Arya said they needed to talk.

He clenched his hands into fists and waited. Arya had only just pulled him aside when Brienne had approached. Another one who ‘needed to talk’.

What the fuck was it about The Red Keep that everyone always needed to be whispering and plotting and planning while no one actually did anything? The urge to whistle for Thunder, grab Arya and ride like the wind back to Storm’s End was growing stronger with every passing moment.

“Not now Brienne,” Arya was saying, looking first at Brienne and then pleadingly at him. But he had no intention of interfering. He vaguely recalled Brienne telling him she had sworn to complete some task for Arya. Brienne lived for such tasks and he had been far too preoccupied with wooing Arya at the time to enquire about this latest one. He was not of a mind to ask now either.

Arya gave him another pleading look. He shook his head almost imperceptibly. If Arya thought he was going to get involved in this, then she was mistaken. Arya was his betrothed of course, but Brienne was one of his oldest and best friends. He would not be taking sides here.

“But I need to speak to you. Now.” Brienne was demanding of Arya.

“And I need to speak to Lord Baratheon,” Arya replied grabbing hold of his sword belt, ensuring he could not remove himself from their discussion.

“’Tis important,” Brienne said, giving Arya an intense look.

“And so is what I need to speak to him about,” Arya shot back.

Gendry’s patience was wearing thin. “Can you not speak of it in front of me and get it Goddamn over with?”

“No!” they both said together, both glaring at him.

He threw his arms up in surrender.

“One of you has to yield, for I have better things to do than stand here and listen to your bickering,” he said badtemperedly.
Brienne yielded first. Bowing to him she said pointedly to Arya,

“We must speak soon.”

Arya nodded but turned quickly away. Brienne glowered, spun on her heel and left.

“Are you going to tell me what in seven hells all that was about?” he asked Arya as he watched Brienne’s stiff back disappear into the crowd.

“Someday, but I have a more urgent matter to discuss. We need to delay our wedding.”

Snapping his gaze from Brienne to Arya he wondered if he had heard her correctly. After every promise she had made him, was she really asking to delay their wedding? Blood pounded in his ears. By The Gods, he wished with all his heart that they had never come back here.

“But you gave me your word Arya. I have waited seven years for this and we will be wed today.”

He gritted out through clenched teeth.

“I know,” she whispered hoarsely, clutching at the front of his boiled leather jerkin in a way she had never done afore. “But Bran is on the way from Winterfell and I would love so much for him to attend our wedding.”

She looked up at him with those big, grey eyes, shining with unshed tears and he knew he could not deny her this.

“I have not seen Bran since I left for King’s Landing with your father all those years ago,” she said, her voice choked with emotion.

’Twas so long ago. She had not seen her brother since afore he had even met her.

Gendry scrubbed his hands over his face and grimaced. He still found it hard to understand why The Gods had seen fit to allow her to meet his father while he had not. His father had borne no love for any of his children and Gendry was not fool enough to think ‘twould have been any different with him. But all the same, he had a detached curiosity about Robert Baratheon; about his father’s life long friendship with Ned Stark that mirrored his own with Jon, about whether their hammer wielding hands were truly the same and he would have liked to observe, and mayhaps learn from, his father’s decline from King to drunken sot.

But ’twas never meant to be. Arya had met King Robert and Gendry had not. The Gods had intertwined all of their fates and he wanted to believe that this delay was just another part of The God’s plan for them, another obstacle to be overcome on their path together.

Blowing out a long sigh, Gendry pulled Arya into his arms and rested his cheek against her head. He stroked his hands over her shoulders and down her back, before wrapping his arms around her and holding her tight to him. No doubt this was considered scandalous behaviour for The Red Keep, but he cared nothing for what any of the twittering little birds here thought.

“Then we shall wait,” he said with a heavy heart.

Arya hugged him tightly and whispered her thanks.

Mayhaps ‘twas just the oppressive atmosphere of The Red Keep, but he had a growing feeling of unease. He tried to smile but found he could not. Instead he closed his eyes and thought on their time together in Storm’s End. He prayed that would be enough to sustain them. She was his and all would be well.
He wished he believed it.

Chapter End Notes

I did post an update on my profile page on Friday (as promised) and intend to do that every Friday if I don’t manage to post as some people seem to appreciate it. Again, as it’s already Sunday, a post next Friday is unlikely – only four full days and a work filled week away. But you know you will get it asap.

I had to go back and read a few chapters this week to remind myself what happened in The Red Keep and you know what? I couldn’t stop reading! It’s been such a long time (Christmas) that I could hardly remember any of it and I actually thought – Wow, this is good! Hahahaha. How vain is that? But if I’m writing something I like and enjoying writing it, I like to think it comes across and makes for a better story.

Reading it again also reminded me of all the fun I’ve had with Brazilian Guy along the way. Thank you again Ser, for everything.

See you soon…
Gendry let his hands wander down the strong curve of Arya’s back to her arse, wondering if the two of them could sneak away to her chambers without being missed, when he heard a familiar voice cough and declare imperiously,

“Try and be discreet, at least until you are wed!”

Arya stiffened in his arms. Gendry reluctantly let her go as they both took a step apart to acknowledge the presence of King Jon who, despite his stern tone, had a playful smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eye.

“My hearty congratulations to you both!” he cheered, clasping one of each of their shoulders.

Arya and Gendry exchanged a quick glance as King Jon proceeded to chuckle at their awkwardness.

“It took you long enough! I always knew you would make a handsome couple but, by The Gods, if your children take their stubbornness from both their father and mother, then we are in for double trouble!” Jon laughed as he opened his arms to Arya.

She wondered if there was a reason he spoke of children now? ‘Twas a strange way to greet her when she had been expecting only a smug “I told you so,” from her brother. She eyed Jon somewhat suspiciously before walking into his embrace and letting him hug her.

“Just say it and get it over with,” Arya muttered, “We all know you’re dying to.”

Jon winked at a grinning Gendry over her head before looking down at Arya and, with a puzzled frown said,

“I have no idea what you mean sweet sister,"

“Aargh! You know fine well,” Arya hissed in frustration, shoving at her brother’s chest.

Jon pretended to stagger back as if she had wounded him.

“I told you so. You want to say it, so just do it and be done with it!”

Jon drew his brows together, pursed his lips and pretended not to understand what she was talking about,

“Do you mean when I said I would build a canal to King’s Landing? Well the work has begun. Sam and Tyrion are outside the city walls now, overseeing the work; otherwise they would have been here to greet you.”

“Ooooh, you are impossible! Of course I don’t mean that!”

“I am just a simple man Arya.” Jon shrugged and held out his hands as if beseeching her to understand, “I know nothing of womanly intrigues. Take pity on me and speak plainly to your poor old brother,” he teased.

Just as it seemed as if Arya was about to scream in frustration, Gendry came to her rescue,
"'Tis true. You will be pleased to hear we are betrothed and will be wed as soon as Bran arrives from Winterfell," he grinned, snaking his arm around Arya and pulling her stiff shoulders towards him. She softened as she looked up at him and matched his grin with one of her own.

Delight lit up Jon’s face.

“I could not be happier, for I have never known a couple to be better matched. May The Gods bless you and your joining with plenty of Baratheon babes,”

Taking Arya’s hand in his, he held it to his lips and brushed a brief kiss over the bite mark left by Ghost outside the walls of Storm’s End.

“I am sorry for scar,”

Arya gave her brother a forgiving smile, “’tis nothing and without your… I mean Ghost’s intervention, I might have died where I fell outside the walls of Storm’s End.”

Gendry grimaced at the unhappy reminder of what might have been. Much as he wanted to, he could not blame the captain of the castle guard, for the man was only doing his job. He had however, made sure every one of the guards had sworn an oath to protect his lady.

A squeal of delight from Queen Daenerys made them all turn, in time to see three fine figures; one with white blonde hair, one with black and one with shining auburn hair, disappear into The Red Keep.

The sight seemed to please Jon as he grinned as he watched them go. “I see you have brought Lady Shireen with you. She is no longer the little girl I remember from The Wall,”

“Nae, she is well past marrying age, yet she still cannot look me in the eye if I address her directly,” Gendry grumbled as Arya glared at him.

“I’ve brought her here to find her a good husband,” he said with a resigned sigh, giving Arya a glare of his own.

John cocked his head to the side and with an amused expression on his face asked,

“So Lord Baratheon cannot find a good husband for his cousin in all of his Stormlands?”

Gendry growled and declined to answer.

‘Twas true he had brought Shireen to King’s Landing hoping to pass the onerous task of finding a husband to Daenerys, or at least intending to wash his hands of the job one way or another. However, he was loath to admit as much to Jon for fear of being accused of shirking his lordly duties as head of House Baratheon.

Jon seemed to find the whole situation amusing, for he chuckled before asking pointedly,

“And how fares your young squire?”

“Squire?!” Gendry huffed, “I cannot remember the last time he did anything even remotely connected to a squire’s duties. He reclined on silk cushions in that bloody wheelhouse the whole way here as if he was Lord Varys himself.”

“He is injured,” Arya said defensively.

“The Grand Maester will see to him and he’ll be back to his water dancing practice afore you know
“it,” Jon said with a wink towards Arya.

Gendry gave a disgusted snort and rolled his eyes.

“Come, we had best find Danny and Sansa or they will have Shireen married off without us,” Jon laughed.

“And the problem with that would be…?” Gendry muttered, earning himself a sharp jab in the ribs from Arya.

-o-

Queen Daenerys and Lady Sansa had taken Shireen to The Queen’s solar, where they were all huddled deep in a conversation that stopped the moment Jon walked in through the door. The three lady’s heads; the white, the red and the black, broke guiltily apart.

“I see you are already being initiated into the secretive ways of the court Lady Shireen,” Jon observed dryly.

“There is much for us ladies to discuss and little of it of to interest my King,” Daenerys said, looking up and smiling warmly at her husband.

Arya watched Jon immediately soften as he basked in the glow of his Queen’s smile. Arya looked away. It felt intrusive to observe the love that so openly passed between them. Instead, she sneaked a glance towards Gendry, helping himself to a cup of water at the other side of the solar. Could one of her smiles have the same effect on him? Arya hoped so.

Sansa stood up, brushing her hands down the front of her dress, signalling an end to the ladies meeting.

“If you have no further need of me my Queen, I will retire to my chambers with my sister, for we have…matters to discuss.”

Daenerys raised her eyebrows, gave Arya a knowing smile and nodded her agreement.

“Would you care to join us Lord Baratheon?” Sansa asked shyly, from under her lashes.

If Arya had not been expecting it, she might have misinterpreted the shared little smile that passed between her sister and Gendry. Arya had to chew on a fingernail to stop from laughing aloud when Gendry gave his cool consent, as if he had nothing better to occupy his time.

While Sansa led the way, Arya and Gendry followed. Arya playfully bumped her shoulder into his and kept hiding her hand in her pocket, behind her back or under her other arm, when he tried to hold it. She must have giggled, as Sansa stopped and asked them, “Is everything alright?”

“Arya, behave!” Gendry snapped in the voice he usually used to bark orders at his men.

Sansa was obviously shocked by his harsh tone. Then she recovered her composure, regarding Gendry with narrowed eyes before turning and setting off again.

When Sansa’s back was to them once more, Arya and Gendry both stifled guilty sniggers like little children, caught with their hands in a sugar jar. From Gendry and Sansa being in on the scheme; ‘twas now Arya and Gendry who held the upper hand. Arya found the role reversal highly amusing. She was with the two people she loved most in the world and ‘twas all she could do to refrain from shouting her happiness aloud for the whole of The Red Keep to hear.
As they approached Sansa’s room, Arya’s joy was dampened somewhat as she could not help but remember the last time she had been here; when she had watched Sansa and Gendry whispering and laughing together. What a fool had she been to believe her sister and her beloved would betray her. Thank the Gods she wasn’t the same lonely, insecure girl now.

Arya reached for Gendry’s hand and entwined her fingers with his. He had done that before, but she had never taken his hand in hers. He looked across at her with an expression that made it near impossible for Arya to breathe. She saw his love for her in the way his eyebrows were raised in delighted surprise over twinkling blue eyes and the way the edges of his mouth tugged up.

It had been a long time since she trusted anyone, but she trusted him, and she trusted Sansa. They were her pack. Arya grinned. She could not help herself. If she had ever been this happy before, she could not recall it.

“Remember to act as if you are surprised,” Gendry whispered against her ear as they followed Sansa into her room. His breath was warm and ticklish and sent a shiver of anticipation up Arya’s spine. Finding it hard to keep her eyes facing forwards, she nodded almost imperceptibly.

Sansa’s rooms were even larger and more sumptuously decorated than Arya remembered. She had not paid much attention afore, but ‘twas as if she saw everything with new eyes. As she caught sight of her sister’s bed in the next room, covered with cushions and richly embroidered throws, Arya could not help but wonder about the man Sansa had chosen to take to her bed. Sad, sweet, prim Sansa had a lover.

Arya had a much greater understanding of the myriad implications of that now than she had before. Not only was her sister a great beauty who any man would be grateful to have in his bed, she was sister to the King and therefore one of the most powerful women in all of Westeros. Her lover was surely a man of influence, mayhaps a Great Lord, yet Sansa had given no indication that she intended to marry. With a start, Arya realised that Sansa’s lover might already be married. A dozen possibilities raced through her head as she stared at the big bed.

“Wine?” Gendry’s sharp request jolted her out of her reverie. He gave her an enquiring look that asked more than whether she wanted wine. Gendry had caught her staring at the bed. Arya resolved to look at it no more.

He handed her a jewelled cup and her first sip confirmed this was finest wine from the Arbour. Arya drank the rest down greedily, enjoying the feeling of warmth that spread outwards from her centre, making her feel even more content and relaxed. She ignored Gendry’s raised eyebrows as Sansa refilled her cup.

While Arya sat and drank and tried not to look at the bed, Sansa was trading pleasantries with Gendry and asking him questions about The Stormlands and what crops and flowers grew there. To Arya’s surprise, Gendry answered the questions about crops knowledgeably, although he admitted to knowing nothing about the wild flowers native to The Stormlands. Arya realised that, between their frequent bouts of lovemaking, he seemed to have spent his time in Storm’s End most productively.

As they talked, Arya considered the myriad different flowers by Sansa’s window. Sansa had admitted they were a gift from Highgarden; from Willas Tyrell. Arya had met him, danced with him even, last time she was here. He seemed nice enough and much taken with Sansa. Was Willas Sansa’s lover?

Arya imagined Willas and his withered leg on that bed over there. She must have screwed up her
face, for Gendry got up from his seat and came over to stand by her chair. Turning his back to Sansa who had taken herself off to her walk in closet, he looked down at Arya and asked softly.

“What is wrong?”

Tilting her head back in order to look up at him, she whispered, “Sansa has a lover.”

Gendry looked down at her, his mouth a tight line, his expression guilty and troubled.

“You know who he is, don't you?” Arya hissed accusingly. “What are you not telling me?”

“You had best hear it from her,” Gendry said on an exhale.

Before Arya could press him further, Sansa trilled happily, “Look what I have here!”

“Remember ‘tis a surprise,” Gendry murmured as he turned back towards Sansa, a smile fixed on his face.

Sansa held clothes in her arms, piled so high she was resting her chin upon the top to steady the bundle.

“What is it sister?” Arya asked in her best mummer’s voice.

“A gift from Lord Baratheon…or rather several gifts.” Sansa said, beaming with delight.

Arya looked from Sansa to Gendry and back. Both were grinning down at her expectantly. Arya could not resist a little jest,

“He must be very fond of you to gift you with so many clothes sister,” she said coolly.

“But they are not for me…they are for you,” Sansa said slowly, her happy expression faltering.

Gendry’s scowl warned Arya to take this no further. She sighed loudly. Sometimes she wondered if he possessed a sense of humour at all.

Arya stood up and took the topmost item from Sansa’s bundle. ‘Twas a man’s shirt, but of the finest silk and, as she held it up to admire it, Arya had to admit that it was perfect. ‘Twas shaped to hug the waist and flare out again at the hips. It would flatter any woman’s figure and, despite her jesting and her initial reservations about a gift of clothes, she could see that Gendry had really tried to please her with this. How many husbands would put up their wife’s habit of dressing in manly clothes, much less indulge it by providing such beautiful garments?

“There is more,” Sansa said enthusiastically, putting the pile down on the table beside Arya and holding up a pair of britches.

To describe them as merely ‘britches’ did them a grave disservice Arya thought, for they were made of the finest calf skin and, like the shirt, were shaped to flatter and enhance a woman’s figure. No more would she have to put up with extra material gathered at her waist and held in place with a big belt. She would be able to move more freely than before and that could only benefit her sword play. ‘Twas truly a thoughtful gift.

“What a wonderful gift! Thank you both so much,” Arya said, really meaning it and near overcome with emotion. What was happening to her? Since when were some clothes enough to make her want to cry?

Feeling awkward under Sansa’s watchful gaze, she did not fling herself upon Gendry and smother
him in kisses of gratitude as she would have done had her pious sister not been there. Although Arya felt Gendry’s eyes upon her, she could not look at him, for then she really would burst into tears. She made do with a whispered ‘Thank you My Lord.’ She resolved to show him how much his gift pleased her later, when they were alone.

Sansa seemed satisfied with Arya’s reaction, for she then turned to Gendry and said,

“Wait here. I am not done with you yet!”

Arya sat down heavily on the nearest chair while Sansa hurried back to her closet. Gendry took the opportunity to stand beside Arya and rest his hand on her shoulder.

Sansa quickly re-emerged with another armful of clothes, but these were black, broken only intermittently by flashes of bright yellow; the colours of House Baratheon.

“For you Lord Baratheon,” Sansa said curtseying as she extended her arms to Gendry.

He looked from the grinning Sansa to his teary betrothed with questioning eyes. He had mentioned to Sansa he needed new, lordly clothes, but had expected nothing like this.

Arya shrugged. ‘Twas as much of a surprise to her as to him.

When he made no move to accept Sansa’s burden, she put it down on the table beside Arya and lifted the topmost garment. It unfolded as she held it up. ‘Twas a surcoat of fine, golden linen with the black Baratheon stag prancing proudly in the centre.

Gendry could not contain his pleasure. He had only ever seen pictures of such things worn by Knights in tourneys, back in the days when men could play at war instead of living it. He had never dared to imagine he would possess such a thing. Taking the edge of the surcoat between his finger and thumb, he marvelled at the rich feel of it.

“’Tis the finest, dyed linen from Pentos,” Sansa said proudly, “…and fit for a king.”

Gendry raised his eyebrows and let the cloth slip through his fingers.

“A gift from Jon and Aegon. King Aegon had it made for you by his own tailor.”

Aegon had commissioned this for him? Gendry could scarcely believe it and it did not alter the fact that he had a bone or two to pick with the Targaryen. He tried to think of some quick retort to besmirch either Aegon or his tailor, but at that moment could think of none. The garment was truly magnificent. His father could not have worn any better when he was King.

Gendry carefully took the surcoat from her and held it up to his shoulders, admiring the detail and craftsmanship with something akin to awe.

“Here is a matching surcoat for your squire,” Sansa giggled as she held up an identical, smaller garment. “The poor tailor is still working on a matching trapper for your horse. It takes many hours of work to dress a Great Lord and his squire, but many more to dress his destrier.”

Arya imagined Gendry and Thunder done up in all their Baratheon finery. With his unique black armour and his magnificent golden helm, Gendry would outshine all the other knights on any tourney field and, of course, he would best them all, whether with his hammer or his sword.

Arya could not help herself from grinning broadly at the vivid image she conjured up; Thunder galloping across the tourney field, bearing her victorious lord and husband to her. She imagined
Gendry holding a crown of roses, the same shade of blue as his eyes, in his mailed fist. And then she imagined him offering it to her.

By the Gods, what was she thinking?! She slapped the palm of her hand to her forehead. That was Sansa’s dream not hers.

Arya looked up to see Sansa and Gendry staring at her.

“There was a bug on my forehead,” she muttered, before examining the palm of her hand for the imaginary squashed insect and making a show of wiping its non-existent remains down the front of her britches.

Sansa grimaced and averted her eyes in disgust, but Gendry was not so easily fooled. He waggled his eyebrows and fixed her with that look of his; the one that saw through her schemes, the one that told her he knew everything about her. ‘Twas Arya’s turn to avert her eyes. Damn him, but he could read her like a book – well, if he could read that is.

“I am in your debt for arranging this for us and I hope one day I may repay your kindness,” Gendry said gratefully, bending low and kissing Sansa’s hand.

To Arya’s intense irritation, her sister giggled and blushed a most becoming shade of pink.

As always, Sansa had done the right thing. She had arranged wonderful gifts for them both, while Arya had not even thought to bring her sister something as simple as a shell from Shipbreaker Bay. Arya was ashamed of her thoughtlessness, but instead of admitting her own failings, she directed her anger towards her sister as she had done all her life. Why did Sansa always have look so prefect and be so perfect? Her every action was above reproach.

Gendry let go of Sansa’s hand saying, “No man could hope for a better, or a more beautiful, Good Sister.”

Sansa giggled again. Even the sounds she made were musical and ladylike and perfect in every way.

Arya’s jealously flared again; as green and evil as Aegon’s Dragon.

“They are only clothes and she is not your Good Sister yet,” Arya said sharply.

Both Gendry and Sansa turned to look at her and Sansa’s face immediately fell; Arya’s cutting words had done their job all too well.

Sansa might have been wounded by Arya’s sharp tongue, but Gendry was angered by Arya’s snide words and embarrassed by her selfish behaviour. Sansa had done nothing save shower them both with consideration and affection.

“She would have been my Good Sister had you kept your word,” Gendry said coldly.

He had never known what it was like to have a brother or a sister, but he was damn sure if he had one, he would treat them with more respect than Arya treated her sister.

“You owe Sansa an apology. You should be thanking her and yet you pour scorn on her gifts and belittle her efforts. I had thought you better than that Arya.”

She knew she should give in now, but it had been her habit for so long to armour herself against everything and to never back down. Much as Arya knew what she should do, she could not bring herself to apologize. She set her chin defiantly and glared at him.
Gendry glared back. Where was the Arya who had shared his bed in The Stormlands? The girl he loved who had selflessly risked her life for Ty, and who had been so generous to Shireen? ‘Twas as if their time together in Storm’s End had never happened, for here they were, back to the bickering that had defined their time in The Red Keep. It seemed this place had the power to twist anything – even the giving of gifts, into something to be resented and fought over.

“If you do not think that comment to your sister warrant an apology, then you are not the woman I thought you were Arya Stark,” he said through gritted teeth.

Arya glared at him for a further long moment, stubborn grey eyes boring into even more stubborn blue.

With a quick shrug of her shoulders, Arya said, “Fine. I apologise.”

“‘Not to me. To your sister,” he demanded.

Blowing out a huff, Arya turned to Sansa. “I am sorry and I am very grateful for everything you have done for us…for me.”

Sansa’s bottom lip trembled slightly as she nodded and then she startled Arya by pulling her into a full embrace.

This was not like being held by Gendry, not at all. As Arya let herself be enveloped in softness and, as she breathed in Sansa’s light, feminine scent, Arya imagined she was a child again, back again in her mother’s arms, safe and warm and loved. Without thinking, Arya clung to her sister, the way she must have clung to her mother all those years ago.

Gendry ran his hands through his hair as he watched the sisters. ‘Twas a good sign, but still, they had a long way still to travel and much to talk about. He needed to remove himself from Arya before he did something he might regret, such as teach her some humility with the flat of his palm on her arse. He needed to release some tension and he knew just who to release it on.

“I must take my leave ladies. I have unfinished business to attend to with Jon.” He gave a shallow bow to the two sisters who still held onto each other. Without waiting for their leave, he headed for the door.

He might have claimed to be leaving to seek Jon, but his unfinished business was very definitely with the other Dragon King.

-o-

King Aegon Targaryen was a creature of habit and Gendry knew exactly where to find him at this hour.

The library was not a place Gendry ever had reason to visit himself. If you could not read, then why would you need to visit a library? The only time he had been inside was to attend a hastily arranged meeting of the war council.

But of course Aegon could read. Jon and Sam could read too and ‘twas one of the few things Gendry did his utmost to avoid. He could more than hold his own in any martial endeavour and there were few Commanders who were as respected as he, but reading and dancing were his two failings;
the weaknesses that betrayed him for the Flea Bottom bastard he was.

As he strode towards the library, he recalled having seen Ty in the wheelhouse with a book about
Knights and suspected his squire had asked Shireen to teach him how to read. Gendry had a
sneaking admiration for the boy’s cheek. What other Flea Bottom bastard would dare ask a high born
lady to teach him to read? But the boy was determined to better himself in any way he could,
including wedding Lady Shireen if she would have him. Thankfully, Shireen seemed too sensible for
that…he thought. All the same, once things settled down, ’twas his intention to ask Arya to teach
him to read, just as Ty had asked Shireen.

Taking a deep breath, Gendry checked his sword still hung at his hip and opened the door to the
library without knocking.

As he expected, King Aegon Targaryen, the sixth of his name, was there; reclining on a chaise,
playing a harp. The music stopped as soon as Gendry took his first step into the room.

Gendry’s hand rested on his sword and Aegon’s on his harp as the two men regarded each other
across the room. The air between them crackled with tension.

They had history; years of disagreements and grudges borne from slights both real and perceived, but
this was different. This was about something greater than all that. They both knew why Lord
Baratheon was here and this time there was no Jon to step between them.

“Are you come to thank me for the clothes?” Aegon asked with a smile that never reached his eyes.

“You know I don’t give a damn about the clothes.”

Even as he said it, Gendry cursed himself. Was he not doing the very thing he had reprimanded Arya
for mere moments ago? He told himself this was different.

Aegon carefully set his harp down on the nearest table and held up his hands, “I am unarmed.”

The first thing Gendry had looked for upon entering the room were weapons and it seemed Aegon
spoke the truth, for no visible blade was within the Targaryen’s reach. Aegon was a skilled
swordsmen and ’twas very unusual for him not to carry a sword. He had obviously also anticipated
this meeting

“Then fists will do well enough,” Gendry growled as he unfastened his sword belt and placed it
carefully on the nearest reading table. In truth, the lack of weapons gave him a distinct advantage. He
was bigger and much heavier than Aegon. If this degenerated into a tavern brawl, as he hoped it
would, then his extra weight and strength would win the day.

Gendry waited for Aegon to stand and face him, but Aegon remained reclined, stoking his smooth
chin thoughtfully, as if he had not a care in the world.

“Do you not think ’twould be a great pity if this pretty face was ruined by your meaty fists?”

Was Aegon serious? “I don’t give a flying fuck about your pretty face, but seeing as you care for it
so much, I promise not to hit you there. Consider it my way of thanking you for the clothes.” Gendry
said with a thin smile, “But know this…touch her again and I’ll kill you.”

Aegon’s too pretty face curved in the angelic smile he had perfect over the years. ’Twas the smile
that had broken a thousand lady’s hearts and that irritated the seven hells out of Gendry.

“I presume you realise ’twould be treason to kill me and you’d have your own head cut off for your
troubles,” Aegon said in a silky voice, “Come to think of it…’tis probably treason to even threaten me at all.”

“Do you see me tremble with fear?” Gendry asked, his voice as cold and hard as The Wall they had once defended together. “It matters not to me if you are the son of a King or a swineherd. If you hurt her, I’ll cut out your heart.”

“Me, hurt her?” Aegon laughed, a light, musical sound that set Gendry’s teeth on edge. “Do you jest with me Lord Baratheon? I needed a Maester to stitch my shin after our…tryst.”

If his jaw was clenched any tighter, Gendry thought he surely break all his teeth. He could beat Aegon to a pulp now and worry about the consequences later. He could leave that pretty face lying in a pool of his own blood, find Arya and be on the road back to Storm’s End afore anyone raised the alarm.

“You worry too much, you know,” Aegon wagged his finger at Gendry as if he was scolding a wayward child. “I have no interested in your Arya. Surely you know by now that I like my women to be great beauties with ripe curves and not girls who insist on wearing ridiculous clothes because they really want to be boys.”

Aegon’s mocking of Arya only made Gendry more determined to teach this arrogant horse’s arse a lesson. Rage could cloud a man’s judgement and make him rash. ‘Twas not so with Gendry. His anger was hard and cold and focused on Aegon Targaryen. The King would pay for pressing his attentions on Gendry’s woman.

Striding forwards, Gendry made to grab the front of Aegon’s fancy robe, intending to haul him to his feet and make him stand and fight like a man. But Gendry’s hand found only empty space, for Aegon had rolled off the chaise and was already standing, with the chaise between them.

“Are you scared of me?” Gendry asked with a wolfish grin as he took another step forwards.

“I would be a fool not to be, for you are the size of an Aurochs and twice as stupid!”

Aegon moved lightly away on the balls of his feet, leaving Gendry’s hand to once again grab at thin air. He growled with frustration. Did Aegon intend to lead him a merry dance around the whole damn room?

“Try and use your head for once and not your fists.” Aegon said tightly. He needed to make Lord Baratheon see sense and quickly. He had not seriously thought Gendry intended to trade punches over this. If The Bull caught him, his clothes were as good as ruined and he was very fond of these clothes, not to mention his limbs and bones too. He would like them all to remain as perfect as they were now and that involved keeping out of Lord Baratheon’s reach until the stupid Aurochs saw sense.

“Why do you think she followed you to the Stormlands when she did not even bid you farewell the night afore?”

Gendry did not answer. He was too focused on chasing down the Targaryen now to bother trading barbed insults. Aegon was deceptively fast. What was it Arya was fond of saying? Quick as a snake. T’was an accurate description of the Dragon King’s reactions. Gendry had fought with him, but never against him and was beginning to realise that Aegon’s reputation as a quicksilver swordsman was well deserved.

“She had no intention of following you until I persuaded her how fortunate she was to have a man
who would put up with her ridiculous clothes…”

Aegon’s heel bumped the wall; nowhere else to run.

“…her short hair…”

Lord Baratheon was within striking distance now.

“…and her thoroughly irritating character.”

Gendry lunged. Aegon ducked, but this time thick fingers found a hold on his cape. Damn that cape. Aegon had known ’twas an affectation too far and would land him in trouble one day, but he had not been able to resist the brilliance of the colours or the perfection of the drape. It made him feel like a peacock. Right now he felt like a peacock that was in the grip of a very big, very angry Aurochs and likely to lose a few of his pretty feathers very shortly.

Aegon’s teeth rattled as his head was bounced off the wall. His feet were dangling in the air and he was pinned against the wall, eye to eye with Lord Baratheon.

“Your eyes really are as striking as they say, now I see them up close,” Aegon said with a grin, although his voice sounded rather higher than usual, due to his throat being constricted by the Aurochs’ grip on the damn cape.

“Shut…the…fuck…up,” the Aurochs growled.

Aegon had to turn his head to the side, for another man’s breath on his face was not a sensation he found he liked. He wondered if he was going to have to use the knife he always kept hidden in his voluminous sleeves.

“Did you really need stitches from the Maester?” the hot breath asked slowly.

“Aye,” Aegon rasped back. He might pass out soon from lack of air and that would not be good at all. “I’ll drop my britches and show you if you like.”

He had flicked the knife down from its specially made harness on his wrist and was ready to slide it between the Aurochs’ ribs when Lord Baratheon suddenly let him go. He dropped to the ground and landed on his feet like a cat. A rather breathless cat, but a cat none-the-less.

“Touch her again and I’ll let her cut your heart out,” Gendry growled.

“Do you know what the definition of insanity is Lord Baratheon?” Aegon asked with a sly smile.

“Nae, and neither do I care, but I have a feeling you are going to tell me anyway.”

“’Tis repeating the same behaviour and expecting different results.”

Lord Baratheon narrowed his eyes and curled his lip in a snarl. Aegon sighed. He should have known ’twas a waste of time trying to educate an Aurochs.

“If I were to touch Arya again, I know I would need more stitches. Therefore, as I am clearly not insane, I shall not be repeating that behaviour.”

Gendry paused and Aegon imagined he could see cogs turning slowly behind those, admittedly rather extraordinary, blue eyes.

“Whatever. Just stay away from her.”
Aegon bowed low. “Have no fear of that My Lord.”

With another snarl, Gendry stomped away, pausing only to fasten his sword belt. He had no idea what that horse’s arse was talking about, but he had Aegon’s promise not to touch Arya again and he had not committed treason, well nothing that anyone could prove. He considered that a success.

-o-

After what seemed like an age and also no time at all, Sansa and Arya broke apart. They looked at each other, eye to eye, no longer as the ‘big’ sister and the ‘little’ one, but as women full grown, bound by family, duty and honour to each other.

“We must talk,” Sansa said carefully, watching for Arya’s reaction.

Arya nodded and Sansa allowed herself to relax just a little. They smiled at each other.

“Let us sit and discuss matters civilly as ladies should,” Sansa said, walking towards the table and standing beside the nearest chair, waiting for Arya to follow.

Arya was about to give her usual retort of “I am no lady,” but for once, held her tongue. Whether she wanted the title or not, ‘twas hers to bear. In truth, it always had been, but now she owed it to Gendry, to House Baratheon and the people of the Stormlands to act like one.

They sat at the table together and Sansa poured more wine. Neither spoke, although they both had much to say. Sansa stared into her wine, unsure where to begin, for there was so much her sister needed to hear. The silence stretched between them, neither willing to discuss the hard things they must, until Arya blurted out,

“There is something I have wanted to ask you, now…now he is gone…” Arya paused in her embarrassment, feeling her face heat under her sister’s inquisitive gaze.

“…about Moon Tea.” Arya mumbled, wishing she was anywhere but here and had anyone other than her prim sister to ask. But she had not the nerve to broach the subject with Davos’ wife after hearing how she had lost so many sons and it had become apparent to Arya that Shireen knew no more about Moon Tea then Arya did. It had to be Sansa; after all, Sansa had been married, currently had a lover and still no babes. She must know the answers to Arya’s questions.

Sansa raised her eyebrows and her mouth curved in a mirthless smile.

“You are wise to attend to such things afore you are wed little sister.”

Arya felt her cheeks heat further. If anyone touched her now, she would surely scald them with the fire of her embarrassment. Sansa assumed she was still a maid. And why would she not? Ladies did not surrender their maidenhead until their wedding night and Arya had to wait a while longer to be wed.

‘Twas all Arya could do to give a little nod, while praying Sansa asked her no questions, for she did not want to lie to her sister. Not saying wasn’t the same as lying… was it?

With a rustle of stiff petticoats, Sansa swept towards a tall chest of drawers and opened the top one. She lifted out a rectangular, gilded box and turned back to her sister with sad, serious eyes.
“I presume you have no experience of…moon tea?”

Arya chewed the side of her mouth and nodded her agreement, relieved Sansa had not asked if she had experience of men.

“Then I shall help you all I can.”

Sansa sat back down at her polished table and, as if ‘twas part of a sacred ritual, placed the gilded box in the centre of the table and slowly opened the lid.

Arya slipped into the chair beside her sister and stared at the contents of the box. There were a dozen or so fine little muslin bags, tied with white ribbon and a bottle of the sort that had become all too familiar to Arya recently.

“Milk of the poppy,” Sansa said softly as she lifted the opaque blue bottle carefully, almost reverentially, out of the box and set it down between them.

Arya looked at the bottle, then at Sansa and quickly back to the bottle.

“It will ease you…when that happens between a man and a woman.”

Arya bit the side of her mouth so hard she tasted the bitter, metallic tang of blood. She should say something now, admit she had already given her virginity to Gendry, but she could not. Yet again she was stuck dumb when she should speak. Arya bit back a groan as she considered what her mother would have said. She imagined Sansa’s reaction would be much the same; disapproval, disappointment and then anger.

So Arya said nothing and besides, she was curious as to why Sansa had milk of the poppy in the same box as her moon tea.

“But surely you need only…ease your way the first time?” Arya ventured cautiously. She would need to remember to pretend she knew nothing of what went on between a Lord and his Lady when ‘twas dark, under the stars and they were both naked under his furs.

Sansa ran one elegant finger down the side of the thick, blue glass and, with her attention still fixed on the bottle gave a sad little shake of her head.

“Was lying with Tyrion really so bad?” Arya asked, unable to imagine what else it could be.

Sansa looked up and raised her eyebrows, as if surprised by the question. She shook her head again and gave a sad little smile.

“Lord Tyrion was good to me,” she said with a brittle laugh, “Better than I deserved, for I was merely a spoiled child then and a rotten excuse for a wife.”

Seeing the confusion in Arya’s expression, Sansa continued, “I never consummated my marriage with Lord Tyrion.”

Arya thought she heard regret in her sister’s voice. Nae, surely she had imagined it. Arya studied her sister intently and thought back upon her conversation with Lord Tyrion, when he had tried to offer her advice on marriage. Arya had done her best not to listen, but despite her best efforts, she did recall him saying of his wife, “She lay beside me every night but her thoughts were ever elsewhere.”

Arya wondered where, or with whom her Sister’s thoughts had been, both then and now.
“Then if not him, then who…” Arya asked, before answering her own question. “Was it that little shit Joffrey?” she banged the table with her fist, furious and indignant on her sister’s behalf. Arya stood up so quickly she almost overturned the table. Sansa made a grab for the bottle and the box to steady them.

“Sit down Arya! ’Twas not Joffrey either, although he took everything else from me; my family, my dignity, my hope, he did not take my maidenhead.”

Arya sat down heavily in her chair and grabbed clumps of her hair in her fists. She wanted to scream and yell and tear at her hair in frustration. Why had she not been a Faceless Man then, when it mattered? When she could have killed that devil spawn Joffrey in a hundred different ways? Why had she been born too late and born a girl? What could she do now to avenge her sister’s pain?

Her crashing thoughts were interrupted by Sansa’s hand resting gently on her shoulder.

“’Tis in the past now Arya and I shan’t tell you any more if it if it distresses you so.”

“You cannot stop now. Tell me it all. Tell me why you keep milk of the poppy in that box.” Arya demanded.

Sansa paused and regarded her sister carefully, weighing up whether ‘twas better to say or not.

Taking a deep breath, she carried on, “You remember Lord Baelish? Sometimes called Littlefinger. King Robert’s master of coin?”

“Yes. He was a slimy, odious little man and a whoremonger I recall,” Arya said, not liking where her train of thought was leading her. “What of him?”

“He was all that and worse,” Sansa said softly with a fleeting, bittersweet smile. “An old maid in The Eire gave me moon tea and milk of the poppy before…before…he took me that first time. She said it would ease my pain…and it did.”

“But…but…why did you let him?” Arya demanded, “I would have killed myself before I would submit to that, indeed I would have killed him first!”

“You think I had a choice?” Sansa shot back, “I was trapped with him in The Eire with nowhere to run and no one to run to. And I am not you Arya. I cannot kill men at will.”

Arya swallowed hard and screwed her eyes shut, trying to rid herself of the image of the thin, sly old man she remembered heaving and sweating atop her dear, sweet sister, who lay drugged and helpless under him.

By the Gods, where had she been when Sansa was being raped? In Braavos killing for The Kindly Man when she could have, should have, been protecting those she loved; killing for something that mattered.

Arya’s stomach roiled. She fought it down, but she was disgusted with herself and with what Sansa had to endure. Bile hit the back of her throat and there was no preventing the inevitable. Arya sprinted for the window and emptied the contents of her stomach into the nearest plant pot.

Her sister’s gentle hands massaged her shoulders and back as she retched and choked and retched again.

“’Tis in the past,” Sansa murmured as she knelt beside her sister and offered her a fine lace handkerchief.
Arya looked at it sceptically, knowing she would ruin it, as she always ruined everything.

“Take it,” Sansa urged softly. So Arya did. She spat into it before wiping her mouth with it and stuffing it into her pocket.

Sansa took her by the elbow and helped her sister stand.

“Why don’t you try on some of your new clothes?” Sansa suggested gently, looking at Arya’s splattered shirt.

“Um, yes,” Arya mumbled, unlacing her boiled leather jerkin. Sansa set off for a cup of water as Arya dropped the jerkin at her feet and then started on the buttons of her shirt.

Setting the cup of water down on the table, Sansa gave an almost imperceptible sigh of resignation as she bent over to retrieve Arya’s jerkin from the floor. Sansa bit back a sharp comment about Arya’s lack of tidiness or manners. They would each need to learn to be more tolerant of each other’s habits and Sansa was determined to lead by example.

“I am pleased to see you no longer bind yourself,” Sansa observed in a calm voice as she looked at the straining button between Arya’s breasts.

Arya gave her sister a tight little smile as she undid that button first and then made quick work of the rest. Sansa held out her hand to receive the man’s shirt before it too fell to the floor. As Arya shrugged the shirt from her shoulders, Sansa’s sharp intake of breath cut through the stillness of the room.

“Your shoulder! What happened?”

Arya turned and squinted at her shoulder, having no idea what her sister was talking about. Too late she remembered Gendry’s wild lovemaking and stifled roar as he came inside her the night before. Her hand flew up to cover the damning evidence of their passion, but Sansa’s hand was there first, grasping Arya’s wrist and preventing her from covering the marks that could have been made by nothing save teeth.

“I had no idea,” Sansa gasped as if wounded herself. She remembered Lord Baratheon’s harsh reprimand to her sister on the way here. “The man is an animal! When did he do this to you?” Sansa demanded, gripping Arya’s wrist with more strength than Arya thought her sister possessed.

Arya struggled to think of what to say. She could hardly deny ‘twas Gendry, for who else would she have let mark her in such a way? Belatedly, she decided that honesty, as Septa Mordane used to preach, was the best policy.

“Last night,” Arya admitted reluctantly, then added stubbornly, “but he did not draw blood.”

“Do not make excuses for him!” Sansa said icily, “I shall speak to Jon. Be assured there shall be no wedding, for no man shall treat my little sister this way.”

“But…” Arya tried to interrupt, but Sansa was having none of it.

“There is no excuse for this Arya!” Sansa yelled, shaking Arya’s wrist as if to emphasise her point. Her eyes were blazing as if she was about to go into battle.

“He is twice your size and he has taken advantage of you. Seven Hells, I have been a fool! Jon assured me Lord Baratheon was a man of honour, otherwise I would never have agreed to his plan.”

Suddenly Sansa wrapped her arms around Arya and embraced her again, murmuring into her sister’s
hair, “What has become of us sister? What would our dear mother say? What have we both become?”

Arya stiffened, not because she had any doubts that her mother would approve of Gendry; of course she would, for he was a great lord now and had always been a good man. Nae, Arya stiffened because Sansa’s warm tears were beginning to run down her neck and because ‘twas obvious that Sansa spoke of herself.

Slowly and deliberately hugging her sister back, Arya whispered, “Do not cry for me Sansa. Jon was right. Gendry is an honourable man and ‘twas I who pleaded with him to lie with me. Gendry would not do it until he had my solemn promise to wed. Only when I gave him my word did we become lovers and that bite was…was done in the heat of passion. You have a lover; surely you understand…?”

To Arya’s confusion and discomfort Sansa began to sob. Her body shook against Arya’s and more tears began to run down Arya’s neck, so many that she felt them roll down her back. She could not stand this; could not stand to witness her sister’s pain and not know what cause it or how to cure it.

“Tell me why you are crying Sansa, for I do not understand,” Arya breathed against her sister’s hair.

Sansa stilled and sniffed. Then Arya felt her sister pull away. Arya reluctantly let her go. Sansa’s face was blotchy and her black eye make up had run down her cheeks, making her look like a little girl with a tear stained, dirty face. Arya was reminded of weasel and of that little girl in Fellwood Keep. A wave of protectiveness engulfed Arya. ‘Twas not fair that she should be so happy while her sister was so sad. Arya was determined to do everything in her power to ease her sister’s pain and bring joy back to her life.

“I am being foolish,” Sansa sniffed, searching in the pocket of her dress for her handkerchief which, of course was in Arya’s pocket.

“I will be fine, I…I just get melancholy from time to time,” Sansa sniffed again. Arya could not remember if she had ever heard her sister sniff before; ‘twas most unladylike, even coming from Sansa.

“You must tell me what ails you,” Arya said firmly, “You must let me help.”

Sansa shook her head and sniffed again, “I must find a handkerchief,”

“Here!” Arya grabbed one of her new silk shirts from the top of the pile and thrust it at Sansa. “Use this.”

Sansa automatically took the shirt, but looked at it in dismay as if Arya had just asked her to blow her nose on Robert Baratheon’s smallclothes.

“It will wash,” Arya said briskly, “just use it.”

With a little shrug and a bigger sigh, Sansa dabbed at her nose with all the delicacy she could muster. Arya could not help herself from smiling. Even in the depths of misery Sansa always remained so ladylike. Arya prayed it would ever be so.

“Come let us sit and start again,” Arya said, walking over to the table, moving the box and the blue bottle out of the way and pouring her sister a large cup of wine.

When Sansa was settled, the shirt crumpled in her lap and had taken a big gulp of wine, Arya urged her gently, “Tell me of your lover…”
AAAAArgh! I had hoped not to leave it there, but even with only four hours sleep last night, time has run out. You did get 9,000 words and I promise I’ll post next Friday.

I am away to The Highlands this weekend to visit the Isle of Iona. It’s a small and very beautiful island, with the best preserved Medieval Abbey in the Western Isles as raided by the Vikings in 794AD. Woohoo, but it’ll need to be extra special to top last weekend’s ‘research’. I might not have been writing, but I was still working!

Last Saturday I was at a re-enactment of the Battle of Bannockburn, staged to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the battle. It was organised by Visit Scotland (you should) and acted out by the men and women of Clanranald, who are the actors/stuntmen/historical enthusiasts who are called upon when such things are needed. They are the people you see in movies such as Braveheart, Gladiator, Robin Hood and yes, even Game of Thrones. They are the hairy ones in the background with the swords who look like they know what they are doing.

So I was treated to the sights and sounds of (amongst other things) a blacksmith making helmets who alas looked nothing like Gendry, two Knights on horseback thundering towards each other (lance versus axe – the axe won) the opposing armies preparing for the battle and finally fighting it out. But the very best part was an hour into the re-enactment when I was thoroughly immersed in that medieval world and suddenly the earth literally shook and the air screamed.

“Here come the Dragons!” yelled the commentator and for that moment I was there. I was in Game of Thrones and the Dragons really were coming and the world was terrible and wonderful and amazing all at the same time.

However, it turned out to be only a Typhoon fighter jet come to perform loop the loops over Stirling Castle as part of Armed Forces Day, but in my (obviously overactive) imagination, it will always be a Dragon!

Hahaha – see what Brazilian Guy has to put up with? He has been a great help with this week’s chapter and also saved that Storm End’s guard’s ass! I was all for firing him or worse, but as BG pointed out, the poor guy was only doing his job. Ser, you are an honourable man and, as AC/DC would say…I salute you!

See you next Friday!
“But we have not finished our discussion of moon tea,” Sansa said with forced brightness. “So you are not a maid, but if you have been careful, mayhaps you need not worry. How many times have you and Lord Baratheon…” Sansa cast her eyes down avoiding finishing the sentence. Her gaze remained focused on the ornate box sitting open on the table.

Arya frowned. She wanted to discuss Sansa’s lover and not this. She wanted to know why Sansa was in tears at the mention of him, rather than glowing with love and happiness as she should be. But first Arya supposed she had to discuss this most embarrassing of subjects. She had asked her sister for advice after all.

With a deep sigh, she wondered what advice her mother would have offered her on her wedding night if circumstances had been different. Then she wondered who had advised Sansa. Then she decided not to think on any more unhappiness and simply get this awkward conversation over with.

“You want to know how many times Gendry and I have fucked?” Arya muttered. She had been about to say ‘made love’, but given Sansa’s reaction to the mere mention of her lover, Arya thought the word ‘love’ was mayhaps best avoided.

Sansa pursed her lips together and started at the little blue bottle, obviously finding the most base word for what a man and woman did together distasteful.

“Two or three times…” Arya continued.

“Aye, well! ‘Tis not too bad!” Sansa declared quickly, grabbing a handful of the little linen bags and thrusting them towards Arya.

“…a day.” Arya said sharply. “You did not let me finish. Two or three times a day since our first night together in Storm’s End.”

Sansa stared at her sister with big, shocked eyes. “Gods be good. The man is insatiable,” Sansa gasped, slapping her hand to her chest.

Arya was about to tell Sansa ‘twas not only Gendry who wanted to make love at every opportunity, but again though better of it. Instead she just muttered “Aye,” and stifled the smile that came unbidden to her lips at the thought of it.

“When did you last have your moon blood?” Sansa asked softly.

Arya rolled her eyes. Of all the things she hated about being a woman, she hated bleeding the most. She regarded it as a sign of weakness and tried to ignore it as best she could. Men had no idea how much women had to put up with she thought grumpily.

“No idea.”

Sansa drummed her fingers on the table in exasperation. “How can you not know?” she demanded. “Every woman must know, particularly if she expects to lie with a man and not let him get a child on her.”
Arya shrugged. “Afore I left for the Stormlands anyway.”

Sansa grabbed the linen bags back, scattering them around in her haste to stuff them back in the box.

“Come and see me when you next bleed and we shall discuss it then.”

As Sansa picked up the fallen bags, Arya noticed her sister’s hands were shaking. Not only that, Sansa was flushed and studiously avoiding looking at her. Arya reached for her sisters hands and despite Sansa’s attempts to pull away, she took Sansa’s more delicate hands in her own. Arya rubbed her thumbs over the back of Sansa’s soft palms, the way Gendry did when he wanted to soothe her. Moon tea could wait. Something was far wrong with Sansa and Arya need to know what.

“Tell me of your lover,” Arya urged again.

Sansa looked up from their joined hands and met her sister’s gaze. Yet again Arya saw Sansa’s eyes pool with tears before her sister closed them tightly, took a deep breath and blurted out,

“I share my bed with Willas Tyrell.”

“Ah! I thought so!” Arya declared triumphantly, “Willas is your lover.”

But something was amiss. When Sansa spoke of Willas, the love that shone openly from Jon or Daenerys at the mention of the other’s name, the desire that Arya saw in Gendry when he looked at her and even the fondness that had bound her mother and father was absent.

“Lover?” Sansa repeated bleakly, blinking as she opened her eyes again. “I suppose ‘tis the common term.”

“Aye,” said Arya, more confused than ever. “Unless you are betrothed and then he would be…”

Sansa did not let her finish, interrupting sharply. “We are not betrothed. I have sworn before The Seven that I shall never marry again.”

Mayhaps Sansa had a grievance against marriage, Arya thought. Mayhaps a lover was enough for her. Had Arya herself not thought a lover would be enough at one time?

“Is he kind to you?” Arya asked, looking towards the beautiful flowers that made her sister’s room into a garden.

“Kind?” Sansa repeated as if she had never considered the question before. “I suppose so. I have had much worse.”

Arya looked at her beautiful sister and wondered at the sad, distant look in her fine, blue eyes. After Joffrey, Littlefinger and even Tyrion, Arya thought Willas Tyrell would have come as a blessing. He was polite and chivalrous and heir to the richest lands in all Westeros. And had Sansa not been taken with his youngest brother at one time? Willas bore more than a passing resemblance to the Knight of Flowers, albeit he was not as pretty, which in Arya’s book was no bad thing. What more could Sansa want?

“I recall that he was very taken with you at the feast,” Arya offered.

“Aye he is taken with me,” Sansa said in an almost detached manner and gave a little shrug as if ’twas nothing unusual in such attention and, for Sansa mayhaps there was not.

While Arya had spent her entire life hiding, Sansa had always been the centre of attention, and ’twas
not only Willas who was bewitched by Sansa’s beauty. Every man who ever laid eyes upon Sansa Stark wanted her. Arya had not been aware of it in Winterfell, but from the time they arrived in The Red Keep, men three times her age had followed Sansa’s every move with hungry eyes.

Arya tried to puzzle out the scant information Sansa seemed prepared to give her. Willas was enamoured with Sansa, but they were not betrothed and Sansa seemed reluctant to call Willas her lover. A cold blanket of apprehension settled over Arya, but she gave herself a shake. Willas Tyrell was not a cowardly sadist like Joffrey, or a scheming whoremonger like Littlefinger. Still, Sansa took him to her bed yet refused to call him lover. Why? Unless…unless the accident that had maimed his leg had also maimed his manhood.

Arya squeezed her sister’s hands, arched one eyebrow and gave her sister what she hoped was both a sympathetic and also knowing look. “Is Willas incapable?”

Sansa responded with a brittle little laugh, “Alas no. He is quite capable.”

‘Alas no?’ What did that mean? The blue bottle and the little linen bags lying in the box between them weighed heavily on Arya’s mind. She was un-nerved by her sister’s uncharacteristic coldness. Sansa had always worn her heart on her sleeve and moments ago they had clung together as Sansa sobbed her heart out, but now her sister was like a closed book.

“You do not love him, yet you take him to your bed.” Arya could not puzzle it out. She had to know the truth of it.

“Why?”

Sansa titled her chin up and fixed her sister with a direct stare. Although Sansa’s eyes were flat and cold, she was twisting the silk of Arya’s shirt in her hands, betraying her internal anguish.

“Because little sister, you do not have to love a man to lie with him.”

Arya sensed her sister had bottled all of this up for too long and, having admitted the worst of it, Sansa seemed to wish to unburden herself of the rest of it.

“I do not love the way he defers to his grandmother’s opinions and orders. I do not like the way he thinks he has to buy my affections with all…this,” Sansa waived her hand towards the indoor garden, her voice becoming shrill as she continued, “…and I hate the way he has to lift his withered leg onto me and the way it feels cold and heavy and dead atop me while he takes his pleasure.” Sansa was almost shouting, her voice and her chin trembling with emotion.

Arya buried her face in her hands, unable to cope with her sister’s obvious distress.

Why? Why? Why?

Why could Sansa not have a love match as Arya had with Gendry and as Jon obviously had with Daenerys? ‘Twas true that love was a luxury many could not hope for. Great families arranged marriages of convenience to strengthen alliances, young maidens traded their youth for the status old men could give them and whores sold themselves for coin.

Lady Sansa Stark of Winterfell needed neither greater status nor coin. That only left an alliance and that meant Sansa was following someone else’s wishes rather than her own. That someone could only be one person.

“This was Jon’s idea was it not?” Arya asked icily, dropping her hands from her face.
Arya thought Sansa paused a little too long before she answered “Nae. No one forces me to share my bed with him.”

“Do not lie to me sister,” Arya said from behind her gritted teeth.

“’Tis no lie and he is not a bad man. As I said, I have had much worse,” Sansa said with a shrug, but her voice held a bitter tone. “You are the one who always got to do what you wanted, whereas I was always destined to be bound by Family, Duty, Honour.”

“But…but you are sister to The King, the most beautiful woman in Westeros, you can have anything you want!” Arya yelled, trying to convince herself of it as much as her sister.

Sansa gave a cynical little laugh. “You speak of yourself Arya. ‘Tis you who can have anything you want. I have been traded all my life. It started with Joffrey and I have no expectation for it to change now, so I take my moon tea and I take my milk of the poppy and I take myself away while I do what I must.”

Sansa’s tight, forced smile could not hide the sorrow in her eyes.

Never had Arya felt like this. In all her years in Braavos, no matter how awful the task or how high the stakes, she had been calm as still water. Detached. Efficient. Cold. But not now.

Now she wanted to run until her legs broke, scream until she had no voice and cry until she cried blood. Her rage pulsed through her, blurring her vision. Her focus narrowed until ’twas as if she was racing down a tunnel. No matter what Sansa said, Arya knew ’twas Jon behind this. He had to be. He had manipulated Sansa the way he had tried to manipulate her.

She had to get to Jon. She had to stop this.

Arya bolted up, knocking her chair over and not stopping to right it. She ran from Sansa’s chambers, ignoring her sister’s urgent pleas to return, to wait, to listen. ’Twas not far to Jon’s solar and nothing would prevent Arya from reaching him. Not even Brienne of Tarth, at the far end of the corridor, talking to some crows and then turning, as if in some slow dream to see her.

Arya knew what she had to do; ’twas as natural to her as breathing. She changed her face and watched as Brienne’s expression turned from that first surprised recognition, to confusion, to disbelief as a girl with a pinched face and a hooked nose flew past.

The crows looked at the girl with blank, unseeing eyes, but Brienne knew. Mayhaps she would shake her head and rub her eyes and tell herself she had imagined seeing one person change into another; mayhaps she would follow, but either way, Arya had bought the precious time she needed.

Turn the corner, down another corridor, turn again and she was outside Jon’s solar and she was Arya Stark once again, impetuous, impatient sister to The King. Arya snarled at the crow guards and shoved them aside, knowing they were too afraid of her, or more accurately, too afraid of Jon’s wrath if they harmed her, to bar her entry.

In moments she was in Jon’s solar with the door slammed behind her and the crows on the other side, still wondering what to do.

A scan of the room confirmed only Jon and Gendry – no Direwolves. No Ghost to protect his master. The Gods were with her.

Gendry sat in the chair nearest to the door. He smiled and spoke to her, but she closed her ears to him and turned away, for he was not the reason she was here.
Jon sat to her right. His eyes widened in surprise and he made to rise from his chair to greet her. Needle was in her hand and heading towards his throat. How ironic.

Too late Jon realised she was not here to exchange pleasantries and his smile of welcome changed to a shocked grimace as Needle was held to his neck. Only pale skin and coarse beard lay between the Winterfell steel and his pulsing life’s blood.

She sensed Gendry behind her, but she was counting on him not risking Jon’s life by making a grab for her or the knife; not when one wrong move by either of them would see Jon’s throat cut. Her years of experience as an assassin told her she would see it in Jon’s eyes if a threat came from behind.

“You wretched, self-serving, piece of shit.”

“So the Guild of the Faceless Men has come for me after all,” Jon said softly.

Arya pressed Needle harder to his throat, causing him to wince and draw the sinews and veins in his neck taught, further exposing that vulnerable pulse.

“’Tis nothing to do with The Guild brother. ‘Tis Arya Stark who has come for you brother.”

“She has been talking with Sansa,” Gendry said from behind, his voice deep and slow and wary.

“Aye. Talking with Sansa, hearing the truth,” Arya sneered as she pressed the blade harder still, smiling in satisfaction as a drop of ruby red blood streaked the silver of her blade.

Jon said nothing and his flat, black eyes betrayed no emotion, his quickening pulse against Needle’s razor edge the only indication that he even heard her. What more did she expect from a man who would sell his own sister?

“You whored Sansa out to Highgarden. My mother was right; you are not one of us,” Arya spat contemptuously.

The hurt and loss that flared in Jon’s eyes, almost made her resolve waiver, but she gritted her teeth and hardened her heart. He was no longer the boy who had ruffled her hair and she wasn’t the little girl who had loved him the best.

“Put Needle down.” Jon said tightly, “Let us discuss this…”

“Shut up! I won’t listen to your silver tongued Targaryen lies. You think you can twist me to your will, like you twisted Sansa! You think you can play God with all of our lives? What was your plan for Gendry once he wed me? What self interest did you hope to advance by…”

A hand like a vice clamped on her wrist, twisting backwards and down. Quick as a snake, she made a grab for Jon’s throat with her other hand, only to find that hand also caught in the same unbreakable grip. Arya gave an involuntary scream at the pain and frustration of it.

“Enough!” Gendry rasped from behind her.

Arya was no longer thinking, only reacting as she drove her head back, intent on slamming her skull into his nose, but he was too tall and he might have been wearing armour for all the effect her blow to his chest had.

“You bastard! You are both bastards!” she yelled furiously as Gendry squeezed her wrist and Jon prised Needle from her fingers.
With a weary resignation Jon held her wrists while Gendry pinned her arms to her sides. Arya Stark was not going to surrender so easily. She kicked out at Jon, but Gendry was ready for her, jerking her violently to the side so the toe of her boot lashed out through empty air. While she was still cursing his thwarting her attack, Gendry lifted her up, crushing her back and arms against his chest so tightly she could hardly breathe. Her flailing legs connected only with his armoured shins.

“Gods help me Arya, I’ll hurt you if you don’t stop thrashing around,” Gendry warned, his breath hot and angry against her ear.

“Do you really think so little of me Arya?” Jon asked quietly, but his tone was cold as ice.

“Willas Tyrell is no Joffrey. He is a good man,” Gendry said, grunting with the effort of holding her fast as she tried to head butt his chest again.

“You didn’t listen to everything Sansa had to say, did you?” Jon demanded through his teeth. He caught her chin in his hand and dragged her head up, forcing her to look at him.

Arya shrieked in frustration at being held fast by two men who were both bigger and much stronger than she was.

“Did you?” Jon asked again, holding her gaze with an intensity that she could not bare.

“No she did not,” a firm, yet feminine voice said from the door.

Squeezing hard, Jon forced Arya’s chin to the side so she could see Sansa standing in the doorway, her beautiful face flushed and framed by wisps of hair escaped from her braids. Sansa’s chest rose and fell with the exertion of chasing after her sister.

Brienne stood at Sansa’s shoulder, glowering at Arya, while two black crows stood still further behind.

“‘Tis past time we talked. Brienne would you mind leaving us?” Jon said, in a voice that left no one in any doubt ‘twas a command rather than a request.

Brienne nodded, bowed and withdrew, closing the door behind her as she left.

“Are you going to listen and behave, or do I have to tie you to a chair?” Gendry said fiercely next to her ear.

“Let me go,” she snarled back.

Jon turned her chin back so Arya had to look him in the eye again.

“He will not let you go until you give me your word, on your father’s bones, that you will not attempt to harm any of the people in this room,” Jon said, the muscles in his jaw flexing, his black eyes boring in to hers. “Once you have listened to all Sansa has to say and if you still believe I…did what you accuse me of, then you and Sansa together can decide my fate.”

Jon released his grip on her chin. Arya looked to her sister who nodded solemnly and then back to Jon whose brows were furrowed together with tension.

“I have given you my word. Now give me yours,” Jon demanded.

“You have my word.” Arya said quietly. Gendry loosened his hold and slowly set her down on her feet. As soon as he released her, he surprised her by entwining his fingers with hers. She looked
down at their joined hands wondering if ‘twas his way of making sure she could not grab another weapon. When she lifted her eyes to his, where she should have expected to see only anger, she saw love and aye, exasperation as well. He shook his head almost imperceptibly, but he also gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Let us all sit,” Jon said wearily.

Gendry did not let go of Arya’s hand as they sat down together. Sansa sat opposite and Jon to the side.

Jon touched his un-gloved hand to his throat and when he frowned at the blood that came away on his fingers, Arya wanted to die of shame. She had not intended to hurt him, but ‘twas as if another Arya took over when she had a blade in her hand. The truth was, at such times she was not Arya Stark at all. She was Faceless, she was no one. The Guild had taught her well; too well, for she was still one of them when her self control slipped.

‘Twas obvious to all, that Jon’s heart was heavy when he finally spoke. “I think this would be best coming from you Sansa.”

Sansa sat with her back as straight as Valyrian steel and held her sister’s gaze.

“You heard only part of it Arya. As always, you jumped to your own conclusions and did not listen to the whole of it afore you made your judgement.”

Arya chewed the side of her mouth and said nothing, for what could she say? She had been so enraged by Jon’s treatment of her sister that she had run from Sansa’s rooms, ignoring her sister’s pleas for her to stay and listen.

“You heard me say I share my bed with Willas Tyrell, but you did not stay to hear why.”

Beside Arya, Gendry shifted uncomfortably in his seat while Jon stared straight ahead, the muscles of his jaw clenching and unclenching. Sansa maintained her dignified composure. Arya thought she looked as much a Queen as Daenerys did.

Once again Arya felt like the little girl with her dress on back to front. Faced by her sister’s serene reproach, Arya’s anger was draining out of her, to be replaced by that creeping feeling of inadequacy she never seemed to be entirely able to shake.

Sansa clasped her hands together and settled them on her lap. Focusing on her hands, she took a deep breath and then began,

“When you were in Braavos, we were starving in Westeros. Because of the war, we were ill prepared for a hard winter. Even when winter had gone; the armies still fought and had to be supplied, for an army cannot march on an empty stomach.”

Sansa looked to Jon as she said this and ‘twas his turn to shift uncomfortably in his chair. Arya suspected Sansa was quoting something Jon was fond of saying back at him.

“While the men fought, the woman and children faced a battle of another kind.”

Although she was reluctant to take her eyes off Sansa, out of the corner of her eye, Arya caught Gendry and Jon exchange a quick glance. ‘Twas obvious the three of them; Sansa, Jon and Gendry had all discussed this afore. So much had happened that Arya had not been aware of when she lived in the House of Black and White. She wondered if she would ever know it all.
“You must have seen famine in the Stormlands?” Sansa directed her question to Arya, finally looking at her sister. Remembering the first time she had visited Fellwood Keep, Arya nodded.

“Did you see babes die at their starving mother’s breast for want of milk? Did you see parents eat their dead children?”

Arya’s empty stomach roiled again and bile rose in her throat. “Nae,” she whispered.

Gendry rubbed his thumb over hers and Arya sensed his unease through the tension in his hand. He liked this conversation no more than she did and no doubt he had wanted to spare her the pain and distress of hearing it.

“I swore to The Seven that I would sell my soul to The Stranger if it meant I could save even one child’s life,” Sansa said with uncharacteristic force, her eyes blazing with passion.

Looking only at Sansa, Jon said tightly, “In the whole of Westeros, only Dorne and the southern Reach were not ravaged by famine.”

“And Dorne had already committed to supplying our armies,” Gendry added.

“Which left only Highgarden,” Sansa said softly. “Twas my idea to invite Willas Tyrell here.”

“Aye”, Jon nodded, giving Sansa a grim half smile, “A bold move, for his grandmother was already committed to our enemy’s cause.”

Arya remembered the sharp old lady from the feast. ‘Twas a brave man or woman who would cross Oleena Redwyne. Arya realised with a start that her sister; prim, empty headed Sansa who Arya had always thought good for nothing more than needle work and daydreaming about Knights, was that brave woman.

Arya had always equated bravery with fearlessness in battle or in the face of death, but she was beginning to realise there were other forms of strength and courage. Without Lady Fellwood’s bravery, what would have happened to the people of Fellwood keep? Arya was coming to learn that her delicate, sad eyed sister and women like Lady Fellwood were just as brave as any Knights who rode into battle with a sword in their hand.

“I had met Willas briefly before and I knew he had a…certain interest in me. I prayed to The Seven that I could use that interest to our advantage; that Willas would come to me.”

Arya gave a heartfelt groan as she watched her sister’s eyes fill with unshed tears. ‘Twas ever thus. Every man who saw Sansa coveted her and Willas Tyrell was obviously no different than the rest. Arya began to understand why Sansa had been so unwilling to speak of her lover, nae, not her lover. The man in her bed.

“I was determined to do whatever needed to be done in order to bring food to King’s Landing, but Willas was initially reluctant to break with his grandmother,” Sansa said bitterly, “He needed to be persuaded.”

Arya knew exactly what sort of persuasion her sister had used. With her head spinning, Arya gripped Gendry’s hand. His solid fingers entwined with hers were her anchor in a storm of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her.

“Have no doubts Arya, I would do it all again…and again…and again if I had to in order to keep this city from starving…to keep one babe from dying. I made my choice freely and I have no regrets. How many can say that?”
With her head held high, Sansa looked first from Arya, to Gendry and finally to Jon. Arya had to aver her eyes. How could she have been so blind to the truth? She had never once asked or even stopped to think what her sister sacrificed; what Sansa continued to sacrifice. Arya had assumed Sansa was still the same girl she had been when they were young; her pretty head filled with silly, idealistic notions of chivalry and romance. Arya could not have been more wrong.

“So you have heard it all,” Jon said wearily. Arya heard no anger or recrimination in his voice, only regret. “We all owe Sansa a debt we can never repay.”

He handed Needle back to her hilt first. “What say you now Arya Stark? Do still want to slit my throat?”

“I…I am sorry for my rash behaviour. I acted without thinking. But I never intended to do you harm. I was just…enraged by the injustice of it,” Arya said, the lump in her own throat threatening to make her break down at any moment. “I still am,” she added fiercely, hearing the tremulous quiver of emotion in her own voice.

Jon nodded and his eyes crinkled at the sides as he said, “I am glad I am forgiven. Of all the ways I might die, I never thought ‘twould be by your hand or Needle’s blade.”

Tears threatened to overcome Arya once more. She looked down at Needle, for she could not look at Jon a moment longer without bursting into tears.

“You must not be so quick or so harsh in your judgements Arya,” Gendry said gently. “I had thought you were past all this. We are all in this together, working towards a common goal. We need to be able to trust you. I need to be able to trust you.”

Arya’s throat was so tight she could not speak. She could only nod her agreement. Her head still spun, but she was able to draw strength from Gendry’s hand in hers and his unconditional love for her. He was such a good man; far better than she deserved. She had tested his patience time and time again and still he would not give up on her. She wanted to be a better person for him. She wanted to be the kind of wife he deserved.

Sansa rose from her chair with all the poise of a Queen and gracefully took the few steps she needed so she could stand before Arya.

“We won the war sister. Now we must win the peace by whatever means we can. Our strength is in each other. Are you with us?” Sansa asked, opening her arms to Arya and favouring her with a smile that lit up the room like summer sunshine.

As Gendry let go of her hand and she stumbled to her feet and into Sansa’s embrace, Arya’s admiration for her sister increased tenfold. Even faced with such adversity, Sansa thought of others before herself. For the first time in her life, Arya truly wished she was more like Sansa.

They might have stood holding each other for moments or hours. Eventually Gendry interrupted them by clearing his throat and saying, “I confess I am wearied by all the travelling and wish to retire early.”

Arya took his hint and let her sister go. Sansa was slower to relinquish her hold on Arya, trailing her fingers down Arya’s sleeve before reluctantly breaking their connection.

“I am weary too,” Arya said, feeling her face flush. She might as well have declared openly she wished to go to bed with Gendry for Jon grunted and said, “At least be discreet about it. I do not want to have to listen to gossip about you two echoing all over The Red Keep.”
Gendry laughed and slapped Arya’s arse playfully. She gave a surprised little squeak and flushed even hotter. Did Gendry have to do that in front of her brother?

“Then you shall go first Lady Arya and be assured I shall enjoy following you,” Gendry winked, looking suggestively at her arse.

Jon rolled his eyes while Sansa regarded the two of them steadily, her expression unreadable.

Arya could not get out of Jon’s solar quickly enough. She could not bear the feeling of helplessness that assailed her when she looked at poor, sweet Sansa who sacrificed so much of herself for others. Arya wanted to be away from Jon and the shame of wounding him and of holding her brother to blame for Sansa’s situation.

As if those two matters were not bad enough, she now had to deal with the embarrassment of Gendry implying they were lovers already despite still not being wed. ’Twas probable Gendry had already told Jon as much, but Arya did not want it spoken of so openly. Mayhaps she did care what people thought of her after all. Some people at least. Her pack. Aye, they were still her pack and she would not be so foolish as to act against one of them again.

But her relief did not last long, for Brienne of Tarth was waiting for them outside Jon solar. She nodded to Gendry, but addressed Arya,

“I must speak with you about urgent business Milady."

Arya did not want to hear what Brienne had to say. Not now, mayhaps not ever. ’Twas Gendry came to her rescue.

“Whatever it is, it can wait. Lady Arya is tired and I am going to escort my betrothed to her bed chamber.” Arya could not see him, for he was behind her, but she heard the smile and pride in Gendry’s voice as he declared they were betrothed. Arya was sure he winked at Brienne over the top of her head, for the Maid of Tarth gave him a lopsided smile.

“It can wait.” Brienne admitted with a low bow, “But not for long…” she added in a soft whisper meant only for Arya’s ears.

Arya had never been so glad of Gendry’s arm on hers as he escorted her around Brienne and away. He was right. She was weary. Bone weary and thinking on the news that Brienne might bring about. The Hound made her poor stomach lurch for the umpteenth time today. Mayhaps something to eat would settle it. She had a sudden notion for some barely cooked venison.

“If I call for a bath, will you arrange for food for us to be sent to my rooms?” she asked Gendry as they walked. “I fancy venison and can you ask the cook to leave it red on the inside? The redder the better.” Her mouth watered as she imagined the bloody meat lying in a rich pool of juices.

“I shall arrange it all Milady. You go on and I shall meet you in your rooms as soon as I can. Discreetly of course!” he added with a chuckle.

He gave her another hard pat on the arse and sent her on her way. She rolled her eyes, although she knew the effect was wasted, for he could not see her face. However she did give her bottom a little wiggle as she walked away and the deep, predatory growl he gave in response was proof that he did see that.

Her small room, which had seemed such a refuge when she had first returned from Braavos, looked
bare and uninviting to her eyes now. Oh, how she longed for her magnificent views over the Stormlands, the warmth of her tapestries underfoot and her big featherbed. At least she would not sleep alone tonight and for that she thanked The Gods. After the upset of the day, she wanted to fall into a deep, dreamless sleep in Gendry’s arms. All those years she had slept alone and now she could not even bear the thought of one night without him.

The first of the maids arrived while she was still divesting herself of her weapons. Arya waited until she was alone and the room filled with steam before she undressed. She could wait no longer for Gendry. The opportunity for a hot bath overrode her desire for a hot meal. The venison would be just as welcome eaten cold later.

Stripping off, she scattered some of the dried rose petals Sansa had given her during her last visit to The Red Keep on top of the water. ‘Twas a mistake, as their delicate perfume immediately took her back to that afternoon and the scent of Sansa’s hair as they clung together. Arya gripped the edge of the bath, but ‘twas no use. A single tear spilled from her eye and then the floodgates opened. Sobs wracked her body as she slid to the floor, her legs curled up under her, her forehead shuddering against the hot copper of the tub while her fingers still gripped the edge of the bath.

Gendry found her like that when he arrived, whistling, carrying a trencher laden with food. Their meal was forgotten as he dropped the dish down on the nearest table and was by her side in three quick strides. Fearing she had fallen, he sank to his knees and was relieved to see no blood, only tears. Cupping her face in his big hands, he kissed her forehead and whispered “I love you. I love you so much.”

“I know,” she sniffed, “and I love you too. That’s what makes what is happening to Sansa…to Sansa…” she could not finish, dissolving into more wracking sobs.

He shushed her gently as he would a babe, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her to her feet. Keeping one arm around her, he smoothed wayward strands of hair from her eyes, the better to see her face.

“I want to keep my sister safe and it tears my heart apart that I cannot,” Arya said, through gasped sobs.

“Willas is a good man. Jon would not let Sansa…”

Arya pressed a trembling finger to his lips. “Shhh. Say no more, for I cannot bear it.”

“What can I do to aid you?” Gendry asked softly.

“Just hold me,” she said on a trembling breath, letting her head fall against his chest.

He wrapped her in his arms and rocked her gently, wishing he could do something to take away her pain and Sansa’s.

When Arya started to shiver against him, he insisted she climb in the tub, quickly discarding his clothes and settling in behind her. Wrapping his arms around her again he pulled her back against him, touching his lips to her shoulder very softly, almost tentatively. She leant her head against the side of the tub as he feathering light kisses along her neck.

“Is it bad of me to wish I was back in Storm’s End?” Arya asked, leaning against him, letting the warm water and his strong arms sooth her.
He chuckled deep in his chest, the hair on his chest rubbing against her back. “If ‘tis, then I am the baddest of men, for I have been wishing the very same thing since we rode out of our bailey gate.”

Arya turned as much as she could in the tub and in his arms to look up at him with eyes red rimmed from tears, “Then let us go. Now. Tonight.”

He shook his head wearily and gathered her tighter into his arms. “Alas no. Duty binds us both here.”

“But what duty is greater than that we owe to ourselves?” she pleaded.

He frowned as he looked down at her. “The duty to your family and to my honour.” He did not need to add the reprimand, “of course,” for she heard it in his voice.

Arya groaned as she turned away from him again. Family, Duty, Honour. She had not expected to be bound by those words, yet she was. Bran was travelling from Winterfell to attend her wedding and Gendry had given his word to Jon to re-forge Ice. Then there was the obligation Gendry had to Shireen and Arya’s new found need to help Sansa. Arya let out an even deeper groan. Nae, they could not run away, although ’twas by far the easier course of action.

Releasing his hold on her, Gendry reached for the soap and began to rub it in lazy circles over her shoulders and back until she sighed and relaxed.

“Do you like that?” he whispered, his breath tickling her ear.

“I do, but I feel guilty being so happy when Sansa is not.”

He did not answer for a long moment, measuring his response, but all the while his hands did not stop their soothing rhythm.

“Sansa is doing what she feels she has to. She will find her own way, as we all must, but until then, no one forces her and Willas is not the monster Joffrey was or that other one – the master of coin.”

“Petyr Balish.”

“Aye him.”

Gendry did not have the answer Arya sought; he did not know how to save her sister any more than Arya did. But he could show her how much she was loved and make her forget her cares for a while. He let his slick hands glide around in front and upwards until they touched the undersides of her breasts.

“I used to think I would never know the happiness and contentment I have now.”

“Hmmm, me neither,” Arya murmured in agreement.

He circled each breast slowly, caressing soft flesh with strong fingers as she relaxed even more against him.

“I used to think a bastard like me did not deserve what I have now, including you,” he murmured, circling his fingers closer and closer to her rigid teats. “But now I think I do.”

He brushed his thumbs over her teats. Even that glancing touch was enough to make her gasp. Never had her breasts felt so tender or had she needed the comfort he could give her as much as she did now. As he rolled fat nipples slowly between his thumb and forefinger she moaned his name like a
plea. As she turned her head to his, he captured her lips and kissed her, slow and sweet, smoothing one hand down her belly, until slippery fingers found and probed the hair and soft folds nestling there.

Arya dropped her head back onto his shoulder, moaning his name, as he caressed the swollen nub between her legs. Gliding his fingers around and around he rocked against her, letting her feel the thick column of his erection against her arse. He curled one finger inside her and then another, caressing her from within as he let his thumb continue the deliciously slow rhythm. Her climax approached swiftly and, understanding her need better than she did, he pinched her nipple hard, driving her over the edge. Her orgasm exploded with an intensity that made her arch up against his hands, her breasts rising clear of the water and sending it sloshing over the edges of the tub.

She was so beautiful in her release that it took his breath away. “I love you Arya Stark,” he whispered hot against her ear, feeling her heart pounding against his.

While she slowly recovered herself, he set about washing himself quickly, being careful not to bump her too much, for he needed this bath done, he needed to bury himself inside her, to possess her, to make her know the intensity of his love and his need for her.

Arya’s legs were as unsteady as a new born foal’s as he helped her step out of the bath. She felt wrung out, boneless as she let him dry her. He wrapped her in the towel and rubbed her firmly through it. Her eye caught at the venison, lying in a cold, congealed pool of blood and her stomach heaved again.

“Are you ill?” he asked, his eyes full of concern. “You are pale as a white walker.”

She shook her head. “Nae, but I have seldom felt so tired.”

Scooping her up with one arm behind her thighs and the other around her shoulders, he carried her the few steps to her bed. She did not even have the energy to protest.

Immediately curling onto her side, she murmured, “Would you just hold me tonight?”

He forced down his disappointment. There would be many more nights for them to take pleasure in each other and besides, he had never seen her so quiet or so pale afore.

He fitted himself around her and kissed her shoulder softly. Listening to her soft and slow breathing, he had almost convinced himself she was asleep when she murmured, “Before Sansa…told me about Willas, I asked her about moon tea.”

He removed his arm from around Arya’s waist, pushed himself up on his other elbow and frowned. “Why would you want to take moon tea?”

Arya felt the need to talk about the events of the day, to try and gain some understanding of them all and order her chaotic thoughts. It had never occurred to her he might be annoyed, or even angry that she did not want his child right away, but yet again she had not stopped to consider what he wanted, thinking only of herself.

“I…I do not feel ready for a babe,” she stammered, glad she did not have to look at him as she admitted it.

He gently pulled on her shoulder, rolling her onto her back so he could look at her face. “I want children. You know that,” he said bluntly.
“I do want your babe,” she whispered, reaching up to cup his cheek with her hand, “…just not yet.”

He shook his head and looked down on her, his blue eyes intense and serious as they gazed deep into hers. “No, not yet, but in the summer. If the Gods are good, you are with child already.”

“So soon?”

Gendry sat up and raked both hands through his hair in frustration and disappointment. How could she say this to him? ‘Twas like a knife in his heart.

He snorted angrily. “Are you really that naive Arya? Surely your mother and that old Septa of yours warned you that even once is enough?”

Arya was about to retort that of course they hadn’t. Did he not remember that she was only nine when she had last seen her mother alive? But she bit her tongue. She was learning. Think afore you speak. She wished she had done that very thing moments before. Why had she felt the urge to tell him about Sansa’s moon tea?

He was annoyed and hurt Arya realised belatedly. He had mistaken her wish not to have a babe now, as a desire not to have one ever. And, truth be told, she had not thought making love once would be enough. She wasn’t sure what she had thought. Yet again, she had not thought enough about it at all.

“Seven hells, we’ve fucked more times in the past month than I thought possible, and now you tell me you do not want a babe,” he muttered, swinging his feet out of bed and turning his back to her.

His sneering use of the word “fucked” set her teeth on edge. Aye, there was no doubting he was angry.

“But look at Daenerys and Jon,” Arya maintained stubbornly. “They have been wed for ages, I am sure she is not drinking moon tea and she has no babe in her belly.”

“That is different,” he said flatly, eyeing his boots and wondering if ‘twas too late to find Jon or some of his men and get roaring drunk.

“How is it different?” Arya asked, sitting up and draping her arms around his neck.

He heaved a great sigh, fighting the urge to peel her arms off of him.

“Daenerys was cursed by a witch who foretold she would bare no more babes.”

“No more?” Arya wondered. That implied The Queen had borne at least one child already.

“Aye. No more. She gave birth to a boy, sired by Khal Drogo. Neither the father nor the babe survived long after the birth.”

Arya had heard tell of Daenerys’ Dothraki warlord and his untimely death, but she had not known that there was a babe. To have lost one babe was awful enough, but to be unable to conceive again compounded the loss. Arya wished she did not believe in witches and curses, but she had seen too much in the House of Black and White to doubt the power of magic. She gave an involuntary shudder at the thought of it.

“Poor Daenerys,” she whispered.

That was too much. Gendry pushed her arms roughly from his shoulders and turned sharply towards
“How can you say ‘poor Daenerys’ and feel so sorry for Sansa, yet tell me you do not want my babe?!” he was beyond angry now, beyond caring if his anger scared her. “You have everything they want and cannot have! You have a man who loves you more than any other man would and, if the Gods are good, you have his babe in your belly, yet we stand over it arguing about whether you want it or not.”

They both looked down at her flat, taught stomach.

“I had not thought on it like that,” she admitted quietly.

At least she had the good grace to look shamefaced about it, he thought as he glared at her, his hands balled into fists.

“No moon tea,” he gritted out through clenched teeth.

“No moon tea,” she repeated softly, looking up at him through dark lashes. “I am sorry. I was wrong. ‘Tis just…I…I am scared.”

Despite his anger he was taken aback. He had never heard her admit she was wrong before, much less that she was scared. Her heartfelt apology and admission doused his anger as thoroughly as a bucket of water thrown on a forge.

“Scared of what?” he asked taking her hand, feeling more protective of her than he ever had afore; than she had ever let him be afore.

“Scared of being a bad mother,” she admitted slowly.

He threw his head back and laughed. “You need not fear, for I intend to be an excellent father!”

Reaching out, she stroked down his belly, her fingers tentatively grazing the root of his cock. It reacted immediately to her touch.

“I am not feeling as tired as I was,” she said with a shy smile. “I think I would like to show the man who loves me, how much I love him.”

He needed no further encouragement and he did his damndest that night to ensure he got a babe on her afore she could change her mind.

Chapter End Notes

This was a hard, hard chapter to write as I wanted to do my vision of Sansa justice. I hope I did. In the next chapter I have a bittersweet treat for you – Willas’ POV.

So now you all finally know who Sansa’s lover is and I’ve set things up for her story - “The Trophy Bride”; whenever I get around to writing that. But before that I have to finish my previous Sansa story which, to my utter shame, I stopped one chapter before the end. So I’ll definitely do that, but it will be a long time before I embark on another epic story. When (if?) I do I’m not even sure if I’ll write Daenerys or Sansa first. That’s a decision for another day.
Thanks again this week to my Super Brazilian Guy for his help and everything else (pity his futeball team weren’t so super though).

See you soon…
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Every night Willas would promise himself he would not ask, but it had been seven nights now, long enough for her moon blood to pass and his need for Sansa Stark was so strong he could concentrate on nothing else.

When he had to converse with any other woman, her would imagine ‘twas her; that the woman afore him had hair the colour of maple leaves in autumn, that she had eyes as blue as spring cornflowers and a smile like summer sunshine after the rain. When he should have been going over Highgarden’s accounts, he found himself daydreaming about taking Lady Sansa to the most beautiful places in The Reach and of how he would lay her down in every one of them; in meadows, in fields of golden corn or on moss as soft as a featherbed by the banks of the Mander. If he could only get her away from the hateful Red Keep she would see clearly, see him clearly. Surrounded by the magnificence of Highgarden she would realise that he could give her everything she ever wanted. In Highgarden he would make her happy. In Highgarden she would put her arms around him and kiss him the way lovers kissed and want him the way he wanted her.

But this was not Highgarden and she did not want him the way he burned for her.

Willas told himself he would not take her if she did not come to him, if she did not want him they way he wanted her. But in his heart, he knew he was weak; powerless to resist the temptation of having her one more time.

As ever, she was seated to his right during the evening meal in the Great Hall. After they discussed the day’s news, brought from all over Westeros by ravens and the gossip from within the Red Keep’s walls, after she had graciously accepted his feeding her the tastiest morsels from their shared trencher and laughed at his piss poor jokes; after all that, she could still walk away from him without a backwards glance.

When she rose to excuse herself, he gave in to his weakness and caught her hand.

“Are you well Lady Sansa?” he asked softly. The scent of her hair, like roses on a warm summer evening, floated up to him as she turned.

There was a pause afore she answered. She knew why he asked. Although he burned with the shame of it, he could not prevent himself from asking, for he wanted her more than he had ever wanted any other woman, needed her more than he had ever needed anything in his life.

“Aye, I am well, if you should like to visit me tonight,” she murmured, her lips curving into a gentle smile. But she did not look at him and he knew in his heart that, if he could see them, that smile would not extend to her eyes. Yet still that did not stop him.

“I should like that very much,” he replied, as he always did. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, a kindness she never returned, afore he let her hand go. He had dreamed that one evening she would return that squeeze and in his dream she would come to him and make love to him with all the passion that burned inside her.

He waited until The Red Keep had grown dark and quiet, as he always did. He walked as quickly as he could to her rooms. If it were not for his maimed leg, he might have run. How he longed to have
her run to him, to be able to proclaim to everyone that she was his. He would have her wear the rose of Highgarden and parade her on his arm and worship her openly the way he longed to do. But although she never denied him, she never came to him without his asking first.

As always, he knocked and waited. He would not have to knock or wait in Highgarden.

The door opened to reveal muted, flickering candle light and the darkness beyond. Sansa gently took his hand with cold fingers, leading him languidly and oh so enticingly, back to her bed. Her hair was unbound and fell past her waist, brushing the sweet swell of her hips as she moved ahead of him, releasing that enticing scent that made his manhood stand even more eagerly to attention. He had been hard since she had confirmed that he might visit her and, as he followed her into the candle lit room, breathing in the scent of her hair, seeing the outline of her long, slim legs through the gossamer thin shift, his self control was stretched as tight as a bowstring.

As they passed, he placed his latest offering on the table; a rose bush, still in bud, with only the first tentative new petals peeking through, as vivid and blue as her eyes. He hoped she would stop to appreciate them later, for he knew that now, before they were done, she was oblivious to anything except him. That should have made him the happiest man in all of Westeros, but as she sat on the bed and looked up at him with dreamy, heavy lidded eyes, he felt shamed once more by what he was about to do.

Her bedchamber was lit by a single candle and in the flickering light her hair shone like fire. He watched, transfixed as she lay slowly back on the bed, her hair spreading around her like dark waves over the white linen sheets, the sheer material of her shift flowing over the tantalising swell of her breasts and the slim curve of her waist to pool between her legs.

He was determined to go slowly and try to bring her pleasure, but he wanted her so badly he knew it would not be easy.

“I have dreamed of this,” he breathed as he bent to kiss her cheek, running strands of silken hair through his fingers as he feathered kisses over her face, her neck and her hair.

He knew her eyes would be shut, that an enigmatic, half smile would drift across her lips as she thought of someone else, someone who was not him.

“Don’t leave me Sansa,” he pleaded against her ear, “…please don’t leave me.”

“But I am here,” she murmured dreamily as she brushed one cold hand against his face. Turning into her faint caress, he covered her icy hand with his, pressing it against his cheek, wanting her to want him, to moan his name in pleasure, to hold him so tightly he could believe she never wanted to let him go.

How he longed to have the other Sansa in his arms, the one who would laughed and danced, the one who’s eyes sparkled with life, but she was never here with him. Still, the smell of her skin, the feel of her under him, pliant and willing was so tempting that it would take a stronger man than he to resist the temptation she offered.

With her eyes still closed, Sansa moved their hands from his cheek to her breast. The feel of the ripe curves of her breasts filling his hands, made him gasp and his cock throb with longing, but for all her soft smile, she remained silent and remote. Though he knew he did not take her against her will, she gave him no indication she enjoyed what they did together.

Willas had heard tell of woman who regarded their husband’s desire as a chore to be suffered, but he had never imagined Sansa to be one of those women. She was undoubtedly demure and mannered in
all things, but he had seen that spark of passion in her when she spoke up for others or argued for a cause she believed in. He wanted to be the man, nae, the husband who woke that passion in bed, but no matter how he tried and cajoled and sometimes, to his shame, begged, Sansa remained as lost and as distant to him as if she were locked in a tower.

“Come with me to Highgarden,” he asked this night, as he did every night they lay together, “Come see the beauty of my lands and be my Lady of Roses.”

She sighed, but he knew ’twas not with passion.

“Perhaps…someday…” she whispered lazily, as she always did, moving his hands from her breasts lower, sliding them over the silk of her shift, encouraging him down.

No other woman had ever felt, or could ever feel, this good. He could have any woman he wanted; highborn, lowborn, every one of them beautiful and eager for his affections. But there was only one he wanted. He needed his hands on Sansa’s skin; he needed to feel her against him and under him. He had waited so long already. He could wait no more and he knew he could never get enough.

With his blood pounding in his ears, he slid his fingers down her body until he found the hem of her shift. She shifted her hips to help him as he tugged it up, exposing the soft auburn curls that nestled between her legs. She would let him pull her shift down too, exposing the creamy skin of her neck and breasts to him, but she would never take it off.

No doubt she thought she hid them from him, but he had felt the scars on her back. He did not confront her about them, as he would not press her on anything. He lived in hope that, if only he was patient enough, if only he was gentle enough, she would one day come to him.

With trembling hands, he pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. Then he unlaced his britches, kicking them and his boots off, to stand before her. With her eyes still closed, she opened her legs for him. His need for her overwhelmed him. Climbing onto the bed, being careful to lift his leg over her, to avoid hurting her in any way, he settled himself between her smooth thighs, skin against skin, his cock pressing against her cunt. He shook with the unstoppable need to push into her, until he was buried deep inside her, to keep moving until he marked her with his seed and claimed her as his own.

“Come with me, come with me,” he urged as he took her, unable to prevent himself thrusting hard and deep and fast, again and again and again until he came in an explosion of unleashed lust and longing, shouting her name like a plea to heaven.

He rolled off her as soon as he was finished, not wanting to crush her with his weight. He tried to pull her close, needing to hold her, but she turned away, curling herself up, letting him know he was no longer welcome in her bed. Covering his eyes with his arm, as if he could hide from himself, he cursed his weakness, swearing he would never take her like that again. But, even as he swore it to himself, he knew he would.

-o-

As the first fingers of dawn crept into their room, Arya was awoken by something gently ruffling her hair. She opened her eyes to see Gendry smiling down at her and blowing softly on her forehead.

“I am sorry to wake you my love, but I must leave you afore ’tis light.”
“Why?” Arya murmured sleepily, reaching for him under the covers, finding the smooth warm skin of his hip and trying to tug him towards her.

“We are not yet wed and I do not want to be seen creeping from your bedchamber with the dawn like some scoundrel.”

“I do not care what anyone thinks. Stay. We have unfinished business from last night,” she said sleepily, trying to press herself against him. She had never felt happier or more complete than when he was buried deep inside her and they were joined together as one. When they made love she could forget everything else and almost believe that nothing else mattered. She wanted to find that blissful oblivion once more. But he removed her hand from his hip and sat up.

“Alas, I cannot, for I have unfinished business with Tobho. I have arranged to meet him in the Street of Steel at first light. Sam and Jon too.”

“Will they have the bucket of Dragon’s blood?” Arya asked, rubbing her eyes. Gendry chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose, “Bloody thirsty as ever I see.”

Arya pulled a face and propped herself up on one elbow. “Well, will they?”

“Aye. I have no doubt. As you said, if Jon thinks it will make him a better sword, he’ll have it. He might have been up all night trying to get it though,” Gendry said with another, heartier chuckle.

“How long will you be gone?” Arya asked as she watched him swing his legs over the edge of her bed and stretch. He twisted his shoulders and back this way and that, loosening tight muscles and also showcasing his warrior’s physique to great effect. Arya could not help but smile. Surely she was the luckiest woman in all of Westeros, but they needed to get a bigger bed. ‘Twas cosy with him sleeping curled around her all night, but ‘twould not do to have him suffer for it during the day.

He sighed as he tugged on his britches. Her smile became broader as he had to stand up to laces his britches and she got a good view of his taut buttocks.

“Three days and nights.”

“Three nights!” she yelped. “Then you must come back to bed right now!”

He laughed as he leant over and kissed the top of her head. She tried to grab at him and pull him down to her, but he easily shrugged her off.

“You will survive. ‘Tis only three days. Just promise me you will think of me when you touch yourself.”

“When I touch myself?” she repeated, shocked, appalled and intrigued by his suggestion all at the same time.

“Aye, do not tell me you have never done that afore?” he asked with twinkling, mischievous eyes.

“I have not!” she said indignantly.

“Then you had better practice while I am gone, so you can show me how good you have got at it when I return.”

She threw a pillow at him, but he dodged it effortlessly and continued getting dressed, pulling on his shirt and jerkin before sitting down again to attend to his boots.
“If you are truly leaving me alone for three whole nights, then let me come with you now.”

He looked up at the window. “If you are quick, for I said I would be there at sunrise.”

“You know I am quick as a snake!”

He groaned at the water dancing reference, but could not help from smiling as she bounded out of bed and began pulling on the new clothes she had been given the day before. Arya grabbed whatever was at the top of the pile, discarding two shirts on the floor before finding a pair of britches. Gendry shook his head but could not find it in his heart to chastise her. Not this morning. Gods willing they would have a lifetime of mornings together in Storm’s End and plenty of time to rub off each other’s rough edges.

As he buckled on his sword belt he rubbed his hand over Oathbreaker’s hilt for the last time.
Everything was changing so quickly. He was about to lose one sword and gain another. Soon, he would also gain a wife and, if the Gods were willing, a babe.

“Promise me you will not do anything foolish these next three days Arya,” he asked, his earlier playfulness fading into solemnity.

She looked up at him with those big, grey northern eyes. “I gave you my word I would not risk my life again,” she said with a grin as she tugged on her boots.

He frowned. “I am sure there are many ways you could find to be foolish without risking your life.”

She huffed and pretended to be hurt by his lack of faith in her, “You worry like an old septa.”

But they both knew his concern was justified.

“Mayhaps I do, but I would have your promise nevertheless,” he said, now fully dressed with his arms crossed over his chest, looming over her as she slid Needle into the top of her shiny new, black boot.

’Twas the first time Arya had worn them and she realised they had been made with a special sheath inside to hold Needle. The full extent of his thoughtfulness and his love for her hit her like a kick from a mule.

Remembering her stupidity and his patience the day before, she looked up at him to find his eyes staring into hers with a burning intensity.

“Of course I promise.” She bolted up and buried her face in his shoulder before he could see that she was about to cry again. Seven buggering hells, what was wrong with her? She had not even cried when her father’s head was cut off and yet these past few days, she felt as if tears were never far away.

Gendry stroked her back with big, warm hands as he rested his chin on the top of her head. He smelled of new leather and that now familiar, comforting and, at the same time, arousing smell that was uniquely his. This morning she also caught the incongruous scent of Sansa’s floral soap from their bath the night afore. He would not like that. Imagine if his men or Aegon noticed! That thought ’twas enough to bring a smile back to her face.

After a few, too brief moments he let her go.

“You must think on a new name for my new sword,” he said looking down at her with a smile tugging at his lips.
“You will let me name House Baratheon’s Valyrian steel?” she gasped. Tears threatened again.

“House Baratheon is our house now. And it depends,” he said with a chuckle. “Do not dare bring me any names that have any connection to Braavos or your damn water dancing,” he growled with mock severity.

She grinned. “Agreed. How about Needle?”

His smile vanished and he shook his head. “This sword will be no needle,” he said gruffly.

“I know that. I’m not stupid,” she said, playfully punching his shoulder the way she used to long, long ago. He looked down at the spot where she had hit him and his face broke into a smile.

“Come, we must make haste or I’ll have Tobho boxing my ears as well as you thumping my chest.”

He offered her his hand as he headed for the door.

“I know a quicker way,” she said with a sly smile.

-o-

In half the time ‘twould normally have taken them, they were in Flea Bottom, standing in an empty, stinking street, in the pale dawn light.

“I shall need to tell Jon of this secret way of yours,” Gendry said, brushing cobwebs and dirt from his new clothes.

When she frowned, he gave an exasperated sigh and said, “You know it makes The Red Keep vulnerable to attack. Would you have us murdered in our beds or would you have Jon place a gate on it?”

She knew he was right, but ‘twas her secret and she was already regretting sharing it with him. When her frown depended he laughed and said, “Mayhaps Jon shall give you a key. Now come on, for we are not there yet.”

Taking her hand, he led her through the deserted streets. She almost had to run to keep up with his long strides as he took one turn and then another with an unerring sense of direction. As she hurried along beside him, she realised he was remembering these alleyways from his youth; before she had known him. While she had only happy memories of a carefree childhood at Winterfell, he had this… this squalor.

Looking at him now; so handsome and self assured in his lordly new clothes and with Valyrian steel at his hip, ‘twas almost impossible for her to remember the shy young ‘prentice smith Gendry had been when they first met. Arya wanted to stop and close her eyes and try to recall the first time she laid eyes on him; what he looked like and how she felt. Had either of them any inkling at all how their fates were to be entwined? She would ask him sometime, but there was no time now and if she did not concentrate on where she was placing her feet she was certain to stand in some kind of Flea Bottom shit. She tried not to think of the kind of shit it probably was.

With one last turn, they emerged from the shadowy alleyways into the broad Street of Steel. Smoke rose straight up from the chimney of Tobho’s shop into the still, clear morning sky. All around them
was quiet, but as they hurried towards the open door, Arya could hear familiar voices carried on air that smelled of charcoal and hot metal. Gendry must have heard them and smelled the forge too, for his face broke into a grin as wide as any she had ever seen him wear.

“Twill do me good to wield a hammer again,” he said happily as he led her straight through the empty shop into the forge.

Blinking as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she counted six figures silhouetted against the fierce red light of the fire. Tobho, Jon and Sam she expected, Tobho’s wife hovering nervously beside her husband she should have anticipated, but the pale silver hair of the Targaryen Queen and King, glinting like quicksilver in the firelight caught her by surprise.

Arya had no time to ask Gendry why Aegon and Daenerys were here as Tobho shouted, “Late again Waters!” from the shadows.

Everyone including Gendry laughed, but Arya heard only the tremor and the breathlessness of the master Armourer’s voice. Tobho sat in a chair beside the forge, looking even frailer than the last time Arya had seen him. The wheezing, wet cough that immediately racked his body after he spoke confirmed what Arya suspected; Tobho Mott would make no more swords after these.

Gendry let go of her hand and immediately began unfastening his lordly new jerkin. Ignoring the rest of them, Arya walked straight over to Tobho and knelt at his feet. She reached for his hand and suppressed as shudder as she felt how cold and bony ‘twas in hers. She needed no Maester to tell her his time was almost done.

“I am sorry we were not introduced afore,” Arya said, knowing this apology was too little and coming too late. “I wanted to tell you how magnificent he looks in the golden helm you made him and how proud he is of it…and of you.”

Tobho patted the back of her hand. His thin, old hands must have once been as strong and as warm as Gendry’s. It made Arya’s heart ache to think on it.

“And I am proud of him,” Tobho replied, his rheumy eyes glistening in the light from his forge. “I could not be more proud of him if he was my own son.”

Tobho’s wife rested both hands on her husband’s thin shoulders and kissed the top of his bald head. He gripped one of her plump hands and inclined his head to look up at her. Their love for each other was plain for all to see.

“I hope you will both come to Storm’s End with us. Please come and stay for as long as you like as our honoured guests,” Arya said, hoping Tobho and his wife understood what she was offering. Tobho would never live to see Gendry’s castle, but his wife would have a home there for the rest of her life.

“My wife would like that very much,” Tobho said gruffly. Mrs Mott had to cover her mouth to save from sobbing.

“Hush woman,” Tobho smiled lovingly up at his wife as he patted her hand. “There’ll be plenty of time for tears after I’m gone. But now we have Valyrian steel swords to make and these boys will all need fed!”

Arya and Tobho’s wife had to smile, for Tobho sounded as happy and excited as a youth.

“Did someone mention food?” Sam yelled from across the forge.
“Aye Samwell Tarly, they did,” Tobho’s wife replied loudly, “Just you make sure you do not have a mouthful of my rabbit stew when you need to say those spells. We’re making swords here, not Tarly pies!”

Once again everyone laughed. Arya gave Tobho’s hand a final, gentle squeeze before she stood up and turned back to the others.

Gendry had his long hair tied back, his shirt off and a thick, old leather apron over his britches. He was lifting and setting down an array of tools, examining each one in turn. Muscle and sinew danced beneath smooth skin already covered with a sheen of sweat from the heat of the fire. Her breath caught as he lifted a hammer, studying it as he held it out over the flames. She had never seen him like this afore; happily lost in his thoughts and ready not for war, but for creation. She was proud of the soldier and commander he had become, but she loved the man who stood there with the hammer in his hand.

As if knowing she was looking, he inclined his head towards her and gave her a delighted, boyish grin. No longer would she need to close her eyes to remember how he was when she first met him, for the image of him then stood before her now.

“He will make us both fine swords,” Jon said from behind her. It seemed her brother bore her no grudge for the events of yesterday as he smiled broadly when she turned towards him.

“Did you get your bucket of Dragon’s blood?”

“Aye,” he grinned, “Being a warg has many uses, as you will learn. I do not think Aegon could have got near Drogon with a sword; much less bleed him, had I not been able to calm him first.”

Arya looked to Aegon. He and Daenerys seemed to shine in the firelight. Although she distrusted Aegon, in truth she hardly knew him. ‘Twas difficult for her to accept that Aegon was more brother to Jon than Jon was to her. Mayhaps she was jealous she realised with a start. She would try to be a better sister to Jon as well as to Sansa and aye; she would even try to be more tolerant of Aegon too.

“You are fortunate to have found another brother;” she said to Jon, while smiling at Aegon.

Jon raised his eyebrows in surprise that she made such a comment. Their eyes met for an instant, each knowing the other thought of Robb, dead for so long and of Rickon, lost to them all.

Pushing aside such melancholy thoughts, Jon nodded and grinned. “Aye. I am fortunate indeed.”

“Brother,” he shouted over to Aegon. Arya noticed that both Gendry and Sam also looked up. Why was she surprised? Were they all not brothers of different kinds?

Sam was Jon’s black brother from the Night’s Watch and Gendry, already a brother-in-arms, would soon be Jon’s good-brother, once Arya and Gendry were wed. With a sigh Arya realised that Aegon almost a brother to her too. She really would need to make more of an effort to get to know that annoying, arrogant and exceedingly vain, horse’s arse, for it seemed her pack was even larger than she had first thought.

As Aegon strode over, Jon asked for Needle. Arya gave him a puzzled look, but drew the blade from its sheath in her new boot and hand it to him, hilt first.

Without flinching, Jon drew Needle’s razor sharp edge down the palm of his unburnt hand. Arya gasped at the sight of her brother’s blood on her blade. Oblivious to her shocked reaction, Jon calmly handed Needle to Aegon, who grinned at her, then proceeded to do exactly the same thing.
Sam waddled after Aegon with a huge, heavy bucket swinging between his legs. Although he gripped the handle with both hands, he was obviously struggling to carry the weight. As he set the bucket down in front of them, Arya had her first look at Dragon’s blood. The inky black liquid seemed to undulate long after Sam had set it down and it smelled, somehow, of fire.

“Blood magic is the strongest magic of all,” Sam said matter-of-factly as he watched Arya stare into the bucket, “and the blood of Kings makes it virtually unbreakable.”

“The blood of two Kings,” Jon said as he gripped his brother’s outstretched hand, pressing bloody palm against bloody palm. Arya watched in horrified fascination as their blood mingled together and then dripped steadily into the Dragon’s blood waiting below.

As the first drop hit the surface, the black blood began to move around the bucket of its own accord she would have sworn she saw something flash silver in the midst of the black, but she blinked and when she looked again, the red blood of the two Kings had disappeared into the slowly swirling black.

“Make that the blood of three Kings,” Gendry said, appeared beside them and taking Needle from a surprised Aegon. In one smooth movement Gendry drew Needle down his left palm and clenched his fist above the bucket. Blood oozed between his fingers and dripped down to be swallowed greedily by something silver, something alive, in the bucket as his blood mingled with the black blood of a Dragon.

“Daenerys.”

Jon beckoned for his wife and, as The Dragon Queen stepped out of the shadows, into the red light cast by the forge, Arya was startled to see that Daenerys was afraid. She had thought the The Dragon Queen to be fearless in all things, but The Queen’s steps were halting, her expression full of dread and apprehension. Arya remembered Gendry mentioning Daenerys’ dead husband and babe and the curse of a witch. Mayhaps Daenerys had more to fear from blood magic than most. But Jon held out his gloved hand to her, giving her a reassuring smile and on she came.

As The Queen stood beside Jon, Gendry handed Needle to her, hilt first. Daenerys accepted it with shaking hands. With her eyes remaining locked on Jon’s, Daenerys sliced the bloody blade down her own palm and, as the three men had done before her, held her hand out above the bucket.

“Blood of The Dragon Queen,” Jon proclaimed eagerly as the first drop fell from Daenerys’ pale skin towards the heaving pool below.

This time the Dragon’s blood seemed to surge upwards and Arya would have sworn on her father’s bones that she saw a gaping black maw leap from the bucket to devour the first drop of Daenerys’ blood. The collective gasp from the circle confirmed ‘twas not only Arya who had seen the hungry mouth rise from the blood. She took an involuntary step back, wanting to distance herself from whatever living thing was in that bucket. Jon Aegon, Sam and even Daenerys seemed transfixed, but Arya’s eyes found Gendry’s and from his uneasy expression, ‘twas clear he shared her misgivings.

Arya warily took Needle back from an unseeing Daenerys, intending to clean it more thoroughly than she ever had before, in case some blood magic lingered on the blade.

Tobho shouting, “No time to waste! We have work to do!” interrupted their reverie. As the circle dispersed, Gendry pulled Arya to him and planted a fierce, swift kiss on her lips.

“I love you,” they each said to the other as they broke apart and both laughed at the absurdity of it.
“Take care,” Arya whispered as she clung onto him, willing him to understand her fears and everything she meant by those two little words.

“You too and remember your promise,” he replied tenderly as he let her go.

With one last, long look, they parted.

Tobho was standing, albeit leaning heavily on the forge and Sam had a huge, old book open in his arms. Arya watched as Gendry retrieved his sword from the bench where he had laid it on top of his clothes and brought Oathbreaker over to the fire. As Sam began to speak the ancient magic words, written down before The Doom, Jon approached the opposite side of the forge with a shorter sword Arya knew must be Widow’s Wail. Arya would not be sorry to see that sword destroyed, for the name was surely a twisted, mocking reference to her dead mother.

Ice was to be reforged and Arya knew she was not needed nor wanted here. Tobho, Sam and Gendry had work to do.

Jon had his arm wrapped protectively around Daenerys’ shoulders and her arm was tight around his waist; the two of them looking as if they had been made to fit together. Aegon stood close on Jon’s other side and the three Targaryen monarchs watched transfixed as Gendry raised his hammer for the first time to bring it down with tremendous force, severing Oathbreaker from its jewelled hilt. The sharp ringing sound echoing around the forge caused Arya to cover her ears and, with one final, longing look at Gendry, she walked away as quickly as she could, resisting the temptation to run.

Back out in the bright morning sunlight, ‘twas easy to forget about the blood creature in the bucket and swords and dark magic.

Her heart grew lighter with every step she took. ‘Twas only three days and then she would have Gendry back. Mayhaps soon after that Bran would arrive, she would be wed and then they could go home.

Home.

Arya felt guilty when she realised that home no longer meant Winterfell. ‘Twas the sea and the wild coast, the security of Gendry’s arms and Storm’s End’s walls that she craved.

She had been away from The North almost as long as she had lived there. They would need to visit. She would show Gendry the places of her childhood and he could tell her all about the war against the others and The Wall. Mayhaps they would journey together to The Wall, or what was left of it. Mayhaps they would finally finish the journey they started out on so long ago.

Arya was so wrapped up in her thoughts of the past and her hopes for the future that she did not see Brienne afore ‘twas too late.

The Maid of Tarth stood in the middle of the street, blocking her way. There was no route for escape or opportunity for Arya to change her face now, for Brienne was striding towards her, intent on finally reporting on her mission.

“I have been looking for you everywhere,” Brienne said accusingly.

“I know,” Arya replied, shoving her hands in her pockets and falling in to step beside Brienne as they walked, or more accurately marched, back to The Red Keep. Brienne marched everywhere. It seemed she could not help herself.
They marched together in silence for a few moments, before Brienne said simply, “I found him.”

Arya’s stomach seemed to drop to the floor.

“What?” she asked, hoping to sound airily disinterested.

Brienne grabbed Arya by her elbow and wheeled her around.

“What has happened to you? You told me nothing else mattered, save finding him. Now I am returned with news and yet you avoid me and you even pretend you do not know of whom I speak?!”

Brienne was near shouting and they were beginning to attract even more interest from passers-by than Brienne’s appearance normally provoked.

“I am not sure it does matter anymore,” Arya said, wishing she really believed what she was saying.

“You will think it matters when you hear what I have to say!”

Brienne retained her firm hold on Arya’s elbow and set off again towards The Red Keep, dragging Arya with her.

“Tell me then,” Arya said, stopping dead and forcing Brienne to stop also.

“Not here.”

“Yes. Right here, Right now.” Arya demanded. She wanted this over and done with. She would soon go to Storm’s End where she meant to forget about Sandor Clegane and her list and live, as someone once said, happily ever after.

Brienne glared at her. “Very well. He lives in the monastery on The Quiet Isle as I suspected.”

“If he has been there this long, then mayhaps I had best just leave him there,” Arya said tightly, trying to shake off Brienne’s hand.

“Tis too late for that,” Brienne said in a low, warning tone, gripping Arya’s elbow even tighter, “For my questioning seems to have awakened what he used to be. I was not even sure ‘twas him at first. Aye, the burns are the same, but he seemed a pious man at first. However, I had to be sure and I fear my pressing him has brought The Hound back.”

At the very mention of his name, Arya’s blood turned to ice in her veins. How many times had she lain awake at night, swearing revenge, swearing murder? But that was then, before she knew what happiness was.

“So? The Lannister’s power is gone along with their gold and Westeros is not the place it used to be. The war is done and he will find little demand for his brutal sort of service now.”

Brienne bent down until her face was level with Arya’s and only inches apart.

“You do not understand,” Brienne said, shaking Arya’s arm in frustration. “He does not speak of returning to King’s Landing merely to take up his former employment! ‘Tis far worse than that.”

Arya studied Brienne’s face and saw real fear in her vivid blue eyes. What could Sandor Clegane threaten that would scare a Knight such as Brienne of Tarth to her very core?

“He comes for your sister. He says she owes him a debt and he is hell bent on collecting.”
Sansa? He comes for Sansa?

Arya took several deep breaths to regulate her breathing and her pounding heart. The Hound threatened Sansa. After all this time. But that dog would not live to carry out his threat. Arya would protect her pack and especially dear, dear Sansa who put everyone afore herself.

Then she had been a child and powerless to stop The Hound murdering Mycah or to prevent her father’s execution or her sister’s rape. But not now. No longer was she little Arya Stark. Now she could be anyone she wanted to be and she wanted to be death.

“I fear for Sansa’s life,” Brienne confided, her voice tight with tension.

“Fear not,” the faceless assassin said with a wolfish smile, “The Many Faced God has a gift for The Hound, a gift that is long overdue.”

Chapter End Notes

This was a big week. I surpassed 30,000 hits on Archive of Our Own and 300 reviews on Fan Fiction (thank you Mrs Jessie Pinkman for that special one). Both were terrific milestones and personal goals. With the end finally within my grasp, it gives me a sense of satisfaction to know that this story has been a success.

Yet again, I am indebted to Brazilian Guy for his patience and sacrifice above and beyond what I have any right to expect. I’m gonna miss you when this is done BG.

I am having a week off, before I finish The Reluctant Bride. It might take more than one chapter, but it will end over the weekend of 9th August. I hope to see you all then…
“You aren’t going to do anything foolish are you?” Brienne demanded.

Arya merely narrowed her eyes, refusing to dignify that question with an answer.

“We can set a guard around Lady Sansa. I have no doubt Lord Baratheon and King Jon will provide the men and I will supervise the arrangements myself. No one will harm her.”

“Why did you wait so long to tell me?” Arya asked, her tone as cold and hard as northern steel.

“I have been trying to tell you since you returned to The Red Keep!” Brienne said, exasperation radiating from every pore. “But there is still time. Afore I left I spoke to Elder Brother. No one on the Isle can leave until after the spring equinox.”

“Then The Hound shall receive the gift before then.”

“You can’t kill him on The Quiet Isle. ‘Tis the holiest place in Westeros,” Brienne gasped, horrified that Arya would even contemplate such sacrilege. “You would be damned to the seven hells for all eternity.”

“Only if you believe in the Faith of the Seven.” Arya said with a smirk and began walking towards The Red Keep again.

“Do not do this!” Brienne urged, for once having to run to catch up with Arya. “You risk the wrath of The Gods.”


Brienne caught Arya’s arm again. “I’ll have no part in this if you won’t heed my warning. You must speak to Gendry and Jon. Seek their support. I will ride with you and we shall have an army at our back!” Brienne said angrily. As this seemed to have no effect on Arya, Brienne softened her tone, pleading “I want to keep Sansa safe as much as you do.”

Arya looked disdainfully at Brienne’s large hand on her arm and then up into those sincere, blue eyes. Poor misguided Brienne. Did she not know that a lone assassin would succeed where an army would certainly fail? Send an army to catch one man and you might as well send him a raven with a time and date for his execution and Arya knew The Hound would take advantage of every opportunity they gave him to disappear. Again.

“No one is allowed on or off the Isle until after the Equinox is celebrated. You gain nothing by leaving in haste,” Brienne argued.

Arya would gain the element of surprise and some Septon’s command would not stop her gaining the Isle. For a Faceless Assassin, there was always a way; locked doors, armed guards, an inaccessible island. Nothing would not stop The Guild. Nothing would stop Arya, save Brienne running to Gendry or Jon telling tales.

Arya knew she must tread carefully with The Maid of Tarth or her mission would be thwarted afore it could begin.
“You know, you are right,” Arya said, giving Brienne her best apologetic smile, “I was letting my heart rule my head. As you say…we have time. We shall wait until Gendry has reforged Ice and then we shall hold a council of war.”

Brienne grinned in delighted relief. “I am glad you have seen sense.”

Arya knew that talk of a meeting and a plan was what Brienne wanted to hear. Always having a tendency towards the dramatic, Brienne dropped to her knee in front of Arya, in the middle of the Street of Steel. “You can be assured I shall guard Lady Sansa with my life until then.”

Arya suppressed a triumphant grin. Brienne of Tarth would present no obstacle to her task now. “I have such fear for my sister. Would you be able to begin your watch over her immediately?”

“It shall be an honour,” Brienne vowed, as she got back to her feet, “I shall go now.”

Dear, loyal, gullible, Brienne. “And I shall go back to Tobho’s shop and leave a message for Lord Baratheon.”

Brienne bowed her head in acknowledgement and, without waiting for Arya to turn back, Brienne pressed her sword scabbard to her side and began sprinting back towards The Red Keep, intent on keeping Sansa safe.

Arya watched her go. Only when Brienne was fully out of sight, did Arya turn; not back towards Tobho’s shop as she had said she would, but in the direction of her secret way back into The Red Keep. She had time, but not much. The Hound must die on The Quiet Isle afore the Equinox was over. Despite what Brienne thought, Arya knew ‘twas the only way to ensure Sansa’s safety.

-o-

Arya changed her face as she crept through the tunnels beneath The Red Keep. Stealing food from the kitchens and men’s clothing from the laundry was easy; stealing King Aegon’s sand steed would not be.

Deciding that a direct approach was more likely to succeed than trying to sneak such a distinguished horse past the castle guards, Arya strode into the stables with her new face, new clothes and a bag full of food slung over her shoulder. She wore the face of a clever man, for no one would accept a woman as a Horse Maester – and that was what she intended to claim to be. She would inspect the sand steed for some mysterious ailment, declare she needed to ride the horse and disappear. By the time anyone realised she had no intention of returning, she would be headed north on the king’s road and no one would be able to catch her.

Arya thought her plan sound until she walked into the stables and saw Ty practicing his sword skills on a sack of grain. Half a moon cycle of lying flat on his back in a wheelhouse had obviously been sufficient to heal his wound. Arya cursed herself inwardly for never having considering this. If she had, Lady Arya Stark could have sent Ty on some spurious errand, but ‘twas too late for that now. Easy living and contentment with her new life had made her careless and her pressing fear for Sansa had made her rash.

With Gendry otherwise engaged and the rest of Bad Company still celebrating their return to King’s Landing, Arya belatedly realised that Ty had nowhere else to go. Shireen would be ensconced with Daenerys and the other ladies of the court and keeping very different company than with lowly squires. There would be no more sword dancing practice and riding in wheelhouses with Lady Shireen for poor Ty. From the way he was attacking the defenceless sack of grain, he seemed to be venting his frustrations upon it.
“Can I help you Ser?” the nearest stable boy asked the clever man. Ty looked up to stare at the newcomer, along with the rest.

Arya’s heart hammered in her chest. The last time she had tried to escape from The Red Keep she had ended up taking Ty with her and it had nearly cost him his life. She could not make the same mistake again. She had to avoid catching his attention at all costs for she could change her clothes, her face, her very identity, but below all these superficial changes, she was still Arya Stark and someone who was as perceptive and who knew her as well as Ty did, might still recognise a mannerism or a peculiarity of hers she was unable to hide.

Arya slung her bag over the opposite shoulder and turned her back towards Ty in what she hoped was not too obvious a move.

“I am sent by King Aegon to examine his horse. I am Syrio Forel. A Horse Maester of great renown. No doubt you will have heard of me,” Arya said, adopting a Braavosi accent and in as deep a voice as she could manage. She added a low bow with a flourish for extra effect.

The stable boys exchanged puzzled glances. “I ain’t never heard ‘o no ‘orse Maester afore,” one grumbled.

Out of the corner of her eye, Arya could see Ty had stopped poking the sack with his sword and was watching her intently. Seven buggering hells.

Setting her bag down at her feet, Arya pulled a handful of gold dragons from the right hand pocket of her britches. “Mayhaps you have not heard of a Horse Maester afore as I am the only one. See! Your Dragon King pays handsomely for my services!”

A collective awed gasp confirmed the stable boys were suitable dazzled by the sight of more gold than they would probably ever see again in their lives. Slipping those coins back into her right pocket, Arya brought out a handful of copper coins from her left.

“The King pays for my services and I shall pay for yours,” the clever man grinned. A dozen dirty hands were shoved under Arya’s nose; all eager for a share of the bounty. All except Ty’s.

Lord Baratheon’s squire stepped closer. Arya noticed he had not yet sheathed his sword. “King Aegon never lets anyone near his horse. If he had hired you, he would have sent word. And what kind of Maester would bow to a bunch of stable lads anyway?”

Damn that Ty, he was too sharp for his own good. The not-so-clever man handed out coins to the other squires, while studiously not looking at Ty. “I thought he would have sent word, but mayhaps it skipped his mind for I hear he is away forging a sword with Lord Baratheon,” Arya said lightly.

The other stable boys were obviously convinced by the sight of so much gold and talk of Kings and Lords. They were all too greedily preoccupied by their coins to question her further.

Ty took a few more steps towards her, twirling his sword casually through the air. ‘Twas obvious to anyone who knew anything about swordplay that the seemingly effortless flicks of his wrist came only through hours and hours of practice. Arya had to force herself to suppress a smile. She had taught him well.

“Your gold proves nothing Horse Maester,” Ty said, placing a contemptuous emphasis on the words ‘Horse Maester’, “…except mayhaps that you are already a thief.”

There was nothing else for it; Arya had to speak to him. She fixed him with a hard stare. “You seem
like a clever lad. Come with me and let me convince you with my skills.”

Ty narrowed his green eyes and Arya’s heart hammered against her ribs. Had he recognised her? It seemed not, for Ty raised his sword to the frontal guard position, resting the pommel in an off-hand way against his chin. His manner was insouciant, but his message was loud and clear; attempt to steal this horse and I will kill you.

“You first,” Ty smirked behind his sword, nodding towards the row of stalls.

The not-so-clever man was forced to brush past Ty, who was very deliberately not stepping out of the way. Ty radiated a very confident, very male, aggression. That was new. Arya was aware of him watching her intently as she slipped past and also that he had grown since they last stood side by side. ‘Twould not be long afore he was as tall as she was.

Arya felt a sudden burst of maternal pride. Ty was everything she hoped her own son would be one day. With a start, she realised that son might be growing in her belly now. Unconsciously, she found her hand brushing over her stomach and was forced to hide the gesture by pretending to straighten her tunic.

“Last stall on the left,” Ty said from behind her. His voice was deeper too.

Aegon’s sand steed was even more magnificent than Arya had anticipated. The mare was as silver as her master’s hair, with sleek flanks and elegant muscled legs that surpassed those of even Edric’s sand steed. Men would kill to own such a horse and riding her unaccompanied would make Arya’s journey so much more dangerous. However, there was nothing else for it. If she had to reach The Quiet Isle in time, this horse was her only hope.

“King Aegon calls her ‘Beauty’, but then you already knew that didn’t you?” The mocking tone in Ty’s voice made it perfectly clear he thought she was lying.

Arya ran her hand down the mare’s sleek shoulder and was rewarded by Beauty gently nuzzling her hair. Arya smiled up at the horse. No wonder Aegon coveted her so highly, for she was the pinnacle of equine speed, beauty and agility, with a nature to match her beautiful looks.

“You are the certainly the queerest man I have ever seen, Horse Maester,” Ty drawled scathingly from the entrance to the stall. Then with a harder edge to his voice, he demanded, “Who are you really and what do you want?”

“Is there anyone who can overhear us?” the clever man asked, without lifting his head from where he had rested it against the mare’s neck.

Arya sensed, rather than saw Ty look over into the neighbouring stall and up and down the central isle.

“We are quite alone. Save for my sword.”

Arya could hear the grin and also the threat in his voice. Passing her hand over her face, the clever man changed back to Arya Stark before slowly turning around to look at Ty.

“May The Warrior protect me!” he gasped, dropping his sword in shock.

While he scrabbled around in the straw to retrieve it, Arya kicked the hilt towards him and said calmly, “Do that when confronted by your enemy and The Warrior would disown you.”

“I doubt any of The Seven would condone witchcraft!” Ty shot back.
“’Tis not witchcraft,” Arya said with a sigh. She needed to stifle Ty’s interest in The Guild afore it got a hold. She did not want him running off to Bravos as she had. “’Tis merely a mummer’s trick.”

“Can you teach me?” Ty asked eagerly as he stood up and sheathed his sword.

“Nae,” Arya grunted as she lifted the sand steed’s saddle down from its saddle rack.

“Why not? And where do you think you are going with King Aegon’s horse?” Ty demanded.

“Because it will only bring you trouble and I am going to kill an old acquaintance.”

“But what if I want trouble?” Ty grinned, helping her by draping the saddle pad over the sand steed’s back.

“Turn it upside down,” Arya said, nodding to the embroidered Dragons on the saddle pad.

Ty quickly complied and, after Arya had position the saddle on top of the, now plain, pad, she gave the squire a pensive look and said, “I shall not teach you because ‘tis a dangerous road to go down and a harder one to return from. My father believed that if a man had to die, he deserved to know who swung the blade. I wish I had taken more heed of my father’s advice and not hidden behind another’s face.”

That was obviously not what Ty wanted to hear, but as soon as he opened his mouth to argue, Arya repeated, “Nae,” more firmly than before.

“But…”

“Nae. Never. Do not ask me again.”

Ty huffed, but decided not to purse the point further, at least not for the moment. Instead he asked, “So who are you off to kill?”

“No one you know,” Arya replied, tying her bag onto the saddle as Ty finished fastening the girth strap.

“King Aegon will kill you for stealing his horse you know,” Ty said matter-of-factly, “…and I hear he is a great swordsman.”

Arya stopped in the middle of tying a knot to regard Ty with cold, grey eyes, “He can try.” She turned back to fastening the bag securely onto the saddle and muttered, “I shall worry about him later.”

“Hmmm, I suppose you are right, for you should be worrying about how to get his sand steed past the dozens of guards you shall meet in the bailey yard, at the barbican and while riding through the army that waits beyond the walls…assuming you get that far.”

“I have a plan,” she muttered, pulling the hood of her cloak over her head.

“Well I hope ‘tis a whole lot better than pretending you are a Horse Maester!” Ty said with a derisory snort.

Arya sighed, but could not suppress a smile as she said, “Not all guards are as smart as you Ty.”

His face beamed with pleasure at the compliment.

“Or as good with a sword.”
Filled with motherly pride for the man the boy was becoming, Arya reached across to cup Ty’s face in her hand. To her surprise she felt downy hairs tickle her palm. He was so fair that this new growth was easily missed in the dim light of the stables, but now she looked closely, Ty’s chin and upper lip had sprouted a soft, sparse beard.

“You need to shave,” she chided him gently. “Shireen will appreciate it,” Arya added with a laugh.

Ty blushed scarlet afore his face fell. “I doubt I shall ever see her again,” he whispered, pressing his cheek plaintively against Arya’s palm.

“She is your friend. Of course you shall see her again,” Arya murmured sympathetically.

Ty’s mood changed in an instant and he hurriedly pulled Arya’s hand away from his face.

“My friend,” he repeated, as if the word sickened him.

Arya would not let his hand go, although he tried to shake it free.

“You really love her?” Arya asked, searching his face for the truth.

“Of course I love her!” Ty spat with a vehemence that took Arya aback. “You may think me a stupid, bastard boy, but I have seen more life than high born folk twice my age. I know she is the only one for me . . . will always be the only one for me.”

Arya could not help thinking of another bastard boy who, after all these years, had admitted he held the same feelings for her.

“If you truly love her then you must fight for her!” Arya urged, taking both of Ty’s hands in hers and squeezing them tight. “Have I taught you nothing? You fight for what you want and if you are knocked down, you get back on your feet, again and again and again. If The Gods contrive to keep you apart now, make yourself worthy of her and, in return obtain her promise to wait for you. Oh, do not give up hope Ty, for she will find no better man than you.”

“Then you will speak to Lord Baratheon and Lady Shireen on my behalf?” Ty asked anxiously.

Arya groaned. “I wish I could, but I must leave. Now. And I suspect Lord Baratheon will not look kindly upon any of my requests if I return.”

“If you return?” Ty asked suspiciously. “Twas his turn to grab her hands and not let go. “I shall not let you leave until you tell me all!”

Arya tried to draw her hands back, but ‘twas obvious Ty would not let her go without a struggle. Remembering his threats to run to King Aegon the last time, she knew she had to keep him on her side and, if that meant taking him into her confidence, then so be it. His honour was of the utmost importance to him and Arya had no doubt Ty would keep his word if he gave it.

“Swear to me that you will tell no one.”

He eyed her warily. She squeezed his hands and whispered, “Please.”

“I give you my word,” he nodded, albeit reluctantly.

“Lady Sansa’s life is under threat from an old enemy I should have killed years ago while I had the chance. Now my failure comes back to haunt me and to stalk her. I must right my wrong.”

Ty nodded as if he understood; his sharp green eyes deadly serious, his mouth a firm, determined
line. Mayhaps he saw this as a chivalrous quest.

“I will come with you. An extra sword to guard your back will be useful.”

Arya wanted to weep with pride at his selfless offer, but she had nearly lost him once before due to her own carelessness and would not risk his life again. This time she knew how to dissuade him from following her.

“I have only one chance at this and I must reach the man afore he leaves his hiding place. I must travel fast and light and….we have only one sand steed.”

Ty seemed to accept the logic of this, for although he frowned, he gave her a small nod.

“Will you guard Lady Sansa for me in case I …fail?”

Ty looked aghast, but again he nodded.

“Brienne of Tarth also protects my sister. I trust Brienne as I trust few others. Will you also accept this task?”

Again Ty nodded.

“‘Tis important no one knows I have left for a long as you can keep it a secret. I do not ask you to lie for me Ty, but mayhaps you can avoid being seen for at least a day and a night.”

“I shall be as quiet as a shadow,” Ty said with a grin.

“Then I shall away,” Arya replied with a heavy heart, resisting the urge to embrace him. She did not wish to worry him further with more uncharacteristic displays of affection. She would embrace him upon her return, when she congratulated him on his betrothal to Shireen.

“I know how you can disguise that horse,” Ty said with a wicked smirk, “We used to steal horses in Flea Bottom. We’d change their colour with rusted iron and salt mixed in a bit of dirty water so we could sell them on. Many’s the bowl ‘o brown been made with horse meat I sold.”

“That’s my boy,” Arya laughed, ruffling Ty’s hair. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

-o-

Brienne was not as easily fooled as Arya hoped. A long night standing guard outside Lady Sansa’s room had given Brienne plenty of time to think. Arya was headstrong stubborn and most importantly, a trained assassin, yet she had given in to Brienne’s request to wait for Gendry and Jon almost immediately. Brienne had let relief cloud her judgement. Arya’s capitulation had been too quick, too easy and Brienne had a long night with the harsh realisation that she had almost certainly been duped.

However, Brienne would not abandon her post to find out. Neither would she disturb Lady Sansa to explain her fears. That poor girl had suffered enough already without Brienne adding to her woes. While the threat from The Hound was very real, Brienne hoped ‘twas not imminent and she saw no need to alarm Lady Sansa. Yet. Nevertheless, Brienne intended to take no chances. So she stood guard and waited until the morning.
Only after Sansa’s maid had appeared and then been despatched to bring two, sleepy and bemused black crows to guard Lady Sansa, did Brienne set off to find Arya. Brienne hoped with all her heart that Arya had not stooped so low as to lie and deceive her when their common goal was to protect Sansa. Brienne hoped against hope that the gnawing suspicion formed in the night was merely the result of a lack of sleep and an over anxious mind.

But increasingly anxious knocks at Arya’s door produced no response and, with a sick feeling rising from the pit of her stomach, Brienne gave Arya’s door a mighty kick. To Brienne’s surprise, it shattered under a second hard blow. As the door fell inwards, she saw why it had buckled so easily; it had previously suffered a similar assault. From the new wood repairing the door and the untarnished hinges, it had been a recent repair. Brienne cursed under her breath. Only Arya could warrant her door being broken down twice.

As Brienne feared, the bed had not been slept in. Travelling trunks with the Baratheon crest tooled into the lids sat, unopened, on the floor. Arya had obviously left in such haste she had not bothered to pack even a change of clothes. Wanting to throw something out of sheer frustration, Brienne forced herself to take a deep breath and think. What was it Arya said? Calm as still water. Aye, that is what she needed to be now, but may The Gods damn that lying girl to the seven hells and back. Brienne held her sword scabbard tight against her leg as she turned and ran. She needed to get to Lord Baratheon. Arya’s very life hung in the balance. The Hound was a formidable opponent, even for one of the Faceless Men. Every moment’s delay increased the risk to Arya and Sansa’s lives.

On her way to the Street of Steel, Brienne had to pass the stables. On an impulse, she headed inside. Her horse would take her to Tobho’s shop faster. ‘Twas only when she confronted a stable boy, intent upon ordering him to saddle her horse, that she realised Arya must have done the very same thing.

“When did Lady Arya Stark leave?” Brienne demanded, impatience pouring off her.

The boy looked wide eyed to his companions for assistance. Brienne had no time for this. She grabbed his arm and pulled him towards her.

“I asked you, not them!”

“We don’t know nuthin’ about Lady Arya.”

Brienne gave the boy a exasperated shake. “But she was here?”

“N…n…nae,” the boy stuttered. Before Brienne could curse him for a fool, one of the other stable boys spoke up.

“Someone has taken King Aegon’s sand steed, but we don’t know who. That is - we never saw ‘im leave.”

Brienne muttered a colourful string of oaths as she let go of the stable lad’s arm.

“Ty might know who took the King’s ‘orse.” The first boy offered in a Flea Bottom accent so thick Brienne could barely understand what he was saying.

“Ty?” she repeated wondering who he was.

“Lord Baratheon’s squire. But ‘ee ‘as disappeared too.”

Brienne was not going to waste more time finding and questioning this elusive ‘Ty’. There were too
many coincidences; Arya was missing, King Aegon’s sand steed had disappeared and now Lord Baratheon’s squire too.

Stealing a King’s horse was the kind of thing only Arya would do. Aegon would be livid when he found out but Arya would have no regard for a King’s wrath; all she would care about was that the sand steed would get her to The Quite Isle long before any pursuers. Even a string of horses could not match a sand steed for pace and endurance. Frustration snapping at her heels caused Brienne to curse again.

“When did the horse disappear?”

The stable boys looked at each other again. One reluctantly answered, “All we know is that she was not there when we went to her stall for the afternoon exercise.”

Yesterday! Seven buggering hells. Arya had half a day and a whole night’s head start already.

“Saddle my horse. Now!” Brienne yelled, sending every stable boy scurrying to do her bidding.

She made good progress, for the sight of The Maid of Tarth on her huge, grey destrier, with her jaw set and intent on her latest mission, was enough to make the Flea Bottom crowds part before her. Until she got to the Street of Steel.

Word had spread of the swords being made in Tobho’s shop and the street was packed with smallfolk, all anxious to catch a glimpse of their Kings or even the war hero Lord Baratheon. He was said to forging the swords for Tobho and, even more surprisingly, was rumoured to be one of Flea Bottom’s own sons.

As Brienne forced her horse through the throng of smallfolk, traders and pickpockets, she caught snippets of the crowd’s conversation;

“Aye, I remember Gendry Waters well. Tobho used to send ‘im to me to buy all ‘is charcoal. I thought he was a dead ringer for King Robert even then…”

“Sheena the whore swears he used to come to ‘er for a fuck every Friday after ‘ee got his wages!”

Brienne bristled at that blatant lie. Gendry would never stoop to such depths. Not only did his looks ensure he had a constant stream of women prepared to give him anything he wanted for free, Brienne knew for a fact, he received only food and lodging for his labours as an apprentice. Tobho had never paid him, indeed she recalled Gendry telling her someone had paid Tobho to train him. Brienne was tempted to lean down from her horse and put an end to that malicious rumour, but to do so would only cause her further delay.

“She fucked his father too of course, but swears the son was the best she ever ‘ad!” the old crone cackled loudly, to uproarious laughter all around.

Brienne had to smile. If that was the worst the crowd had to say about Lord Baratheon, then Gendry was faring far better than most of the rest of the Lords of Westeros.

A wall of Jon’s personal Black Crow Guard ringed Tobho’s shop, good naturedly deflecting the crowd’s constant questions while ensuring the safety and privacy of those inside.

Brienne dismounted directly in front of Pyp, recognising him as the most senior Crow there. He gave her a surprised grin, which she was in no mood to return.
“I need to speak with Lord Baratheon now.”

“Aww, come on Brienne. Why do you think we’re here?” Pyp countered, deliberately keeping his tone light while standing his ground.

“To keep riff raff like you out!” the Crow beside Pyp butted in. A few of the other Crows laughed.

“Now!” Brienne repeated with force, drawing herself up to her full, intimidating height and looking down on the line of crows. Her hand went reflexively to her sword hilt.

“Woa!” Pyp call out, both his hands raised up as a dozen crows reached for their own swords. “Even you can’t expect to take all of us on and win.” Pyp said calmly while signalling to his black brothers to sheath their weapons. All his experience told him that the good natured crowd could quickly turn into a rampaging mob with little provocation. A scuffle between the Maid of Tarth and the Crows could easily be the spark that started a riot.

“‘Tis a matter of life and death,” Brienne hissed, “Otherwise I would not be here. It will be a matter of your life or death when Lord Baratheon finds out ‘twas you who kept me from saving the life of Lady Arya Stark.”

Pyp groaned inwardly. ‘Twas always the way with the Maid of Tarth; everything was so damn dramatic. Bloody women. They were far too susceptible to their emotions to be Knights in his opinion. You only had to look at Brienne and even Lady Arya to see the proof of it he thought with another, deeper groan. Still, he knew Brienne well enough to know that she would not leave without a fight and he didn’t fancy facing an angry Lord Baratheon if there turned out to be something in her life or death claims after all.

“Wait here and I will pass your message on…” Pyp muttered, before reluctantly heading for the door of Tobho’s shop. His black brothers closed ranks behind him.

When Brienne was finally ushered into the shop by Pyp, she was surprised to be confronted by the two Dragon Kings, rather than Gendry.

The air was hot and heavy with the smell of fire and metal. The rhythmic pounding of a hammer on steel echoed from the forge through to the front shop. Brienne could also hear the low drone of a voice, intoning words like a prayer, although the voice was too distant and indistinct for her to catch any of the words. Gritting her teeth, she resisted the urge to barge through to where Gendry was undoubtedly hard at work.

King Jon was pacing back and forwards behind the shop’s counter; a day’s growth of stubble darkening his jaw and shadows deeper than usual under his eyes. It appeared he had not slept recently either. In complete contrast, King Aegon looked as freshly groomed as ever, his hair shining like polished silver in the morning light.

Bowing low to her Kings, and then fixing them with her most intense stare, Brienne repeated the reason for her intrusion, “I have an urgent message for Lord Baratheon.”

Jon stopped mid stride, turned to her and snorted. Aegon folded his arms across his chest and gave her a cool smirk. He was standing in the doorway leading to the forge and ‘twas clear his positioning was deliberate, for he barred Brienne’s way to Lord Baratheon.

“I cannot interrupt him now. Whatever it is will have to wait,” King Jon said a tone that brooked no argument.
Of course Brienne was going to argue her message warranted an interruption, but before she could open her mouth, Aegon smoothly clarified Jon’s statement,

“My brother says he cannot interrupt Lord Baratheon. What he truly means is that he will not. Not for you Brienne of Tarth. Not for anyone. Not even if The Seven themselves appeared beside you and demanded it of him.”

Jon rolled his eyes at Aegon’s melodramatic explanation, but all the same he fixed Brienne with a steely glare and confirmed, “Aye. That is the way of it. Once Valyrian steel is being worked, the smith cannot stop until the job is done.”

’Twas clear to Brienne that she would not gain access to Lord Baratheon without committing treason of some kind and she was not ready to do that. Yet. Although she had been sworn to secrecy when she had undertaken Arya’s initial quest, Brienne felt that she was no longer bound by her vow to Arya. After all, Arya had lied to her and King Jon was Arya’s kin. Presumably once he understood the urgency of the situation, he would relent and allow her to speak to Gendry.

“Not even if Arya’s life depends on it?” Brienne demanded, bringing her fist down on Tobho’s shop counter with a frustrated thump.

Jon and Aegon traded sidelong glances. Aegon remained implacable, but Jon ran his hands through his already dishevelled hair in exasperation. Blowing out a heavy sigh, he asked,

“What in seven hells has Arya done now?”

“She has taken King Aegon’s sand steed…”

Upon hearing this, Aegon’s languid indifference vanished instantly. He took two steps forward, his hands now balled into fists at his side, his normally implacable face set in a furious grimace, purple eyes flashing angrily.

Jon placed a firm hand on his brother’s tensed bicep, as if to restrain him in case Aegon decided to vent his fury on Brienne. But she met his angry gaze with a grim, unyielding stare of her own.

“…and she rides for The Quite Isle, intend on killing The Hound.”


“Aye, if all she wanted to do was end his life,” Brienne braced both arms on the counter top, leaning forward as she tried to convey the utmost seriousness of the situation, “…but killing him in itself will not be enough. Not now. Arya has history with Sandor Clegane, and I do not profess to know the exact nature of it. All I can tell you is that she wanted him dead afore, but now he threatens her sister, ’tis beyond personal. Arya needs him to know ’tis her ending his life and why. She will not rest until The Hound is dead and Lady Sansa is safe.”

“The Hound threatens Lady Sansa?” Aegon asked incredulously, his anger over the theft of his stand steed seemingly forgotten, or at least overlooked for the time being.

“There is a debt that requires to be paid,” Brienne said darkly, “And he comes for it now.”

“What is the manner of this debt?” Jon asked quietly.

“Clegane would not say, although I pressed him repeatedly. I believe it to be of supreme importance to him though.”
“Then we must ask Lady Sansa and do our utmost to protect her!” Aegon declared animatedly and ‘twas now him who began pacing behind the counter of Tobho’s shop, his hands clasped firmly behind his back, as he considered how best to deal with this threat from the past.

Jon stood as if he were a statute, with the heels of his hands pressed to his eyes while Aegon paced. Brienne was forced to watch the two of them, her impatience growing with every wasted moment. She had never seen them both under pressure before. Individually yes, but never both together and she had certainly never seen King Aegon so impassioned before. Now, as she watched, Brienne realised they were as different as brothers could be. Ice and Fire indeed.

‘Twas Jon spoke first, calmly addressing both Brienne and Aegon. The later stopped his anxious pacing. “We can make plans and assist all we can, but it must be Lord Baratheon who goes to Arya.”

“But why?” Aegon demanded, “We agreed he cannot stop now.”

“And every minute we delay, Arya rides closer to The Quiet Isle,” Brienne added impatiently.

Jon gave a weary sigh. “Because Arya carries his child.”

Both Brienne and Aegon looked at him aghast.

“All the more reason for you to tell him now!” Brienne said vehemently as soon as she had recovered her composure.

“Not an option,” Jon declared with a shake of his head, “Besides, I think Arya should be the one to tell him and not me.”

“Seven buggering hells. He does not even know?” Aegon asked incredulously.

Jon shrugged. “I am not sure if Arya knows yet, or if she has admitted the truth to herself.”

“Then how do you know?” Brienne demanded, leaning still further across the counter.

“The Direwolves know,” Jon said, as if that explained everything.

Brienne looked to Aegon for assistance or further explanation, but he had turned his back to her in order to rest both his hands on Jon’s broad shoulders. Both men’s heads were bowed, their foreheads almost touching.

“Does Daenerys know?” Aegon asked his brother softly.

“Nae,” Jon said with a heartfelt sigh, “And I do not wish to tell her, for there is more…”

Jon’s silence seemed to stretch for an age; the hot, stagnant air broken only by the rhythmic pounding of Gendry’s hammer in the forge.

“…Nymeria is carrying too.”

Aegon raised his eyes skyward and took a long, deep breath before blowing it slowly out again.

“And Ghost is the sire of her pups?”

“Aye,” Jon admitted.

Aegon pulled his brother into an embrace, saying something against Jon’s ear so softly that Brienne could not catch it. Mayhaps Aegon offered words of comfort or support? But Jon’s slow shake of his
head seemed to indicate that he did not share his brother’s sentiments.

The whole Kingdom knew of The Dragon Queen’s failure to conceive and Brienne was no exception. However, the lack of a Targaryen heir was of no concern to Brienne now. After waiting what she considered a fair amount of time to let Aegon console his brother, she cleared her throat and asked, “So what do we do now?”

Aegon turned around as if he had forgotten Brienne was there until she spoke. With his brow furrowed, his purple eyes looked as dark as to be almost black like Jon’s.

“We do nothing until the swords are forged,” Jon said slowly as if speaking to a particularly simple child.

Brienne’s shoulders were shaking with frustration and her voice shrill with the effort of refraining from yelling at the two Kings, “But Arya has near a full day’s head start and a sand steed. We must leave now if we are to have any hope of catching her!”

“The Trident is five day’s ride from here, even on my horse,” Aegon said, a sly grin spreading across his face, “We have time enough still.”

“How?” Brienne demanded, leaning right across the counter until her face was mere inches from King Aegon’s.

“You forget … we have Dragons,” Aegon said with a delighted, mischievous smirk.

-o-

Three nights, nigh on four days and he was almost done. Although he could not remember sleeping, he must have done; maybe on his feet with his eyes closed, or slumped against the wall of the forge when Tobho took a turn quenching the new blades in the blood of Kings and Dragons.

Gendry’s arms and shoulders were beyond aching, beyond even pain. Ice was finished – lying gleaming in the fire light on the side of the forge. He had never seen the original Stark sword afore it had been destroyed on Tywin Lannister’s orders, but Tobho assured him the one they forged now was better even than the original. Dragon’s blood and spells from that ancient Valyrian book had worked their magic.

The blade shimmered in the flickering light and when Gendry held it, the sword felt alive in his hand; an extension of his will. He could not explain it, nor did he want to try. Images had come to him in waking dreams as he worked. At first he had tried to ignore them, but as he grew ever more weary, lulled into a dreamlike trance by Sam’s ceaseless intoning of the old tongue, Gendry had seen images of battles and Northmen, fire and ice, Direwolves and Dragons flickering in the flames and reflected in the metal he worked.

Now his own sword was almost done and it too felt alive under his hand. The fire had shown him unfamiliar cities under scorching suns, fleets of sailing galleys and battles fought on heaving waves, thunder and lightening rolling across stormy skies and the sea; always the sea. How he longed to see it again, with Arya by his side.

With a final, tremendous effort he hammered the plain hilt, moulded to fit his own hand, onto the Valyrian steel blade and ‘twas done. He laid his Baratheon sword beside Ice and finally, finally
closed his eyes.

“Magnificent,” he heard someone exclaim from behind him, but his head felt as heavy as an anvil and his arms like lead weights, swinging from shoulders carved from stone.

“Catch him!” was the last thing he heard as he fell into darkness.

When he awoke, ‘twas to the tones of a soft, feminine voice.

“Arya,” he mumbled, reaching for her and grasping only emptiness.

“Look, he wakes,” a woman who wasn’t Arya murmured.

“Shall I fetch a bucket of cold water?” a familiar voice who definitely wasn’t Arya asked.

Whispered refusals and reprimands with softer tones followed.

“But a bucket of water in the face will wake him in jig time!”

“Nae Brienne!” another, more commanding woman’s voice hissed sharply.

Seven buggering hells. He wasn’t sharing a bed with Brienne was he? Giving himself a shake, he opened his eyes, blinking in light that somehow told him ‘twas morning.

There were woman beside him all right; four of them, but none of them were the one he wanted.

“Where’s Arya?” he muttered, pushing himself up onto his elbows so he could better look for her, but by The Gods that hurt. He felt as if Brienne of Tarth had been sitting on his chest all night, trying to rip his arms off. Looking down at his chest he realised he was naked.

“Fuck!” he swore loudly. Arya really would kill him. He jerked the thin blanket up to check his lower half and saw he still had his britches on and mercifully no morning erection. Mayhaps the Gods were good after all. Falling back onto the pallet he cursed again as he closed his eyes. He couldn’t have got into too much trouble if he still had his britches on, he thought, sighing loudly with relief.

“Arya is not here,” the commanding voice said. He opened one eye a fraction and squinted up at Queen Daenerys.

“I see that,” he muttered, “But what are the four of you doing here? And where am I anyway?” He turned his head to the side, still with only one eye half open, to take a look around.

“You are still in Tobho’s forge.”

With a start he realised he was back in the store room he used to sleep in as a ‘prentice smith, only ‘twas empty, save for four women. Four women in his tiny room would have been a dream come true when he was a lad. However he was a man now and a Lord to boot and this room was far too small for the five of them, even though the bags of charcoal and piles of firewood that used to line the walls were all gone.

Enough was enough. With a great deal of effort, he swung his feet onto the floor and sat up. By the Gods, he felt as if someone had hit him about the body with his own hammer. He rested his elbows on his knees and ran his aching hands through his hair. His right hand merely hurt, but the left throbbed painfully. That would be the self inflicted wound, Gendry thought ruefully. It had seemed a
good idea at the time to remind bloody Aegon that The Smith was the son of a King too.

He was aware of the women crowding around him. Then Sansa appeared before his eyes, kneeling down on the floor directly in front of him. As soon as he saw the stricken look on her face he knew something was badly wrong.

“Tell me,” he demanded, gripping Sansa’s slim shoulders rather harder than he should have.

“She has stolen Aegon’s sand steed and gone to the Quiet Isle.”

He knew where it was and what it was - The Faith of the Seven regarded it as the holiest place in all of Westeros. But it was the last place he would have expected Arya to go. She was no would-be-septa. He could think of no one less suited to a pious life. The thought almost made him laugh.

“Why the fuck has she gone there?” he growled, searching Sansa’s face for the answer.

“To kill Sandor Clegane,” Sansa whispered, her face colouring and her eyes pooling with tears.

“Arya tasked me with finding him for her,” Brienne said bluntly. “Are you familiar with her list?” Brienne asked as Gendry turned his head to stare at his friend in disbelief.

“Aye, but that was years ago, when we were children.”

“I believe The Hound is the only one who still lives,” Brienne said, “and she lied to me about her intentions.”

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!” Gendry roared, making Daenerys, Sansa and Shireen wince. Brienne, being accustomed to such language merely frowned. “I thought we were past all that!” he yelled at no one in particular. He would have bellowed it at Arya, by The Gods, he would have shaken her until her teeth rattled if she had been there, but seeing as she wasn’t, the other four received the full force of his frustration.

“Listen to me,” Sansa said, her voice quavering with emotion, “’Tis not too late.”

Gendry turned his attention back to Sansa, still crouching in front of him.

“Sandor told Brienne he was going to come here, to collect a debt I owe him. Arya, fearing for my life, has travelled to The Quiet Isle to kill him.”

“And finally complete her list,” Brienne said with a shake of her head.

“But you must stop her. You must save Arya and you cannot let her kill him,” Shireen pleaded, wringing her hands.

“For the debt he seeks to collect is only a song!” Sansa wailed, “He saved my life after the battle of the Blackwater and I promised him a song. Only a song and ‘tis a debt I would gladly repay.”

“You must hurry,” Daenerys urged, “Aegon will take you on Viserion, but you must go now.”

Gendry looked from one anxious face to another and then to the next, struggling to comprehend what he was hearing. After all the promises she had made him, Arya did this?!

He had been as patient and understanding with her as he could and had already put up with much more then other man would have suffered. ‘Twas all for naught. The moment his back was turned, she was off risking her life, breaking her promise. Arya would not find him to be so tolerant again. She would play him for a fool no more.
He stood up so quickly he nearly knocked Sansa over. “Take me to this goddamn Dragon!”

Chapter End Notes

Dun-Dun-Duuuuu . . . see you Sunday!

Thanks (for almost the last time - sniff) to Brazilian Guy for all his time, specialist knowledge, hints and tips.
The Hound

Chapter Notes

(...and, before you all get excited, this isn’t the end. The weekend didn’t turn out like I planned. Instead of staying in and writing on Saturday night I went out and partied. Whoops! So sorry in advance. There will be more...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arya walked the exhausted sand steed to the water’s edge. Before them lay The Quiet Isle, but she was still separated from her goal by too wide an expanse of sea.

She had not been back to these lands since she had left The Hound to die under a tree by the banks of The Trident. If she had ever thought on returning, she would not have imagined it to be in order to finish the job she was too foolish to complete when she had the chance.

If she could not cross on the ferry, whether by arrangement or theft, Arya had hoped to swim to the island, mayhaps hanging on to Beauty’s saddle if the channel was too wide for her to swim alone, but ’twas obvious from a first glance that even that would not be possible. The Bay of Crabs narrowed here, funnelling the sea through the channel between the mainland and the island, creating treacherous currents visible even from the bank.

With a sinking feeling, Arya looked longingly across at the ferry tied up on the opposite bank. If Brienne spoke the truth, as Arya was sure she did, the ferry would not sail again until after the spring equinox. That only left her one option and ’twas the one Arya most feared – the Path of Faith.

With a final tug on the reins, Arya turned Aegon’s horse. “Nearly there girl,” she whispered to the weary sand steed.

Arya too was near the point of exhaustion. Having learnt from her desperate ride to Storm’s End, she had tied herself in the saddle in order to sleep without fear of falling, trusting the sand steed to keep to the king’s road and Beauty had never faltered once. However, once they left the king’s road, to follow the pilgrim road to The Quiet Isle, the road was no so wide and in some places little more than a rutted track. Arya had not allowed herself to sleep. With nothing else to do but wait for low tide, she intended to sleep now.

Arya could not understand why she was so tired, for she had slept more on the ride than she would have thought possible. Mayhaps ’twas because Beauty had the smoothest gate of any horse she had ever ridden. Mayhaps that soothing rhythm had been to blame for continually lulling her into sleep. But then was she still so tired? Arya could not remember being as bone weary as she was now. Every movement seemed to take so much more effort than usual. If she could sleep until the summer she would. But she had a job to do first. A dog to kill.

Arya had passed a few sorry looking travellers on the pilgrim road, some hauling their afflicted relatives on carts or sleds behind them. She saw now that a makeshift tent had been erected on this side of the crossing, presumably by one such pilgrim, while they waited for the ferry to take them to the island. With nowhere else to go, Arya headed towards the tent.

The dye Ty had hastily smeared over Beauty’s silver coat had long since been washed off but, even
filthy with the dust of the road, the sand steed was obviously no ordinary horse. Arya would need to tread warily. Beauty was probably the most valuable horse in the whole of Westeros and Arya had no choice but to leave her with a stranger. She would need all her skills to get her safely across the mud flats. Beauty deserved a better end than that; thrashing and drowning in quicksand if Arya led them astray. There was no option but to leave the sand steed on this side of the crossing. Either Arya would return on the ferry or not at all. If she did not, mayhaps Aegon would find his horse again. Arya hoped so.

Seeing only one forlorn aurochs grazing on the rough grass on the bank, Arya called out a greeting as she dismounted and stumbled on stiff legs towards the tent. Her greeting was returned and a grey head poked out from in between badly stitched blankets.

“I’m seeking information on the tides,” Arya said as she led Beauty nearer.

“Next low tide is at first light tomorrow, not that it’ll do you any good,” the old man muttered, “You need to believe, persist and follow to walk the Path of Faith. The first two is easy, ‘tis the third that’s the problem. No brother will come to lead us across until after the celebrations, so we’re stuck here meantime.”

Arya looked out towards the island. The sails of the windmill turned slowly in the breeze and sheep dotted the hills, but there were no signs of any men working the fields or fishing or of any men at all. Mayhaps ‘twas not just the ferry, mayhaps all work stopped during the equinox.

She would begin her attempt to cross at dawn. “I am looking for someone to take care of my horse for a while. I can pay of course,” she said to the old man who was still on his knees in the tent.

To her surprise, the old man’s face broke into a wide smile. He was missing teeth and his face bore the scars of a bout of the pox, but he had kind, twinkling eyes and Arya’s instinct was to trust him.

“I’ll not ask where you’re going. But if you ain’t back from wherever afore we leave, I’ll get the brothers to take your horse along with that aurochs ‘o mine. We ain’t going anywhere for a while yet.”

“We?” Arya asked as he old man climbed out of the tent with a creak of old bones.

“The wife and me. Took us longer to get here than I thought and we missed the ferry. Got to wait for the next one.”

Arya looked at the old cart beside the tent and the sad old aurochs and then back at the old man. No doubt there was a sick old wife in that tent. No wonder it had taken him longer to get here than he had expected.

“Who is it dear?” a tremulous woman’s voice called out from the tent.

“It’s a girl and her ‘orse dear,” the man shouted back, very loudly. The old woman must be deaf, Arya thought.

“Can I sleep under there tonight?” Arya asked, nodding towards the cart. It wasn’t much, but it would offer some protection from the wind and rain. I’ll pay for that too, of course.”

“No need to pay us dear. We got no need for coin where we’re goin’, but if you got a bit o’ food that’d be welcome.”

The only man lowered his voice, “My wife hasn’t got much time left. I’m hoping she can hold on until we get there.” He looked wistfully over to the Quiet Isle. “’Tis my fault for being so slow, but
we’ll need to make the best of it. Five winters we’ve been through together and we won’t see another,” he said with a heavy sigh.

Winter is coming, Arya thought with a shiver as she unfastened her bag from the saddle and handed it to the old man. Winter was always coming.

“There is not much left, but what I have is yours.”

The old man grinned that toothless grin again. “Thank you kindly. You’re welcome to squash in with us tonight if you’d like, rather than sleep out in the rough.”

Arya shuddered at the thought of sleeping in the tiny tent beside the old man and his dying wife.

“Thank you, but nae. I will leave at first light and would only disturb you. Here…” she thrust a gold Dragon at the old man, “This is for looking after the horse. She is called Beauty and if I do not come back, you must tell the man who comes for her that I promised you five more gold Dragons for her safe return. Nae. Tell him ten… tell him any number you want.”

The old man smiled sadly and shook his head, “No need for any ‘o that dear. Gold dragons don’t help you none when The Stranger is coming for you.”

“All the same, you must take it for looking after Beauty. She is very precious and deserves to go home. The man who owns her can afford to reward you handsomely. Believe me.”

But the old man still shook his head and still refused the coin. “I’d best be getting back to the wife. I don’t like to leave her for long.” he said, clutching the meagre bag of food to his chest. “Don’t know what I’ll do when she leaves me…” he muttered as if to himself, as he shuffled off.

Arya fought down the lump that rose in her throat and blinked back the tears pooling in her eyes. The old man’s love for his wife had shaken her, for it reminded her of Tobho and his wife, of her mother and father who never got the chance to grow old together and of Gendry and how much he loved her.

Arya had a cold, hard night huddled in her cloak under the old couple’s cart. While she listened to the old couple snoring peacefully together, she thought of Gendry. He would know by now what she had done and, for the first time, her resolve began to waiver. If only she had killed The Hound when she had the chance. She had thought to increase his suffering by leaving him to die slowly under that tree. She was young and inexperienced then. She would not be so foolish this time. But tomorrow, Myca’s death would be avenged, all on her death list would have received The Gift and Sansa would be safe. That was her only comfort during the long night.

Come the dawn, Beauty snickered softly as Arya planted a kiss on her silken muzzle. A man who loved a horse as much as Aegon loved Beauty could not be all bad, Arya thought as she tied the horse’s reins to the cart. She took a gold dragon from her pocket and left it where the old man would see it. Aegon would make sure the old man was properly rewarded. Mayhaps he would be so pleased to get Beauty back he would arrange for a Maester to attend to the old woman. Arya wished she had told the old man to ask for a Maester, rather than gold. She thought about waking him up to tell him and decided against it, for she might raise his hopes up for naught. What if Aegon did not come? But she knew he would. Gendry would come too, but by then ’twould all be over. One way or another.

Arya found a branch on the beach. Once she stripped away all the dried leaves and twigs, it made a
reasonable walking staff. Then she set off on her own Path of Faith.

In the grey dawn light, the pools of water on the mudflats looked like black pits that could swallow you up forever. The wicked were swallowed by quicksand she heard. Or drowned. Mayhaps The Seven would deem her to be too wicked to reach their holy isle and she would die here, with no one except an old man, his dying wife and a horse to hear her cries afore the mud claimed her. She flattered herself. ‘Twould not even be that many, for the old woman was too deaf to hear her. Mayhaps she could count the aurochs instead, she thought with a snort of self pity.

Near the bank, the mud was fairly firm, but as she walked out, she saw more pools, more seaweed and found the mud softer, the path not quite so clear. She tested the depth of the mud with her staff afore she took every step. Most times it did not sink far and she placed her foot there with confidence, but sometimes the staff sunk down too easily and when she pulled it out, she could feel the mud trying to suck it back, as if some monster below her feet was wrestling her for possession of the staff.

‘Twas slow going and the longer she stood in one place, the deeper she sank. Her jabs with her staff became more anxious as, if she took too long to find another firm foothold, her boots sunk up to the ankles in mud and she feared losing one of them, if she did not move faster.

‘Twas a hard, unpleasant walk for a water dancer. Arya laughed aloud, her voice echoing eerily over mudflats, at the irony of it and wished someone had taught her mud walking instead.

When she eventually saw a rock trusting up out of the mud, she headed for it with all the desperation of a drowning man swimming for a floating log. She sighed with relief when her boots finally set upon something solid. Only then did she lift her head to see how far she had come.

With dismay she saw that, by concentrating only on her feet, she had veered off to the right. The Quiet Isle was no nearer now than it had been when she set off. Looking behind, she seemed to have come no distance at all. The sun was now well above the horizon and she had made worse than no progress, for she was heading in entirely the wrong direction.

Shielding her eyes, she gazed out across the mudflats. Silver shimmered in the distance; surely sunlight reflecting off water. Had it always been there and had she simply not noticed or was the sea coming for her already? With a sudden, desperate dread, she realised she had never asked the old man when the tide turned. How long did she have? Once the sea came back, it would rush over these mudflats and cover them in no time at all. Did she have enough time to retrace her steps? Should she give up and try again tomorrow? If she pressed on, would she be another dead body for the Brothers to fish out of the water? Mayhaps The Hound would dig her grave.

That thought was enough to spur Arya on. She would not retreat, but ‘twas clear she could not continue in the manner she had begun. She would drown well before she made the other bank; there was no doubt about that. Damn seeking the Path of Faith. She would make her own way.

It seemed The Seven did not want her to reach their holy isle. They wanted her to die here but she was not ready to die today.

Arya took a deep breath, closed her eyes and called upon her Gods, The Old Gods, to help her now. She visualised the heart tree in Winterfell and ghost’s eyes and imagined Gendry’s love enveloping her.

Swift as a deer, calm as still water. She added ‘light as a feather’ to her silent prayer, opened her eyes, dropped her staff and ran.
Avoiding the pools was easy; her enemy was the treacherous mud between. If mud was her enemy, speed was her friend. If she was fast enough, if her feet were light enough…

Quick as a snake,
Swift as a deer,
Calm as still water,
Light as a feather,

She repeated her prayer over and over as she zigzagged between the tidal puddles, risking only the briefest of glances upwards to check where she was heading.

The words she repeated stopped her from thinking. She could not afford to think, her only hope was to trust her reactions, trust her instincts, trust her Gods.

Left, left, run, sharp right, run, run, run . . .

The mud tried to grab at her heels but she was faster;

Quick as a snake,
Swift as a deer,
Calm as still water,
Light as a feather,
Run, run, run . . .

She was not much more than half way across when she realised the tide was coming. If mud could not stop her, they would send the sea.

Silvery blue glittered at the edge of her vision, so beautiful, so deadly. Trying to distract her. Don’t think, just run.

Blood pounded in her ears, her heart hammered in her chest, and her breathing became ragged. The tide was sending out tentative fingers to tickle the pools. They seemed to shimmer and ripple as if they were giggling at her. Look at you. You think you can out run us? Stupid girl. Here we come . . .

With every little, teasing wave there was less mud and bigger pools. Here we come.

Don’t think, just run.

Her boot sunk and she fell as if she had been tripped. Her outstretched hands landed in deeper pools, splashing her face with salty water, making her blink and spit. Her knees sunk into the mud and her boot sunk deeper.

A gentle, mocking wave lapped against her knees and her wrists and suddenly there was no mud to see at all, only water surrounding her for as far as the eye could see and she was kneeling in it, sinking fast.

Got you. Told you we’d get you. Here we come…

Don’t think. Instinctively she rolled flat onto her back. The mud sucked at her hands, pulled at her
boot, but had to reluctantly let her go with a bad tempered squelch as she twisted her boot free. The ground was not so soft under her other foot. Scrabbling that way, she rose to her feet. The water had receded, but only for the moment. The next one was already on its way. The pools were bigger still, but she could see her path. You don’t have me yet, she thought with a grim smile.

Fixing the pathway in her mind she ran again, two steps forward, one to the left, forward, right…

Another wave came rolling in. Bigger, angrier and more anxious to stay. Still she splashed on through the water, now ankle deep in it. The water receded grudgingly and only just enough to reveal the higher points of the path, but ‘twas enough; the other bank was in sight.

Run, run, run . . . The next wave hit her calves harder and the tide pulled her back as if demanding she stay and never leave. She forced her way through and it relented, if only for a short while, clutching half-heartedly at her ankles before rushing at her again, more determined than ever, pulling at her knees, trying to drag her down.

Come back here…

“Never!” Arya shouted aloud as she pumped her arms and her legs harder and higher, sending salty sprays in every direction. She gritted her teeth, balled her fists and strove towards the bank. With a last, desperate, effort the tide came at her in a huge rush, knocking her from her feet, carrying her away. But she had the measure of it now and she rode the wave, kicking with her legs and grasping with her arms. Furious, the wave had to retreat yet again. But ‘twas only to gather even more strength for a final assault from which she knew there would be no escape.

Staggering once more to her feet and with only a moment to spare, Arya’s hands found land and she grabbed at it with everything she had, scrabbling towards it and onto it and away from the tide that thundered past with a final, wrathful roar, unable to catch her as she crawled up the bank.

Once she knew she was safe, she rolled onto her back and lay panting. Taking only the time she needed to catch her breath and thank her Gods, she made her way up the hill, past indifferent sheep on her way to kill The Hound.

-o-

Gendry had never ridden on a Dragon afore. Jon had offered, of course, but Drogon was not believed to be a reincarnation of Balerion the Black Dread for nothing and Gendry had long ago decided that he would stay as far away from Dragons as he could. Apart from anything they stank; of rotten meat, dragon shit, fire and death. However, having had no alternative but to get on Viserion if he wanted to stop Arya, he was converted.

Jon had long spoken of the freedom and joy to be found in soaring with the wind in your hair, the sun on your back and all of Westeros laid out below you. Jon said ‘twas like riding a horse designed for the Gods and Gendry now knew his friend was right.

After Gendry got over the initial panic of the lurching, near vertical take off and the mortification of having to hold onto Aegon (Gendry had initially, absolutely refused to do it, but Viserion’s first upwards leap had sent him clutching for Aegon’s waist like a babe for his mother’s breast) he was so engrossed in the views of King’s Landing, the army and everything below him, that he had even forgotten his wrath for a while.

Mercifully, conversation was almost impossible and apart from Aegon’s pointing out particular sights of note and Gendry’s one arm, now only loosely draped around Aegon’s waist (in case of sudden snapping lurches, which Viserion was prone to if some unfortunate bird failed to get out of their way...
in time) the two of them had been able to almost completely ignore each other for the whole journey.

Aegon had followed the king’s road north and when Gendry had seen the sparkling waters of the Gods Eye and then the broken fingers of Harrenhal off to the west, he knew ‘twould not be long until they reached The Quiet Isle.

The sea, which had disappeared hours ago, swung back into view. Craning his neck to see further over Aegon’s shoulder, Gendry realised that he was looking at the Bay of Crabs. He could feel Aegon shifting and moving as he directed Viserion with pressure from his legs and with the gilded rope around the Dragon’s neck, banking the Dragon so the swooped lower and more detail came into view.

Gendry was concerned about the landing. Just as the take off had thrown him backwards and sent him clutching for Aegon, so he suspected the landing would send him crashing forwards into Aegon’s arse, which he was very anxious to avoid. The close contact would be why Jon extolled the pleasures of riding “two up” with Daenerys, Gendry thought bitterly.

Apart from jumping off in mid air and risking breaking every bone in his body, Gendry did not see how such a ‘cosy’ landing could be avoided, for there was nowhere else to go and he had been dreading cradling Aegon’s arse with his thighs from the moment they took off.

The king’s road that had just looked like a dirt ribbon from higher up, now became a road again, with trees and ditches on either side. They were low enough now to make out fields and streams and farmhouses. The ruins of Saltpans and the sparkling ribbon of the trident swung into view and then away again as Viserion circled ever lower. Gendry leant to the left in order to look over Aegon’s other shoulder, straining to see The Quiet Isle. Viserion did not seem to appreciate the sudden shift in so much weight for he shrieked, causing Gendry to shudder and screw his eyes shut. Up close the sound of a Dragon’s angry shriek felt as if The Stranger was drawing his fingernails down the bones of your back while simultaneously thrusting an ice lance through your brain. Gendry resolved to sit as still as a statue from now on.

Aegon slapped Gendry’s thigh and, at first, Gendry thought Aegon was giving him a childish reprimand for moving and was about to slap him back and a whole lot harder, then he realised Aegon had been merely trying to attract his attention. Aegon was pointing to something. As they dropped through some damp, misty clouds, the Quiet Isle appeared like a vision below them. Aegon banked Viserion even harder, making Gendry’s stomach lurch uncomfortably.

They scanned the land below, seeing the Sept and the windmill that dominated the island, the stone wall encircling them and other, smaller buildings, the pathways, the white dots of sheep and the gardens. As they circled even lower, Aegon pointed again and Gendry could see people, still tiny from their vantage point so high up, but still, he recognised Arya as soon as he saw her.

-o-

She lay in wait, hiding behind a grassy hillock, still soaking from the sea, shivering, waiting.

The accommodation for the brothers and their bakery, brewery and all the other regular buildings were quite separate from the Sept and Arya hoped that would present her with the opportunity she needed. Arya knew the way of such places; living such a cloistered, regimented life, meant The Brothers had no time to themselves. Her opportunities to get Clegane on his own would be few and far between. She must chose her moment carefully, but she must also make haste for the longer she stayed here, the more chance there was of being discovered, both by the Brothers and by anyone else who had pursued her. So she waited impatiently, reciting her list for what she hoped would be the last time;
Weese, Dunsen, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling, The Tickler, Ser Gregor, Ser Amory, Ser Ilyn, Ser Merhn, King Joffrey, Queen Cersi and The Hound, The Hound, The Hound
All dead, save one and his time had come.
As the noon bell rang, calling the Brothers to prayer, they stopped their labours and formed a line, with the Elder brother at the front. Arya craned her neck as far as she dared to get a better look at the tallest brother limping at the back of the line. All the Brothers had the hoods of their brown and dun robes pulled up and there was nothing to distinguish amongst them, save their height and size. The Hound had stood taller than any man save his brother and Arya was counting on that rare height to reveal his identity.
As the brothers began their slow, silent walk towards the Sept, Arya could see that the last brother was indeed the tallest by a considerable margin. His shoulders were broad and his belly flat; unlike most of the other brothers who were as round as turnips and seemed to regard eating as a pious pastime. The tallest brother walked with a pronounced limp that would be in keeping with the injuries he had suffered when Arya had last seen him and left him to die.
The Hound’s weakness had always been gold and she hoped his greed had not been impaired by his time doing penance here.
Arya sought Needle, sliding it out from her boot and gripping it tight. Having Needle back in her hand reassured her. Needle had been her only link to Sansa and Jon and Winterfell through all the dark, lonely years. Feeling the northern metal in her hand had always been a source of strength and comfort and it was again now. Arya gripped the hilt tightly, seeking the reassurance it offered.
“For Mycah and for Sansa,” she whispered to herself as she got up and ran, in a crouch, to the Sept.
The brothers filed in, slowly, silently and with their heads bowed. She would have one chance at this; alert him to her presence too soon and all hope of a swift, silent kill would be lost.
The timing was crucial. After watching and counting the Brothers and the steps they took into the Sept, Arya sent a gold Dragon rolling to cross the path of the last Brother. She silently set another coin down at the corner of the building and shrank back into the shadows to watch.
Her timing was perfect. Just before he stepped into the Sept, the shining coin rolled slowly across the last Brother’s path. With his head bowed, staring at his feet he could not miss it. But what would he do? Arya was counting on The Hound following the lure of the gold. But would he?
Holding her breath, she watched as he stopped and bent slowly to pick up the coin. He held it between his thumb and forefinger, turning it this way and that in the light.
Take it, take it, take it, Arya willed him.
Either The Hound or The Gods heard her, for he slipped the gold coin under his robe and looked up to see from whence it came. The Brother before The Hound had entered the Sept. If her luck held, the doors would shut and ‘twould just be him and her alone outside.
Catching the glint of the second gold coin on the ground, he started towards it. Good, good, come on you dog…

She needed to get him far enough away from the Sept so that the rest of the Brothers would not hear the sounds of any struggle. Not that she expected there to be a struggle, but she would take no risks, for there would be no second chances.

Laying another gold coin down, she crouched and ran for the hillock she had first hidden behind. If she could get him beyond that, even if one of the Brothers came out of the Sept looking for him, they would not find him; at least until ‘twas too late.

She laid another gold Dragon in a prominent position near the crest of the grassy slope, where it was sure to be seen, and then retreated behind the hillock.

The Hound had appeared from around the side of the Sept and had the second coin in his hand. Come on, come on, just one more coin…

He looked up, searching for the gold and Arya had her first chance to see his face. The lower half was covered by some rag, but she would have known those black eyes anywhere, for they concealed a blacker heart.

Blood was pumping in her veins, her breath coming in short, rapid gasps as she tightened her grip on Needle.

When The Hound had the third coin, when he crested the hillock, she would strike. Quick as a snake, with a precise, powerful blow. He would not even see the end coming afore she drove Needle up under his chin, angling it back, and thrusting it deep. With the heel of her hand on the hilt for extra force, she would drive it up into his skull. There would be a resistance, a tug on her blade as she pierced bone and then she would feel the easy slide into his brain.

Arya had done it many times afore and knew that there would be a long moment afore he died, when he would look into her eyes and recognise her. There would be time for him to hear her say “For Mycah and Sansa. Valar Morghulis,” and then his brain would register the death blow and The Hound would breathe his last, slumping further down onto her blade. The momentum would make it easy for her to drag him over the hillock and down the other side, where she would leave him for the Brothers to find after their prayers. By which time she would be on the stolen ferry, sailing to the safety of the other mainland, leaving the Brothers with no way of following her until the next low tide.

Just one more coin…

And then it happened. They heard the sound of huge, leathery wings beating a nightmare rhythm, the air seemed to be hauled back and then pushed towards them with tremendous force. It could only mean one thing; Dragons!

The Hound looked up at the same time she did. She saw his head tilt back and his hood fall back as he looked to the sky. The ruined face was exposed. His expression changed from shock, to recognition and then horror as the shadow of the dragon fell upon them both.

-0-
Then all hell broke loose. All at once Viserion seemed to pause in mid air, rear, stretch his mighty wings and let loose a roaring, searing lungful of fire. As Gendry clutched at Aegon to save himself falling backwards, he saw flames from the sails of the windmill tear up into the sky as the dry canvas went up like a tinderbox.

As Aegon fought frantically to get Viserion back under control, Gendry twisted and turned, searching for some sight of Arya to prove to himself she was still alive. And then he saw them; the two figures moving, both running, with Arya in pursuit.

“Put me down there!” Gendry bellowed, grabbing at Aegon and jabbing his free arm downwards towards the figures already disappearing behind them.

Aegon managed to bank the Dragon again, loosing speed, losing height but they were coming in hard and fast and not where Gendry wanted to be.

“Back there!” he yelled uselessly into the wind, but Viserion already had his wings back, his great clawed feet unfolded and they were going down, whether Gendry liked it or not.

-o-

“Fire!” The Hound cried, his voice rough and hoarse but sharpened by fear. Ignoring Arya, if he had even seen her at all, he turned and plunged back down the hill.

Arya had to stop him afore he made it into the Sept. Scrambling up the hillock, cresting it and slipping on the wet grass as she ran down the other side she cursed every Dragon ever hatched and the men who rode them.

Flames from the burning windmill were already leaping high into the sky. More worryingly sparks and pieces of flaming canvas were streaming off the sails as they still turned in the wind and The Hound was already half way back to the Sept.

With instincts honed by years of training and killing, Arya knew the distance, their respective speeds, the target, the force and angle of her throw required as her arm drew back ready to let Needle fly. But then he did what she least expected him to do; he turned sharply away from the Sept, sprinting off towards the tight packed group of buildings. The Sept was made of timber. He feared it catching fire, she thought with the sudden clarity that always came with the chase. Arya instinctively knew he was seeking shelter. Somewhere he would be safe; away from fire and wood and Dragons. He had the advantage of knowing the terrain and all she could do was follow.

His stride was longer than hers and the limp had vanished. To her horror, she realised the gap between them was growing. A knife in his back at this distance would slow him at best and, if she misjudged the angle, even by a fraction, or if he turned again unexpectedly, Needle might glance off a shoulder blade or rib, literally landing at his feet. The Hound was not an enemy she wanted to face when he was backed into a corner with a blade in his hand.

Controlling her breathing and staying her hand, she focused on increasing the speed of her pursuit. The leather soles of her boots slipped on wet cobblestones, while his bare feet flew over them as if fear of Dragonfire had lent them wings. The distance between them lengthened further. And then he made it to the jumble of buildings. And then she lost him.

-o-

The landing was sudden and frantic and over before Gendry had time to register that the ground was rushing up at them far too fast or to think about staying away from Aegon arse.
“Get off!” Aegon yelled as Viserion, heaved himself to a stop. But Gendry was already clumsily sliding over the dry scales to get away as quickly as he could.

“What they fuck was with that fire?!” Gendry shouted as he scrabbled with his sword belt, which he had previously unfastened and slung over his shoulder.

“Let me take care of the damn windmill! You get Arya.” Aegon snapped back, gracefully slipping off the Dragon. “He’s never been that close to a windmill afore. I think he thought ‘twas another Dragon,” Aegon muttered defensively as he hastily began untying himself from the gilded safety rope.

Viserion was already eyeing a startled sheep and had begun dragging himself clumsily towards the animal that did not seem to have the good sense to run.

Letting the rope fall at his feet, Aegon started dusting himself off and said with a smirk, “But I think you enjoyed that overall. Particularly the landing.”

Gendry stopped buckling his sword belt and gave Aegon a searing look. Gendry knew he should thank Aegon for getting him here, seven hells he knew he should thank Aegon for a lot of things, but he could not bring himself to give that smirking horse’s arse, the satisfaction. Instead he did what any man who did not like being forcibly shoved against another man’s arse would do; he growled “Fuck off Aegon,” as he stomped away.

The sound of Aegon’s laughing uproariously behind him only made Gendry more determined never to thank that arrogant cunt or fly behind him ever again.

-o-

Arya was forced to stop running and start creeping, searching for her enemy, who might be hiding around the next corner. She ran in a crouch from one doorway to the next, expecting The Hound to lunge out at her from a doorway or from the shadows with every heart beat. Her senses strung tight as bowstrings, she hunted him from building to building, kicking open doors as she went, looking for any sign.

And then she looked up. The walls of the buildings crowding around her were of stone, but the roofs were made of thatch. Even wet, they would burn faster than wood. If The Hound would not seek shelter in the Sept, he would certainly not seek it here. Cursing her stupidity, she ran through the maze of buildings and out the other side, just in time to see the flick of the edge of a robe disappearing into a cave carved in the hillside. Unless that cave had another way out, she had him.

“Valar Morghulis” she whispered to herself as she started her advance towards the cave. Calm as still water she checked Needle, checked her sword and the blade hidden in her sleeve. Ready for the end game. Ready for the kill. And then, appearing as if from nowhere, Gendry was on that hillside; big and black and furious. The sword in his hand flashed with reflected fire. In one leap he was down and standing ready in front of the entrance to the cave.

“You want him. You’ll have to go through me.”

Chapter End Notes

So, NOT the end. Sigh. Believe me, I wanted to finish it as much as you, but I haven’t
been able to. I didn’t even have time to show this to BG!

Until next Friday…sigh…
Arya stalked towards him. She suppressed the surge of emotions that swept over her as Gendry jumped down to bar her way. Emotions made her weak and she had come too far to stop now.

Gendry was a formidable opponent. She knew he had held back when they duelled in The Red Keep and he wielded no slim, Braavosi blade now. Her eyes flicked to his new broadsword, drawn and ready. She acknowledged it with a grudged nod of approval and stopped just beyond striking distance.

“Let me pass.”

He knew that look on her face, for he had worn it often enough himself; ‘twas the cold, hard resolve and the deathly calm afore a battle. His expression darkened. His jaw tensed. “Nae.”

“Why do you care whether The Hound lives or dies?” she spat, “He is nothing to you.”

“I don’t give a shit about him. I am here for you.” To protect you from yourself, Gendry added silently, knowing how little Arya would like to hear that.

“For me?” She scoffed and then laughed, but ‘twas forced and hollow. “‘Tis only a dog I mean to kill. Now get out of my way.”

He slowly shook his head. This was not the Arya of Storm’s End, not his Arya. The girl who stood before him with the black, unfathomable eyes was the Arya he thought they had both left behind; the Braavosi Assassin, the lone wolf impatient for the kill who saw him merely as an obstacle in her way.

Remembering something Jon told him long ago, Gendry said softly, “When the cold wind blows the lone wolf dies but the pack survives.”

“Where did you hear that?” Arya demanded.

“I know your father used to say it. What would he think of you now Arya?”

“He would think I am saving Sansa!”

“By losing yourself? By hiding behind masks? By killing without a fair trial? I do not think he would like what I see.”

Gendry had never met her father, yet Gendry thought he could lecture her! How dare he. Presumptuous bastard.

She came at him in a furious rush.

Gendry deflected her first strike with a sharp crash of steel as their blades met. This close, his longer sword and greater size were no advantage and Arya knew it. Her blade flew, every one of her moves calculated and precise, seeking his weak spots; joints, tendons, arteries.

The Valyrian steel in Gendry’s hand seemed to respond afore he had even fully thought of his next move, whirling before him, blocking every one of her lightning strokes. Steel sang against steel,
grunts of effort came from them both and then in an abrupt, jarring crash, their swords locked above their heads and their eyes met.

Even with both her hands gripping her sword hilt above her head, Arya’s arms shook with the strain of holding him at bay.

“I would have helped you if you had only asked,” Gendry said, looking down on her as she struggled against him, searching for some sign in those hard, flat eyes that she was at least prepared to listen to reason. He found none.

Gritting her teeth, she spat, “I don’t need help from you!”

“You still think of yourself as a lone wolf?” Gendry demanded, “Then what am I? What are Sansa and Jon? What are Shireen, Daenerys, Lem and your Goddamn accomplice Ty?”

Arya did not answer; instead she narrowed her eyes defiantly and kicked out at his knee. Twisting to avoid her boot and growling with frustration, Gendry tensed his shoulders and shoved her away. Hard.

Arya staggered back, baring her teeth.

“We are your pack!” Gendry shouted at her, “Whether you want us or not! Whether you like it or not! And I’ll be damned if I am going to stand by and let you carry on with this…this…mindless revenge. Revenge will not bring any of them back!”

“You think I am interested in blood magic? This is not about bringing anyone back,” Arya sneered, her voice low and dangerous, “’Tis about keeping my sister safe and paying a debt. The Hound owes me a life.”

Arya stepped closer, her sword raised, her eyes as cold as northern steel.

“You think to keep Sansa safe, but what about you Arya? Who will save you from yourself?”

“Save me?” she repeated, giving him a slow smile that never reached her eyes, “’Tis too late for that. As long as Sansa is safe it matters not what happens to me.”

Her words hit him like a fist to his heart. She could dismiss him and everything they had shared so easily?

“How can you say that?” he asked, his blue eyes narrowed to angry slits.

“Get…out…of…my…way.”

With blood pounding through his skull he shook his head. Without further warning she lunged.

Gendry blocked Arya’s strike with the flat of his blade. His broadsword was still ringing with the impact as she sidestepped him, spinning away towards the cave.

It had been a feint; she had not meant to strike him at all. ‘Twas The Hound she wanted.

With a lunge of his own, his sword arm extended to full stretch, Gendry thwarted her advance. She had no choice but to retreat. For now.

Growling with frustration through her gritted teeth, Arya’s eyes flicked to Gendry’s new forged blade. He wielded it as if ‘twas an extension of himself. She had not thought he could have blocked her so quickly with a heavy, cumbersome broadsword, but ‘twas anything but clumsy in his hand.
The sword seemed to have a life of its own. Arya had assumed the flames that licked over the Valyrian steel were mere reflections of the fire raging behind her, but now, up close, she was not so sure.

“Mayhaps The Hound owed you a life once, but he saved Sansa’s,” Gendry pressed.

Arya paused in her advance to ask, “When?”

A gruff voice answered from the darkness of the cave. “I saved her from the mob in King’s Landing.”

The Hound stepped out from the shadows, brandishing a wooden table leg with part of the table top still attached. His eyes flicked from the burning windmill to Arya. He gave her a long look before he growled, “Your sweet sister would have been raped half a hundred times, but for me.”

“You can put your weapon down,” Gendry nodded to the table leg in The Hound’s hands while keeping one eye on Arya, “I won’t let her touch you.”

The Hound claimed he saved Sansa? Arya’s mouth twisted with disgust. If he had, ‘twas only for his own ends. Mayhaps The Hound expected to be rewarded with gold. Arya well remembered the dog’s confession of how he stood by and watched while they beat Sansa in The Red Keep and worse, that he wished he’d fucked her bloody then ripped out her heart. Aye, Arya remembered every vile word.

All Arya’s years of wishing The Hound dead were conveyed in the black, poisonous look she gave him. “Liar!” she spat as she sprang at him.

Gendry swung his sword at Arya’s head. She had no option but to retreat once more, but in a heartbeat she turned on him. She was quick as a snake, Gendry thought as he blocked her attack, but not swiftly enough to avoid the sting of her blade on his forearm. Gendry was not sure what stung more, her blade, or the fact that she had claimed first blood. He staunched the flow of blood with his left hand while Clegane laughed.

At least Gendry supposed the rasping sound The Hound made from the back of his throat was meant to be a laugh; it felt like a stab of cold down his spine.

“The she-wolf bites,” Clegane growled at Gendry, hefting his table leg higher, “But I see I have a champion. You’d better be good, as she’s a persistent little bitch.”

“Oh I’m good,” Gendry drawled, with a tight smirk aimed at Arya.

She met his gaze and curled her lip in a half smile that never reached her cold, grey, killer’s eyes.

“But call her a bitch again Clegane and I’ll let her kill you.”

“I’m going to kill him, whether you ‘let’ me or not,” Arya vowed to Gendry while glaring at The Hound.

“Nae.” Gendry shook his head and, ignoring the wound in his arm, raised his sword again. “Lady Sansa told me herself that Clegane saved her life. The debt is paid Arya. A life for a life.”

“I saved the she-wolf’s life too and this is all the thanks I get,” Sandor said almost conversationally to Gendry, but his tone became scornful as he turned his attention to Arya, “Forgotten about that, have you girl? I put my axe through a Frey knight’s head afore he could cut you in half and if I hadn’t knocked you out cold you’d have run into that bloody castle and would be just as dead as your
bloody brother and all your bloody buggering Northmen.”

Aye and her bloody mother, Gendry thought, feeling the scar Lady Stoneheart had given him pull as he gritted his teeth. Did Clegan speak the truth? Had he saved the lives of both Stark sisters? Gendry waited for Arya to confirm or deny it.

She hesitated and, as Gendry watched her jaw clench and unclench and her eyes flit from The Hound to him and back, Gendry knew Clegan spoke the truth. The Hound had saved Arya’s life as surely as he had saved Sansa’s, whether Arya was prepared to admit it or not.

“You killed Mycah!” Arya yelled abruptly.
“After all this time you still want to kill me for riding down that bloody butcher’s boy?” Sandor asked incredulously. “Been searching for me all these years have you?” he mocked, “I’m the last name on your bloody death list, am I?”

Clegane passed his improvised table leg weapon from one had to another and, seemingly satisfied ‘twas more than a match for Arya’s slim Braavosi blade, he took a step out beyond the cave’s entrance.

“You couldn’t kill me afore, even when I begged you,” The Hound gloated. “If you’re still dead set on killing me, come on! Let’s see if you’ve grown a pair of balls in those britches yet!” He beckoned Arya forwards with his free hand.

Had Gendry not been in the way, there was no doubt Arya would have had her blade at The Hound’s throat in a heartbeat. But Gendry was there, standing in front of her as immovable as a rock.

As Clegane revealed more of the past and Arya still hesitated, Gendry began to see things more clearly. Arya had the opportunity to kill The Hound years afore, yet she had not. Why? Because The Hound had saved her life, though Arya appeared to be ready to die rather than admit it.

If it had been only about revenge, surely Arya would have seized the opportunity then to strike another name off her list?

With an acute, blinding clarity, Gendry realised that Arya’s list, the prayer she had clung to for so long, was not about revenge at all; ‘twas a roll call of the people who needed to die afore she would be safe. Arya would never feel secure until every one of the people who had hurt her when she was a child was dead.

That was why their time together in Storm’s End had been so peaceful, so perfect; the castle had been her refuge. No one could harm her while she was there with him. Gendry cursed himself for a fool for not seeing the truth of it afore. Now he needed to make her see it too.

“No one is killing anyone,” Gendry said, stabbing the point of his sword into the ground beside him and leaving it standing there.

Arya drew him a quick, hard, contemptuous look. She obviously though him a fool for discarding his weapon, but at the same time was wary in case ‘twas part of some trap.

The two of them eyed each other as they each tried to work out how to end this to their own advantage.

The Hound watched everything that passed between Arya and Gendry wondering what the fuck was going on. Not that he cared much; all he cared about was staying away from that fire and, when the fire was out, getting off this bloody, buggering island. Still, he could do without fighting the she-wolf. Elder Brother wouldn’t like that and besides, she looked a lot handier with a sword that the last
time they had met. But with any luck he wouldn’t need to, for her Knight seemed hell bent on
stopping the blood thirsty little bitch. And, if Sandor wasn’t mistaken, that sword plunged into the
ground was made of Valyrian steel. Sandor already knew the she-wolf had gold and if this Knight
had Valyrian steel, he was certain to have gold as well and Sandor needed gold for what he planned.

“No hair off my arse if you kill each other,” Clegane said, making that sound again that was almost a
laugh. “Who’s your chivalrous Ser anyway?” he asked Arya, his contempt for Sers and their chivalry
clearly undiminished by his years on the Quiet Isle.

“You know who I am,” Gendry replied, his voice deadly quiet. “I was with the Brotherhood when
you fought Beric Dondarrion.”

The Knight with the Valyrian steel was one of those bloody outlaws? Sandor still burned at the
memory of his treatment at the hands of those buggering outlaw bastards. Even after he’d killed
Dondarrion in trial by combat they’d robbed him of his gold.

“You stole my gold after The Gods judged me innocent!” Sandor rasped, looking at Gendry, as if
seeing him for the first time; the black hair, the blue eyes, the Valyrian sword and the size of him.
Raking his black gaze up and down the younger man, The Hound’s eyes widened and he gave that
harsh laugh again, like iron scraping over stone.

“You’re a Baratheon! Seeing as Stannis wouldn’t sire a bastard and Renly couldn’t, you must be one
of Robert’s – the one the gold cloaks were searching for.” Sandor threw his head back and laughed
loudly. “King Robert’s outlaw bastard and Ned Stark’s little wolf cub. The Minstrels could write a
pretty song about that!”

“He’s not an outlaw any more you . . . you dog!” Arya spat, “He’s Lord Baratheon and he’s worth a
hundred of you!”

Gendry let a cold smile of acknowledgement curve his lips. So Arya still felt something for him after
all.

“And she is the curse of my life,” Gendry said with a bitter shake of his head.

“Bugger this!” The Hound growled, “What the fuck are you two going to do with me now?” He sat
down heavily on a stone at the entrance to the cave and let the table leg drop, but he was not fool
even enough to let go of it completely. “The she-wolf wants me dead and Dondarrion’s Baratheon bastard
won’t let her kill me. I’ll just sit here until you two fight it out shall I? Wake me up when it’s over.”

“Wake you up?” Arya yelled at The Hound, “I’m going to kill you afore you harm my sister!”

“What makes you think I’d want to harm her, you stupid little bit . . . girl?” Sandor asked, eyeing
Gendry warily, remembering the bastard’s vow to let Arya kill him if he called her a bitch again. “I
only intend to collect what she promised me,” Sandor smirked, the burned side of his mouth
twitching. “I’ve been stuck here silent long enough. I’ve unfinished business with Lady Sansa Stark.
She’s a sweet little bird, unlike her bloody sister,” he glared at Arya, “…and I mean to collect the
song I’m owed once I get off this bloody island.”

“A song! Arya did you hear him?” Gendry demanded. “The debt Sansa owes him is a song.”

“He’s a liar,” Arya hissed, pointing her sword at The Hound’s black heart.

“Why should I lie? Dogs don’t lie,” Sandor snarled, jumping to his feet again, brandishing the table
leg.
“You would kill him for a Goddamn song?” Gendry challenged Arya.

A song? The debt The Hound claimed was only a song? Arya hesitated, stunned and shamed. Sansa had never said, but in her haste she had not asked either. Arya forced herself to remember Mycah and her list. The Hound was a liar and would say anything to save his own skin. She launched herself towards him.

Gendry knew he was not watching Arya. He saw only the blind, mindless killing gaze of the Faceless Assassin charging towards him.

Instinctively Gendry grabbed the blade, the sharp edge of the Braavosi sword cutting into his palm, not yet healed from the forge. A searing flash of pain shot up his arm and, without a conscious thought, he brought his other fist up, crashing it into the underside of Arya’s chin. She staggered backwards and fell.

“Enough,” Gendry snapped angrily, clenched his right hand to staunch the flow of blood. He kicked Arya’s sword away and stood on the tip of the blade, so neither she nor Sandor could reach it.

As she looked up at him through wet hair, Gendry’s heart wrenched at the sight of her on the ground.

“'Tis over,” he said gently, dropping to his knees in front of her. “There is no need for you to be a lone wolf or hide behind a mask anymore.”

He held out his hand to her. “Let me be your pack.”

Arya could see herself and the flames reflected in Gendry’s blue eyes. He was looking at her in that way only he could; as if he understood, as if he could read the myriad emotions surging through her; anger, frustration, loneliness and the fear that she could not protect those she loved. Gendry made it sound so simple, but Arya knew it was not.

“Don’t look at me like that!”

“Like what?” he asked, his eyes never leaving hers, his gaze seeming to burn through her.

“Like you have the answer to everything.”

He let a smile tug up the corners of his mouth; for he was sure he had everything she needed.

Arya looked at his outstretched hand and gripped Needle’s hilt tighter in her fist. She had instinctively twisted to retrieve Needle from her boot as she fell and now kept it tight against her side, out of Gendry’s sight.

He gave her a reassuring smile for he suspected she was still wary, unsure. But he knew that if she accepted his hand, all would be well. “Take my hand Arya,” he urged.

Quick as a snake, Needle was between them, flashing in the sun, pointing at his throat.

The blue eyes that reflected fire, sky and her own treacherous face never flinched.

“Kill me then,” he said, making no move, “If this means so much to you … do it.”

Arya clenched her teeth to suppress the shivers that were threatening to wrack her body, now she had stopped moving. Why wouldn’t he fight her back?

His eyes dropped to the impending bruise on her chin where he had hit her. “Forgive me.”
“That is all you have to say?”

He smiled sadly and shrugged. “Since I first laid eyes upon Arya Stark on the way to The Wall, there has been no other for me but her. If she is gone, if all that is left is a Faceless Assassin, then do it.”

“You would just let me?” she asked, watching him intently, taking in the rise and fall of his chest, his still outstretched hand, the contours of his face that she knew better than her own.

“I love her,” he said simply as if that was reason enough.

Ignoring Needle, he lifted his outstretched hand to her face and brushed her bruised chin gently with the calloused pad of his thumb. When she did not turn away or stop him him, he tilted his head forwards, pressing his lips against hers; so warm, so familiar, like coming home.

Unable to prevent herself, Arya kissed him back as if she might never have the chance again.

Needle dropped, forgotten, between them.

-o-

While Gendry left to find and stop Arya, Aegon sprinted towards the Sept.

Gendry owed him for this, Aegon thought as he ran. Of course, he would have done anything for Lady Sansa Stark, but the damned Baratheon did not know that. So Aegon intended to enjoy extracting payment for the Dragon flight later. Truth be told, ’twas almost payment enough to have watched Gendry’s panicked scramble off Viserion’s back after that hard landing.

But thanks to Viserion, Aegon now had a burning windmill to deal with. The problem with Dragons was that they were so damnably unpredictable. Unless you happened to have a ship’s anchor handy to restrain them, Dragons could do whatever in seven hells they wanted. Who knew Viserion would have reacted so furiously to the sight of that windmill? Mayhaps Jon the warg would, but Aegon had seen only a windmill where Viserion had seen a threat and acted as Dragons do when threatened.

However, ’twas horribly predictable that, after a long flight, Viserion would be devouring a substantial portion of the island’s livestock. The problem with that particular, predictable behaviour was, if there happened to be a man or worse a child, in Viserion’s way, the Dragon would roast them too and there was not a damn thing Aegon could do about it. Carrying a hefty purse of blood money around was a necessity when you rode a Dragon.

Viserion would be content for a while, feasting and sleeping, leaving Aegon to fix the chaos the Dragon left in his wake, or at least try to.

As they circled above the Quiet Isle, it had not escaped Aegon’s notice that the Sept was made of wood and that all other buildings had roofs of thatch. You tended to notice such things when fire was an ever present threat. If the Sept caught fire, he would not be remembered as Aegon the Dragon King or Aegon the Victorious, but as Aegon the Sept burner. That was not the way he wanted to be remembered for all eternity. So there was nothing else for it – he must save the Sept.

Running at full tilt towards the windmill, King Aegon VI, the apprehensive, attempted to formulate his battle plan. Two of the windmill’s canvas sails were already ablaze, but Gods be good, the windmill itself was made of stone and there was no breeze to turn the sails. If the westerly winds had
been blowing, even he could not have saved the Sept.

As it was, drifting embers had already set at least one of the thatched roofs alight and still there was not a soul to be seen. Where in seven hells were the pious Brothers? No doubt at their incessant prayers when, if they truly wanted to save their souls, they would be far better served by filling buckets with water.

“Fire! Fire!” Aegon yelled at the top of his lungs as he sprinted towards the windmill. If the Brothers could not smell the burning, then surely they would hear him.

The windmill had five canvas sails, much like a ship’s, fastened to wooden poles by a complicated arrangement of rigging. If Aegon could cut the sails free, sending them plunging to the ground where the flames could be doused by the Brothers, then mayhaps he could save the Sept and his legacy. If the bloody Brothers ever showed up. “Fire! Fire!” he shouted again.

When he was almost there, Aegon pulled his knife from the sheath in his belt. Or at least he tried to. Nearly stumbling as he wrestled with the ornate sheath, Aegon eventually managed to tug the blade free with no little difficulty, for the jewels on the hilt kept catching on everything. Damn these frivolous ornamental daggers. He had chosen it that morn purely as its jewels matched the silk of his tunic, not expecting to have to use it while clambering up a windmill hacking at ropes.

With a last bellowed warning, Aegon took the blade between his teeth and leapt for the nearest sail. Although ‘twas still a good few feet above his head, he grasped the pole at the first attempt. However the wooden frame creaked and rocked ominously back and forth under the impact of his weight. Aegon prayed he did not end up spinning around like a ball on a training carousel.

As he began to haul himself up, hand over hand, he remembered old Griff yelling instructions at him as he chased that damn carousel during his cavalry training days. Aegon wished Jon Connington was below shouting instructions and encouragement to him now. Strange. He had not thought on the old man in years and yet ‘twas Griff’s grim face that came to his mind now, half way up a bloody windmill.

Mercifully, each sail was only fastened to the pole in three places. Aegon cut through each tether as he climbed. At least the dagger’s blade was razor sharp and Aegon was able to saw through the rope, while hanging one handed, without too much difficulty.

As the first sail fell in a crumpled heap on the ground, Aegon judged the distance to the next pole. He tried to reach across, but ‘twas further than he could stretch. He would need to jump across; no small feat on a swinging pole so high above the ground. Fall and he might break a limb, but if he fell, the Quiet Isle would burn. ‘Twas nothing else for it. Clenching the knife between his teeth, Aegon The Hopeful mumbled a hasty prayer to The Warrior and leapt.

He caught the next pole easily, but the sails shuddered and swung afore rocking to a halt again. At least he could hear finally panicked cries below; the Brothers had finally woken up to their danger, but Aegon had more pressing concerns than hailing those below. A smouldering ember had landed on his shoulder. He smelled the burning silk afore he felt it, but he was nearly through another tether and, by the time the sail fell free, his silk jerkin was burned through and his skin pulsed with the heat of the fire.

Using his hand to smother the smouldering silk, Aegon risked a look up. Seven buggering hells. Flames from the sails were licking high into the air and cinders floated in the smoky air, dancing and twirling in all directions like some snow storm from hell. He needed to work faster.

The next sail was fully ablaze. Once he made that leap, Aegon’s fate was in the hands of the Gods.
He glanced down to see a chain of Brothers frantically passing buckets from one to the other to be emptied in a rush upon the burning thatch. Aegon realised with deepening horror that two of the roofs were already ablaze. He craned his neck around to see the Sept and let out a deep breath he had not even realised he was holding when he saw ‘twas safe. Untouched. So far.

“Get down from there you fool afore you kill yourself!”

Aegon shifted again in order to see who hailed him from below. The Brother was large and well built and showed no sign of fear or panic. Aegon would have taken him for a fighting man had he not also worn the habit. This must be the Elder Brother.

There was no time for introductions or explanations. King Aegon The Mischievous could not help himself; he gave Elder Brother a jaunty wave afore taking the blade between his teeth and jumping again. He heard a collective gasp and then a relieved release of breath from the Brothers below as he made the next pole.

With flames licking at his sleeves, Aegon began freeing another sail. As he sawed through the rope, he was aware of flames encroaching on all sides and of Elder Brother bellowing order upon order upon order at the Brothers below. Aegon knew his type too well to mistake Elder Brother’s reaction to the crisis for anything other than experience of battle. But Aegon had no time to ponder that mystery further for his clothes had caught fire. Such a waste of fine tailoring he thought, as the fire playfully licked and then greedily devoured the finest silk in all of Westeros.

From their anxious cries, Aegon knew the Brothers presumed him a dead man. There was nothing he could do about that; he had to hope the Elder Brother was as able a commander as he seemed and would continue to douse the thatched roofs and not give up the fight. All Aegon could do was prevent more embers falling from above.

In the midst of it now, he was engulfed by the fire’s angry roar. There was no respect from or quarter given by the flames, even to a Targaryen King. How dare you not burn? and, Who are you to defy me? Aegon imagined the fire saying as it flared, leapt and spat around him. But this Targaryen did not burn. Aegon imagined Jon Connington nodding his head, a proud smile playing on his lips as another sail fell, streaming fire and smoke, cinders and ashes, to the ground below.

Before it landed in a flaming heap, King Aegon Targaryen the sixth of his name (but the first to ride a Dragon since his namesake, Aegon III, known as Dragonbane) was already sawing through the ropes that held the last, burning sail.

As that fell, Aegon allowed himself to look to the Sept. Through the drifting smoke he saw it still stood, untouched by the fire. He allowed himself a smile. Nae, ‘twas not as ‘Septburner’ he would be remembered.

Hanging from a burning pole, afore dropping to the ground, Aegon landed steady on his feet, his knees flexing to absorb the impact. His clothes were gone, burned clean away, leaving him naked as his first name day, with his sword in one hand and a jewelled dagger between his teeth.

The air was thick with smoke, drifting from the crumpled sails and recently doused thatch. With the remnants of flames licking over his body, Aegon raised his hand and watched in fascination as blue and orange flames twirled and danced across his palm, only to be extinguished like stars faced with the morning sun when he clenched his fist.

Then a torrent of water hit him square in the face, on his torso and, most shockingly, between his legs. A torrent of vicious and blasphemous oaths quickly followed from Aegon’s lips.
Still cursing with the shock of it, he pushed the soaking strands of silver hair out of his eyes. Half a
dozens Brothers in their drab brown robes, all streaked with soot and ash, stood before him with
empty buckets in their hands.

“We…we…thought you were on fire,” the nearest one stammered, eyes wide with shock.

“I was,” Aegon confirmed, doing his best to sound regal and magnanimous and not curse these damn
Brothers and their cold water to the seven hells and back.

“Kneel afore your King!”

The order was barked by the Elder Brother, pushing his way through the astonished Brothers who
were, all at once, dropping to their knees.

As the smoke swirled and cleared, Aegon saw many more of them all stopping in the midst of work
to kneel as their leader commanded. There was no doubt left in Aegon’s mind that the man stalking
towards him had once been a Knight at least and mayhaps even a Ser; born to command.

“King Aegon Targaryen, the Brothers of the Quiet Isle are at your service and in your debt,” Elder
Brother said, his voice loud and strong but, Aegon was pleased to note, tinged with awe.

Elder Brother dropped to one knee and adopted the Knight’s position of head bent, one hand fisted
behind his back. Aegon had not been wrong in his assessment of the man.

“Arise Elder Brother,” Aegon said, motioning with the dagger he had removed from between his
teeth, only to find he had nowhere else to put it.

As the man got stiffly to his feet, Aegon realised that he was older than he looked. While his eyes
were still full of the vigour of life, the grey in his hair was not merely ash and his movements spoke
of stiff joints and mayhaps old battle injuries.

“Your bravery and that of your brothers saved your Sept. I shall pray that the Seven bestow their
blessing upon you and your endeavours on this sacred isle, for they have tested you and you have
triumphed this day.”

Aegon thought it best not to mention Viserion yet; unchained and hungry on the other side of the hill.
Aegon had no doubt these holy men would prefer to believe such a near disaster was a test imposed
by the Gods, rather than an accident caused by a damn Dragon spoiling for a fight with their
windmill. However, Aegon already knew Elder Brother suspected the truth. These days, where there
were Targaryens, there were likely to be Dragons and Elder Brother had recognised Aegon as a
Targaryen straight away.

Elder Brother nodded piously and expressed his thanks for the blessing, then, to Aegon’s surprise, he
said, “Mayhaps the Iron Throne would extend its blessing by assisting with gold to replace all we
have lost?”

Aegon chuckled. He had to admire the Elder Brother’s nerve. His King stood afore him naked and
wielding two blades, and still the man still had the guts to ask for gold.

“I had a purse with which to grant your request,” Aegon made a show of twisting his hips and
looking around his person as if for the missing purse, “…but alas I seem to have mislaid it. However,
in recognition of your loss all the gold Dragons you find that may have fallen from my…ah…person,
are yours to keep.”

Elder Brother’s grin was so wide that Aegon found it to be quite infections and matched it with one
of his own.

“My Brothers will deal with clearing up. May I offer you our hospitality and some…clothing Your Grace?”

It did not bother Aegon in the least to parade around naked, but Arya was presumably around here somewhere and, judging by the surreptitious, longing looks some of those Brothers were giving him, Aegon’s continuing to remain unclothed might be a temptation too far for some of the holy Brothers.

“Very well,” he agreed, slapping Elder Brother’s broad shoulders. “I have never worn a Brother’s habit afore and I do like the idea of appearing to be a pious man. Let us go and find out if drab brown-and-dun suits me!”

Chapter End Notes

So, later than I thought, shorter than I hoped, but here it is. That was the hardest chapter so far and I think Brazilian Guy was getting as fed up with me as I was with this chapter. Sorry buddy and thanks for turning me around and pointing me in the right direction.

I’m not going to bother saying when this will end as I hate breaking my promises. Just look out for more – Fridays or Sundays and know the end is just around the corner.
Two weddings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As they walked towards the smouldering huts, Aegon thought he had best broach the delicate matter of the hungry Dragon beyond the hill and the reason for his visit with the holy man walking beside him.

“I must seek your forgiveness Elder Brother, for I am not in the habit of arriving unannounced,” realising he had just made an unwitting joke, Aegon started to laugh, “Habit! I talk of being ‘in the habit’ yet I am naked as newborn babe!”

“So I see Your Grace,” Elder Brother said solemnly, acknowledging, but pointedly averting his eyes from, King Aegon’s state of nakedness.

Aegon decided Elder Brother was not a man who appreciated japes and he had better stick to the original plan; bring Gendry, stop Arya, save The Hound, find his Goddamn horse and get the hell off this holy isle and back to his familiar, debauched life as quickly as possible.

After his mission was accomplished, Aegon would return, triumphant, to Lady Sansa. Mayhaps she would show her appreciation he thought with a smirk. But afore he could fantasise about the many, many ways he would like Sansa Stark to thank him, he still had to get off this island, which meant keeping himself and The Hound alive and keeping Viserion from burning the whole damn place down.

“I regret I cannot tarry,” Aegon said to Elder Brother, hoping he sounded like he meant it, “And I am sorry I descended upon your holy order unannounced, but circumstances demanded it. Circumstances that also demand I depart as soon as possible.”

“I hope you will not think me rude, Your Grace, but as protector of this Quiet Isle, I am wondering what brought you and a Dragon here at this most holy time.” Elder Brother asked with a probing sideways look.

Damn, he knew about Viserion. Elder Brother was proving himself to be every bit as astute as Aegon had feared.

“Well, . . . ah…” Aegon started and then paused. For once, he was lost for words.

He had not expected to have to explain his mission. King Aegon Targaryen was not used to explaining or justifying anything he did to anyone and this particular matter needed to be handled with particular delicacy. While he might be vain and self serving, Aegon was no liar and he would not endanger his immortal soul by telling Elder Brother an outright lie. However, telling the holy man the truth; that Arya had come here, hell bent on killing one of the holy Brothers and that Aegon had brought her lover to stop her, seemed overly dramatic. If Aegon had gone on to say that the girlish would-be-killer was really a Faceless Man and a pregnant one no less and that the man Aegon had fetched to stop her was the bastard son of the King Robert, who had murdered his own father a few miles away in the shallow waters of the Trident, then the whole story took on a surreal quality.

Nae, he could not tell it like that. ‘Twas bad enough that the man Elder Brother harboured these past years, the man Arya had come to kill, was the brother of The Mountain; the beast who had raped and killed Aegon’s own mother and supposedly killed Aegon himself.
With a heartfelt groan, Aegon decided to keep his explanation simple.

“...’Tis a matter of the heart. My friend pursues his runaway love.”

Damnation! But had he not just referred to Gendry as “my friend”? See you fool! See where weaving a tangled web of lies leads you? Aegon had to suppress the urge to spit on the ground.

“A matter of the heart eh?” Elder Brother asked, obviously intrigued, “And his love is here, on the Quiet Isle?”

“Aye,” Aegon confirmed with a sigh, “The fool is in love and Gods help me, I serve my own interests by bringing him here.”

Elder Brother stopped walking and very slowly turned to face Aegon, his expression grim.

“The Faith of the Seven, will not condone man love, even for a King.”

“What?!” Aegon gasped, horrified by Elder’s Brother’s suggestion that he might be . . . with Gendry . . . argh, ’twas too awful to contemplate. If he chose to indulge in man love then ‘twould not, under any circumstances, be with Lord Baratheon.

“A woman Brother! My friend pursues a woman!”

“There is a woman here? On the Isle? During the Equinox?” Elder Brother looked even more appalled by that prospect than by man love. Quickly recovering his composure, the holy man, narrowed his eyes suspiciously, “Is it that damn Maid of Tarth again? I have told her afore; the one she seeks is dead.”

Aegon could not stifle another groan. “Nae, ‘tis not Brienne. Come, the she-wolf can tell you herself.”

Elder Brother almost chuckled, “I did think the idea of a man pursuing The Maid of Tarth for love rather improbable.”

Aegon rolled his eyes, thanking The Gods that Brienne and Jaime Lannister were not able to hear this conversation. He started walking towards the smouldering huts again. “Afore we seek my . . . ah . . . friend and the she-wolf, you mentioned a habit?”

Elder Brother produced a threadbare, but long enough, dun-and-brown robe from one of the less damaged huts.

Aegon sniffed it suspiciously. Mercifully it only smelled of smoke. Had it smelled of another man, he would have eschewed it altogether, but at least ’twas clean.

As it was, Aegon became increasingly irritated as he attempted to fashion the hood and rope in some way other than the traditional cowl and belt arrangement. Not surprisingly, he failed. Even with his fine figure and his sword and dagger stuck in the rope belt, he looked depressingly similar to every other man who had ever worn the habit, and Aegon Targaryen did not like to look like every other man.

Elder Brother did not seem impressed with Aegon’s efforts either, as the older man had sat down some time ago to wait on his King.

“I confess, I hoped you had another reason for visiting us,” the holy man said as he watched Aegon retie the rope belt for the second time, hoping for a more satisfactory outcome.
“Oh?” Aegon asked disinterestedly, as he fiddled with his belt, unable to think of any reason whatsoever why he would wish to visit The Quiet Isle. An island inhabited only by men! ‘Twas surely the most Godforsaken, boring place in the whole of Westeros. Even The Wall had its share of wilding women afore their Dragons melted it and turned a good portion of The North to mud. Nae, The Quiet Isle was no place for a Targaryen and Aegon intended to leave as quickly as he could, never to return.

“I fought for your father at The Trident,” Elder Brother said quietly as he watched Aegon with unfathomable eyes.

That statement certainly got Aegon’s attention. “Ha!” he exclaimed, “I knew it!”

Elder Brother looked askance at him. “You did?”

“You have the bearing of a fighting man. I am sorry . . . well, I am sorry things did not turn out as you hoped. As any of us would have wanted.”

Although Aegon had never tasted real defeat, he could well imagine what it was like to be crushed under the heel of a tyrant like Robert Baratheon. The Gods knew Aegon would strive until his dying breath to avoid that feeling.

“I knew you would come one day.”

‘Twas Aegon’s turn to show surprise as he asked “You did?”

“To pay your respects at your father’s graveside.”

Aegon stopped dead and had to place his hand against the wall of the hut to steady himself. “My father is buried here?”

“Aye. In the far corner of the Sept yard. The Brothers did their best with the stone, but ’tis a humble marker for such a Prince.”

“But . . . I assumed . . . I am not sure what I assumed,” Aegon said, turning away from Elder Brother, so the older man was not witness to his shock and confusion. Aegon’s hands shook as he dragged them through his still wet hair. His father. Buried here, when Aegon had just thought to himself ‘twas no place for a Targaryen.

Taking a deep breath and making a great effort to compose himself, Aegon turned back to face Elder Brother. “If I assumed anything, ’twas that his body was burnt as should be the way with Targaryens.”

Elder Brother sighed and shook his head. “Robert Baratheon would not allow it. A final victory over your father I suppose. As part of the surrender, your father’s bannermen managed to negotiate that the body should be brought here by boat, ’tis not so far after all and the Brothers arranged the burial in the light of The Seven.”

“Were you one of those knights?” Aegon asked, desperate to know more, to seize and explore this link to his past.

Elder Brother gave a slow, apologetic shake of his head. “Alas nae, I was grievously injured in the battle and washed up here some time later. ’Twas months afore I was well enough to learn of your father’s fate and, by then, the knight I had been was dead and . . .” he spread his hands wide and smiled serenely, “. . . reborn in the light of The Seven as you see now.”
Aegon was in no mood to listen to Elder Brother’s tales of death and rebirth unless they involved his father.

“I must see him now,” Aegon declared, striding towards the door, all thoughts of his appearance instantly forgotten.

“As you wish Your Grace,” Elder Brother said as he rose stiffly to his feet, “but afore you go, I must ask where your Dragon is.”

Aegon paused on the threshold of the hut. “Viserion is hungry and on the other side of that hillock yonder, so I suggest you avoid him. However, you have a more pressing problem; the grave digger you have been harbouring for years – he is The Hound, is he not?”

If Elder Brother was surprised by King Aegon’s question he did not show it. “Was The Hound,” the holy man replied, “The Hound is dead and my Brother was reborn in . . .”

“…in the light of The Seven,” Aegon finished for him, rather more sarcastically than he had intended. It made no matter to Aegon who or what The Hound was now, as long as he was delivered back to Lady Sansa in one piece. “One of the Faceless Men has come here to kill him; save this assassin is not a man, although she dresses like one. I would avoid her too if I were you.”

Elder brother’s eyebrows shot up with surprise.

Aegon was not about to attempt to try to explain Arya any further. He was becoming more impatient with every passing, wasted moment. “The man I brought with me is Lord Baratheon, who for some incomprehensible reason loves her and is hell bent on stopping her. He is the very image of his bloody father, so you’ll not mistake him.” Aegon said dryly.

“Good luck with all that,” he added over his shoulder as he strode off towards the Sept and his father’s grave.

-o-

As Arya clutched at Gendry the tears began to flow. ‘Twas over. One way or another, ‘twas done. He was right; she should not kill The Hound.

Arya had tried to drive Gendry away much as she had driven Nymeria away. She had thrown rocks at Nymeria and she had hurled abuse and worse at Gendry. She had deceived him, broken her promises, even held Needle to his throat and, despite it all, he had not given up on her. He was here, big and warm and solid.

“Arya, I know,” Gendry murmured as he held her sob wracked body tight to his. He did not say anymore. He did not need to. He knew her better than she knew herself.

“Bugger!” Sandor exclaimed from behind them, “Here comes trouble.”

Gendry looked up to see a Brother with steely grey hair and the unmistakable air of authority striding towards them. Gendry rose from his knees to standing, dragging Arya up with him while still holding her firm against his chest.

“Who is he?” Gendry asked Sandor.
“Elder Brother. Used to be a knight. Takes no shit... saved my life.”

“I see,” Gendry muttered, and he did. ‘Twas obvious the man who was almost upon them had been a fighting man in a previous life and he looked as if he was spoiling for a different kind of fight now.

Elder Brother regarded the two newcomers with great interest. King Aegon had been correct; no one who had ever seen Robert could mistake his son for anything other than a Baratheon. He was Robert’s very image, save for his expression which was calm and vigilant, with none of the oafish arrogance that had characterised his father.

To Gendry’s surprise, Sandor bowed his head in deference as Elder Brother approached. Although no words passed between the two men, ’twas clear Sandor held the former knight in high esteem.

“Give Lord Baratheon back his sword,” Elder Brother said in a voice that made it clear he was used to giving orders and having them obeyed.

Gendry turned his head sharply towards Sandor, only to see him guiltily slide the Valyrian steel out from under his habit. Did the fool really think the loss of Valyrian steel would go un-noticed?

Sandor petulantly stuck Gendry’s sword back in the ground from where he had stolen it. Gendry glared and Elder Brother nodded in satisfaction.

“Welcome to the Quiet Isle,” Elder Brother said to Gendry. Lord Baratheon gave the holy man a slow, assessing look up and down.

As Elder Brother knew his name, Gendry assumed Aegon had spoken to the Brother; no doubt to blame Gendry for burning half the island down.

“I very much regret the damage caused. I hope no lives were lost?”

Elder Brother solemnly confirmed all the Brothers were safe and accounted for.

“I shall make good the damage caused,” Gendry vowed, hoping the Stormlands’ depleted coffers could bear the cost, although ‘twas Aegon’s damn Dragon’s fault.

Elder Brother waved Lord Baratheon’s offer away with a meaty hand and a surprisingly gracious smile, “There is no need. King Aegon has left a generously payment of gold.”

Gendry was dumbstruck upon hearing that. Aegon was well known for being mean with his funds, unless ’twas to clothe himself, in which circumstances his purse was bottomless. The finest silk from Qarth, lace from Myr or ornate armour from Tyrosh; if Aegon wanted it, he bought it. Yet Aegon had already compensated Elder Brother. Gendry muttered something indecipherable in relief.

Elder Brother assessed the assassin held tight against Lord Baratheon’s chest with shrewd eyes. Mud from the bay clung as high as the thighs of the assassin’s britches. That could only mean one thing; the Walk of Faith. Some believed sufficient piety was enough to complete the walk, but Elder Brother knew differently. If you had neither a guide nor years to memorise the route, the mudflats were impossible to cross, yet this assassin had crossed them. Were the Faceless Men really as skilled as the legends claimed? With an uneasy shudder, Elder Brother wondered if Faceless Men could really walk upon water.

Had King Aegon not warned him ‘twas a woman dressed as a man, Elder Brother might have been fooled, for the assassin was tall, lithe and with hair shorn short, but the assassin’s clothes were wet and clung to hips that no man ever possessed.
Anxious to see one of the infamous Faceless Assassins for himself, Elder Brother asked Lord Baratheon, “Am I to be introduced to your . . . companion?”

Reluctantly Gendry loosened his hold on Arya, knowing how much Arya would hate for anyone to see she had been crying.

“Eder Brother, I present My Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell,” Gendry replied warily, wrapping one arm around Arya’s waist, finding her hand with his, lacing their fingers together, wanting to reassure her, not wanting to let her go.

With a final sniff and not afore she drew the back of her free hand under her nose, Arya turned slowly around to greet Elder Brother.

He could not keep the shock from his face. He had not been expecting a Lady of noble birth and certainly not a Stark of Winterfell. Elder Brother had been expecting the Faceless Assassin to be battle hardened, scarred or, at the very least ugly. Instead his stunned gaze was met by a strikingly beautiful, very vulnerable young woman who seemed loath to leave Lord Baratheon’s embrace and who had quite clearly been crying. As their eyes met he was instantly transported back to his days as a young knight in Prince Rhaegar’s army. Elder Brother had only seen Lyanna Stark once, clinging to Rhaegar much as Arya Stark clung to Lord Baratheon now, but even that had been enough to enchant a young knight and he carried the memory with him still.

Elder Brother bowed low to Lady Stark, partly because old habits died hard, and partly to hide his astonishment. Not much surprised him, but she did. Ned Stark’s daughter had joined the Guild of The Faceless Men. Had it not been for the fact that King Aegon himself said ‘twas true, Elder Brother would not have believed it possible, for so many reasons.

“If we could impose upon your hospitality and stay tonight, we would be grateful,” Lord Baratheon said as Arya shivered against him. Gendry needed to get her out of those wet clothes and he had plenty he still needed to say to her. In private.

As Elder Brother straightened from his bow, two pairs of eyes watched him, waiting on his answer; the blue of the sea and the grey of the north. He sighed. If he wanted them to leave the only way was by ferry and the tides were not conducive for a crossing to the mainland and back afore nightfall. If he let them stay, he would have a woman on the isle at the Equinox. But Elder Brother was a pragmatic man. She was here and the best he could do was remove her as soon as he could.

“One night?” he asked.

“Aye,” Lord Baratheon confirmed. “Aegon will send Dragons for us tomorrow.”

Lady Stark looked up at him in astonishment at the mention of Dragons and the Brother who once was called Sandor Clegane visibly shrank back towards the safety of the cave.

Elder Brother could allow one night, but there was another consideration; Kings and Queens, Lords and Ladies, ‘twas the same rule for all . . .

“Are you wed?”

‘Twas no answer Gendry could give, save a rueful, “Nae.”

“Then you sleep alone. On the Quiet Isle men and women do not sleep beneath the same roof unless they are wed. You are welcome to stay until your Dragons come, but Lord Baratheon shall sleep with the Brothers in the cloisters and Lady Stark shall have one of the cottages set aside for women.”
Gendry could not conceal his disappointment and frustration at Elder Brother’s pointless rules. He was a Lord who did what he pleased and Arya was no maid whose chastity needed protecting, so why did it matter where they slept? And he had no intention of letting Arya out of his sight for a long time to come.

But Arya shrugged against him as he frowned down at her. She seemed content to abide by the stupid rules and sleep apart. For some reason, that annoyed him even more.

“Mayhaps Lady Arya Stark would appreciate a change of clothes and a bath by a warm fire?” Elder Brother suggested as Arya shivered and chewed her lip to keep her teeth from chattering.

Gendry began to rub his hands vigorously over her back to warm her, but Arya still said gratefully, “I would like that very much.”

Gendry growled with annoyance. He had no doubt Elder Brother’s rules against sleeping together extended to bathing together. So be it, but Gendry would have Arya know his mind afore she left him. Grabbing her shoulders, he turned her sharply towards him. “You will not sneak off again Arya,” he warned her sternly. “I mean it.”

She looked up at him through tear dampened lashes, “Of course I will not.”

“Then go and be quick about it,” he ordered. “I will be waiting,” he added as a further warning in case she was harbouring any more foolish notions of escape.

“Mayhaps you would like to join King Aegon while you wait?” Elder Brother suggested, “He is in the yard behind the Sept. I believe he would appreciate your company.”

Gendry grunted his reluctant assent. No one who knew them would think Aegon and Gendry could ever ‘appreciate’ each other’s company. However, their relationship, or lack of it, was not something Elder Brother need concern himself with.

Gendry decided Elder Brother was as interfering as any meddlesome old Septa. However, unless he wanted to keep Sandor company, he had nowhere else to go while he waited on Arya. If ‘twas a choice between Sandor and Aegon, the latter was the better option. Sweeter smelling at least.

Elder Brother gave Gendry a smug, satisfied smile. ‘Twas all Gendry could do to refrain from cursing under his breath as Elder Brother, like the knight he once was, offered his arm to Arya. She eagerly linked her arm in his.

Only when they were so linked, did Elder Brother address Sandor.

“How do you wish to stay or go Brother?”

Since that meddling Maid of Tarth’s last visit, Elder Brother knew Sandor’s memory had returned and that his Brother chaffed against the restrictions of life on The Quiet Isle. Elder Brother had no idea what that damn Brienne had said to the formerly content, pious Brother, but it had stirred something in Sandor that would give him no peace until ‘twas sated, one way or another. Elder Brother could only hope Sandor’s time of reflection on the Quiet Isle had changed him.

“You know there is a place for you here as long as you wish to stay.”

“I’ve been here long enough,” Sandor muttered, not meeting Elder Brother’s eyes.

Elder Brother sighed, his disappointment at Sandor’s decision obvious. That Sandor would leave was not unexpected, but all the same, Elder Brother feared for his Brother’s future and his immortal
As if he was able to hear her thoughts, Elder Brother said softly, “The Hound is dead. He died under that tree where you left him. My Brother stepped from the shadows into the light . . . will Arya Stark?”

Gendry’s eyes bored into her. Elder Brother squeezed her hand encouragingly. The weight of Gendry’s and Elder Brother’s expectation bore down upon her as if she carried The Iron Throne upon her back.

What was more important; her past or her future? Her past was only dark and full of shadows. She looked at Gendry, so resolute, so steadfast, so in love with her and her heart overflowed with light.

“Thank you,” Arya whispered softly.

Elder Brother patted her hand and steered her back towards the Sept.

-o-

Aegon sat cross-legged on the grass in front of his father’s grave. A huge oblong slab of some drab local stone lying prone in the grass marked the last resting place of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen. A crowned knight, complete with sword and badly imagined Dragon had been roughly carved into the stone. Aegon suspected it had never been particularly impressive and now ‘twas partially obscured with lichen. Lying under that slab, alone in the cold, damp earth of this bloody island was not how Prince Rhaegar Targaryen’s song should have ended.

A thousand thoughts swirled inside Aegon’s head. He had almost begun to say aloud some of the things he had always wanted to say to his father, but only a fool would talk to a slab of stone. Instead, he ran his fingers along the edge, where some Brother had carved Fire and Blood, over and over and over until the words of House Targaryen encircled the whole stone. While his fingers absentmindedly traced the words, Aegon thought of how different his life would have been if Robert
Baratheon had perished in the Ruby Ford instead of his father. How different the world would have been.

What if his Grandfather Aerys had not been touched by madness? What if The Kingslayer had not slain the King? What if Rhaegar had never laid eyes on Lyanna Stark? What if? What if? What if? ‘Twas enough to drive a man mad; or at least to drive him to drink.

Mayhaps, seeing how his father’s life had ended, ‘twas only natural for Aegon to think of his own end. All he had ever wanted was to be King, to take back The Iron Throne that was his by right. He was King, but . . . what now? Aegon had never thought beyond The Iron Throne; never thought about the empty years that might stretch ahead of him until he too was dead and cold.

He had Jon and Daenerys to share the burden of rule, but they had each other and what did he have? Or more accurately who did he have? No one. His frequent, meaningless dalliances with woman had been enough while he a goal to strive for, when nothing else mattered, but he had achieved his goal and . . . what now?

He knew he should find himself a wife; a young maiden from a Great House to birth his heirs. There was certainly no shortage of Lords pressing their chaste, pious and infinitely boring daughters upon him. But the thought of any of them left him cold. He could have any woman in the whole of Westeros, any of them, save the one he wanted. He was bewitched by auburn hair and vivid blue eyes and the saddest smile any man had ever seen. Like him, Sansa Stark knew what ‘twas like to have everyone want you and yet to still be the loneliest person in the room.

Aegon was still not sure when or how it had begun, but his initial indifference to Lady Sansa and her sad eyes had been replaced by an unexpected respect for her courage and selflessness. His admiration had grown and grown until it had miraculously blossomed into something new and wonderful that filled his chest with an ache that no amount of wine or other women could erase.

At the beginning of his infatuation, he had thought of little else save how to bed her, but sitting here, contemplating his future, he realised that alone would never be enough. He was a fool to think it ever would have been.

When he had found himself in lust afore, a quick tumble was enough to slake that thirst but he already knew, afore they started, once would never be enough with Sansa Stark. He wanted more than just her body. He wanted everything and, to his eternal shock, he found he wanted to make her happy. For the first time in his life, Aegon Targaryen found himself caring for someone else’s happiness above his own. That grasping cripple Willas Tyrell only succeeded in making her more miserable with every passing day and every time her mask slipped, when she thought no one watched and tears welled in those blue eyes, ‘twas like a blade twisting in his heart.

He wanted to be the man who turned that sad smile to joyous, heart-warming, laughter. Aegon would love her so thoroughly, so completely, that she would forget all the other men who had treated her ill and made her so unhappy, until she could think of and remember only him. Those sad eyes would sparkle and dance for him. Only him.

Aegon might have sat there for moments or hours, for he was so lost in his thoughts that he had paid no heed to the time passing, when he heard the heavy footsteps of someone’s approach. They stopped somewhere behind, no doubt wondering how to interrupt his reverie.

“I hear you,” Aegon said with a sigh. If ‘twas one of the holy Brothers mayhaps they would fetch him a skin of wine. He could do with one, nae he could do with several. Wine would not make him forget, but it would dull his pain.
He could not suppress a groan of disappointment when an empty handed Lord Baratheon walked into view.

“What’s that?” Lord Baratheon asked, nodding to the slab.

“My father’s grave.”

“Oh.”

Aegon almost enjoyed Lord Baratheon’s awkwardness, but he was feeling so melancholy that he could not even enjoy that properly. So he asked, “I don’t suppose you have anything to drink on you?”

“Nae, but I passed a well on the way here.” There was a pause afore Gendry continued grudgingly, “I suppose I could fetch you a ladle of water.”

Under normal circumstances Gendry would never consider fetching Aegon anything, but the man was sat in front of his father’s grave and Gendry felt an unexpected pang of sympathy for the horse’s arse. And there was more; damn if Gendry didn’t feel guilty for what his father had done.

“Not that kind of drink,” Aegon muttered.

“Well I have no wine and Elder Brother does not seem the type to offer,” Gendry said as he stood awkwardly beside the grave, wishing he had never listened to Elder Brother and had stayed with Sandor after all.

The two men contemplated the stone in silence for a while.

“Arya tells me your horse is safe and well,” Gendry said eventually.

“Well, that is a relief,” Aegon muttered, not even finding it in himself to summon up much enthusiasm for his poor horse.

“Beauty is being cared for by an old man and his wife on the other side of the mudflats, but you have to pay them in gold or find a Maester to attend to some ailment.”

Aegon grunted an acknowledgement, before saying testily, “You need to teach that she-wolf a lesson. She needs to learn she cannot go around stealing my horse.”

It briefly crossed Gendry’s mind to leap to Arya’s defence and protest ‘twas only a loan of the horse, as Arya would no doubt claim herself, but he was sick and tired of making allowances for Arya and besides, Aegon was right. She should never have taken the horse, should never have involved Ty in the theft and most importantly should not have broken her promises.

“Ned Stark should have put her over his knee years ago,” Aegon muttered.

“Aye,” Gendry agreed, for someone certainly should have. Arya had had her own way for far too long. Her parents may not have spoiled her with dolls and dresses, but they had certainly failed to instil any humility in their youngest daughter. “I intend to have words with her, but The Gods only know when, for ‘tis the rule of this bloody Isle that unwed men and women do not consort.”

Aegon snorted, but still gave Gendry a wry grin. “You still cannot wait to bed her after all she has done?”

“Nae,” Gendry chuckled, “Apparently my cock bears no grudges.”
“Wed her then.”

“I intend to, the minute her brother Bran arrives in the damn Red Keep.”

“I meant here. In the Sept I saved from burning.”

Gendry was about to dismiss the idea as ludicrous. But if it got him what he wanted tonight, why not? The Faith of the Seven meant little to him and they could wed properly afore the Heart Tree when Bran eventually turned up.

“Hmmm, mayhaps we could,” Gendry mused, “Arya would not like it though,”

“So?” Aegon challenged. “All the more reason to bloody do it! You defer to that she-wolf too damn much.”

“I suppose I do,” Gendry said with a grin, “But she bites!”

“Luck bastard,” Aegon chuckled and then they both laughed before falling into a companionable silence once again.

After a while longer of contemplating Rhaegar’s grave, Gendry said, “For what it’s worth . . . I am sorry,” and he meant it. He was sure that, irrational as it was, he would have appreciated an apology from Aegon if their father’s roles had been reversed and Rhaegar had killed Robert. A son could not be held responsible for his father’s actions and ‘twas not as if either of them had even known their fathers, yet ‘twas as if the bad blood between the fathers had seeped down their bloodlines and soured the relationship between the sons. Mayhaps, ‘twas time that Gendry did some forgiving of his own. “And thank you for bringing me here . . . and for the use of your tailor.”

“I appreciate your thanks,” Aegon said graciously, “‘Tis a pity Rhaegar and Robert could not have been as civilised.”

“Aye but a woman got between them and the Gods know a woman can drive the best of us mad,” Gendry said, thinking again of Arya and how angry he had been that morn’ when he had been told she had fled.

Aegon smiled ruefully and nodded his agreement. Madness was an apt word, for wasn’t he mad for even considering what he was about to do for Sansa Stark? Their fathers had won and lost a Kingdom over a woman. Aegon had been contemplating how far he would go to win the woman he wanted.

“Would you go to war for Arya?” Aegon asked abruptly.

Gendry drew in a deep breath and blew it slowly out again. There was no doubt he would. He would fight to the ends of the earth for her if he had to. He prayed he never had to. So he merely muttered “Aye,” and sat down by Rheagar’s grave. He was beginning to wish he had the drink Aegon craved after all.

Aegon chuckled, “‘Tis a good job I have no desire to steal Arya away from you then is it not?”

Gendry narrowed his eyes and frowned. As if Aegon could! As If Arya would have him! ‘Twas on the tip of Gendry’s tongue to tell Aegon there was more chance of Sam winning a tourney, than of Aegon bedding Arya, but they were sitting by Aegon’s father’s grave and Gendry felt he should extend the hand of friendship, so he merely muttered another reluctant, “Aye.”

“I never thought I would feel that way about a woman,” Aegon said quietly, tracing the words Fire
and Blood with the tip of his finger.

Gendry was at once both intrigued and concerned. Aegon seemed to be hinting that, although he had never felt that way about a woman afore, he did now. Surely he could not mean that bitch Margaery? She was the only woman Aegon seemed to dally with regularly, but Gendry had thought the arrangement merely a physical one that was convenient for them both. Surely Aegon had not development feelings for the trollop.

“Please tell me you do not mean to go to war with Tommen over his wife?”

Aegon threw his head back and laughed. Gendry was so relived to hear Aegon laugh about it, that he joined in. ‘Twas ridiculous on so many levels. Aegon would merely have to look at Tommen the wrong way and the boy would burst into tears.

“Nae, I do not mean with Tommen.” Aegon gasped as he caught his breath. “Even if I wanted to, Margaery would not let her precious little soldier go to war.”

The two of them laughed some more at that. Tommen was babied relentlessly by Margaery. She seemed to think that the longer she treated him like a little boy, the longer she could do whatever the seven hells she wanted behind his back. But they both knew the end of Margaery’s fun was nigh, for, despite Margaery’s best efforts, Tommen would soon be a man and would demand what every husband had every right to expect from his wife. Margaery was in for a rude awakening afore too long.

Once their laughter has subsided, Gendry remembered that, if not Margaery, there was some woman Aegon considered worth fighting for.

“So who is this poor wench who has to suffer your affection?” Gendry asked with a smirk.

Aegon’s smile immediately vanished. Gendry had never seen Aegon look more serious in all the years they had known each other. This was not good.

“’Tis apt you mention her suffering and she does not know of my affection at all.”

Gendry began to wonder if Aegon had been drinking afore he arrived. Aegon not tell a woman he loved her in a thousand flowery words? Not pursue her? He usually wrote them shockingly insincere love songs, yet apparently this woman did not even know she was the object of the King’s affection. And Aegon felt the need to share this with Gendry? ’Twas unheard of. ’Twas not good at all.

“I am not going to start guessing who this woman is,” Gendry said abruptly, no longer finding the subject in the least bit humorous, “So either tell me or not.”

Aegon turned his disturbing purple eyes to Gendry and simply stared at him for a long while. He seemed to be considering whether to confide in Gendry or not. Gendry would neither flinch nor look away, but he wished he had never listened to Elder Brother, never strolled over to find Aegon, never sat down, never asked anything at all.

Eventually Aegon smiled and said, “I used to think being King was enough, but now I have it, I find ’tis not. I want what you have, what Jon has and I find I am minded to do anything in order to get it.”

“Even going to war?” Gendry asked, hearing himself say the words and not believing he was actually asking such a question. War. Even to think of it ‘twas madness.

“Aye, for the woman I want, is the one I cannot have.”
Gendry felt as if he might wretch. There was only one woman Aegon could not have.

“Sansa,” they said together, only there was no amusement to be found in their both speaking the same name.

“You cannot.” Gendry said firmly. “We all agreed. You agreed.”

“I know,” Aegon shrugged, “But I find I have changed my mind.”

Gendry drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes briefly. He did not know whether to weep or whether to pummel Aegon into a bloody pulp in the grass. A war with Highgarden. Another war. ‘Twas unthinkable, but then why was he having to think on it?

“Nae, you cannot. We need Highgarden and Willas will not give her up.”

“I do not need Highgarden and I will not give her up,” Aegon said slowly.

“The realm needs Highgarden!” Gendry ground out through gritted teeth as he rose to his feet, “You would see us all descend into famine because you changed your mind!?” he snarled.

“Aye,” Aegon shrugged with not an ounce of remorse.

A dozen different scenarios flashed afore Gendry’s eyes; none of them good. Jon would never break the agreement with Highgarden, would never let his people starve, even for Aegon. Gendry’s loyalties would always lie with Jon. But if Sansa chose Aegon, Arya would choose Sansa and where would that leave him? He and Arya would be ripped apart; the realm would be ripped apart. War. He had believed there would not, could not, be another war in his lifetime.

“You cannot do it. You must wait,” Gendry pleaded, finding himself begging Aegon and not caring how he demeaned himself. There was too much at stake to consider his own pride.

“You said yourself you would go to war for Arya. Our fathers did it. What makes you think I am any different than you? Than Robert? Than Rhaegar?”

Gendry had no answer to that. What would he do if Arya was in the same position as Sansa? He knew the answer afore he even asked it of himself. He would do whatever he needed to and to hell with the consequences.

“Then I can only hope Sansa will not have you.”

Aegon grinned, but ‘twas a mirthless, cold grin. “When has a woman ever been able to resist me when I decided I wanted her?”

Gendry clenched his jaw in his rage. Any harder and he might break his teeth.

“Then I shall pray Lady Sansa has more sense than the rest of them.”

Aegon unfolded himself and stood up. “I shall return to The Red Keep now and I shall send Daenerys and Jon to fetch you and Arya. Then I shall speak with Lady Sansa and . . . we shall see.” Aegon gave another shrug.

Aegon would have Sansa all to himself for two days and there was not a damn thing Gendry could do about it.

“Then we shall see,” Gendry agreed bitterly, for there was nothing else he could say.
So, we inch closer to the end. Again, not as long as I would have liked, but I had reasons for wanting/needling this finished three weeks ago. I have a lot of new stuff going on now that means less time to write. I only hope you will hang on in there with me until the end of The Reluctant Bride. As you will have noticed, I am taking the time to lay the ground work for the next story which is taking longer than anticipated.

Yet again BIG thanks to Brazilian Guy for all his help/support/ideas/encouragement/crappy songs etc etc etc.

See you soon.
“I do not usually cry,” Arya sniffed to Elder Brother, “You must think me pathetic.”

Elder Brother had not yet formulated an opinion of the mysterious Lady Stark, but he was already sure she would never be that.

Keeping her arm looped through his, he patted the back of her hand. “Of course I do not,” he said in the tone he reserved for the sick and infirm brought to the Isle to be treated. Still, he could not forget what the King said she was. Elder Brother decided that, as in battle, a direct assault was usually simplest.

“King Aegon told me that you are a member of The Guild of the Faceless . . .”

He had not finished before Lady Stark interrupted with a terse, “Was.”

Elder Brother gave her a sideways look, watching her stare intently straight ahead as her jaw clenched and unclenched, “I only ask as I need to know if my Brothers are safe from The Guild.”

Arya turned her face away towards the sea, hating that Elder Brother had to ask, hating what she had become.

She watched Gendry striding purposefully along a different path, towards the Sept. She wished with all her heart he was heading towards her, to take her in his arms and home to Storm’s End. She wanted to be back in their room, with the drapes closed tight around their bed, to shut everything out except him. She wanted to have never heard of The Guild, or the Hound, or the war. She wanted her mother and father and Robb and Rickon back, but she never got what she wanted. A tremendous wave of exhaustion swept over her. She wanted to sleep until she forgot about it all but of course she never could, for that was what she was. But could there be more to her than that? Gendry thought so.

Arya rubbed her free hand across her forehead, hoping to stem the ache that was building there. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes again as she muttered, “Your Brothers have nothing to fear from me.”

Elder Brother seemed to accept her assurance readily enough, for he rapidly changed the subject.

“I hope you will be quite comfortable in one of the cottages set aside for the women who visit us. Of course you will be alone. There are no other women on the isle, because of the Equinox.”

Being alone was nothing new to Arya. She had been alone all of her adult life, until Gendry had saved her. Mumbling her thanks to Elder Brother, she watched the man she loved turn the corner of the Sept and disappear from view.

Elder Brother followed her gaze. “Prince Rhaegar’s bones lie there. I was surprised the King did not know it.”

Aegon’s father was buried here? And Aegon had only found out about it now, after all these years? Arya’s gut twisted and her heart wrenched for Aegon. She knew how he must feel, for she longed to discover where her father’s body had been taken after his execution. He should lie in the crypt in Winterfell, with the rest of the Starks. Instead only The God’s knew where his bones were, mayhaps
scattered to the four corners Westeros, mayhaps she would never know. At least Aegon finally knew.

Thinking on her father, on Winterfell and all the people she had lost caused the tears that had been threatening to finally escape from the corners of her eyes.

“I never cry,” Arya said, determinedly swiping away the tears, “At least I never used to cry, but now I find I cannot stop.”

As a healer, Elder Brother was used to tears. He knew people cried for all sorts of reasons; pain, loss, fear, joy, yet he did not doubt Lady Stark’s claim that she never cried for surely Faceless Assassins were immune to the emotions that ravaged ordinary men and women. Lady Stark was, or had been, one of them, yet the tearful young woman, whose arm linked with his, appeared to Elder Brother’s experienced eyes to be no different to the dozens of other pregnant girls who were brought to him, save that she was more beautiful than most. More beautiful than all of them, if he was being honest with himself.

Lady Stark was not far enough along in her pregnancy to be obviously showing, although her wet clothes clung to what his practiced eye recognised as the early swell of a babe in her belly. That would explain the uncharacteristic bouts of crying.

“Have you been suffering from any other maladies save crying? Mayhaps tiredness?” Elder Brother asked, wondering if Lady Stark knew and if she had told Lord Baratheon.

“I feel as if I could lie down right here on the grass and sleep for ever,” Arya said, while simultaneously sniffing and stifling a yawn, as if the mere thought of it was enough to send her to sleep.

That could be the aftermath of whatever confrontation she had with Lord Baratheon Elder Brother thought; battle fatigue he was wont to call it. He had seen that often enough, both afore and after his rebirth as a Brother on the Quiet Isle. He needed to know more if he was to confirm his suspicions.

“And have you felt sick at all?”

‘Tis funny you should mention that, for I have had little appetite,” Arya chewed the side of her mouth as she appeared to think on something else, “I was sick afore I left King’s Landing, but my sister had just shared some news that I found unpalatable. I expect ‘tis still the shock of that making my stomach churn.”

Elder had to refrain from shaking his head. He had encountered the same lack of insight from so many young girls on so many occasions. They lay with men, then a few moons later experienced all the symptoms they would immediately recognise in others as confirmation of a pregnancy, yet they could not, or would not, see it in themselves.

The welfare of such girls was a matter close to Elder Brother’s heart for he suspected he had left a fair few of those girls in his wake afore he saw the light.

With every moon, abandoned girls found their way to the Quiet Isle. They were like human flotsam and jetsam; unwanted, washed up on the Isle up by the tide. Elder Brother always strove to do his best by them, in the hope it might atone for some of the sins of his former life.

However, he should not compare Lady Stark to those poor girls. She should have wed Lord Baratheon afore lying together, of course, but young love was never patient as Elder Brother recalled to his cost. However, he did wonder at Lord Baratheon being so casual with his affairs, particularly
with such a high born Lady. Farm girls and kitchen maids were one thing, but the daughters of the Great Houses of Westeros were another matter entirely.

Even a Lord dare not risk a liaison with such women unless he had marriage firmly on his mind. The wealth and power of these families lay in their bloodlines and the alliances that blood could bring them. Dishonour a daughter of one of the Great Houses of Westeros and your head was likely to be swiftly missing its body. Even if a man was considered of sufficiently high standing, he would find a long line of fathers, brothers and uncles ready to force a quick marriage. High born women did not often suffer the shame of bearing a bastard, despite it being expected that their husbands would. Nae, Lady Stark must be wed afore it became obvious she had a bastard growing in her belly.

Elder Brother’s paternal instincts rushed over him like the tide in the bay. Lady Arya was an orphan with no father or mother to insist Lord Baratheon wed her. Her brother Robb was long gone too. Mayhaps the bastard brother who sat on the throne was not concerned with such things. But he should be! Lady Arya’s babe would have the name and title that was rightfully his. Elder Brother intended to see to it.

There was one more thing Elder Brother needed to know afore he dragged Lord Baratheon to the alter.

“I am considered a healer my dear and I need to ask you an intimate question. All I ask is that you answer it honestly.”

Arya sniffed and nodded.

“You have lain with any man save Lord Baratheon?”

She flushed bright red, fixing her gaze on her boots and muttered, “Nae.”

Elder Brother was relieved to hear it. “And when was the last time your moon blood flowed?”

Arya continued to stare at her boots while she thought about Sansa and how she had asked the same question. “Three moons past,” she whispered, unable to deny the truth of it to herself any longer.

“Do you know you are carrying Lord Baratheon’s child?”

There was a long pause as Arya’s tumultuous thoughts whirled and clashed in her mind. Gendry’s child.

“I know,” she whispered so quietly Elder Brother almost missed her confession.

In truth, she had known since her last dream of Nymeria.

Lying under the stars, Arya had almost convinced herself ’twas just a dream; but, deep in her heart she knew her unconscious thoughts of Nymeria had never been just dreams. Arya had felt it then; the tiny flicker of life growing in her womb and she felt it again now. Her palm instinctively covered the small, barely there, swell of her growing babe.

She had not wanted to confront the truth, for it changed everything; no longer could she be Faceless or No one or Cat or even just Arya Stark. She had to be more than all of them, for Gendry’s babe. For her babe. Their child deserved the best life Arya and Gendry together could give, the life that neither of them had; safe and secure, with both mother and father to protect them.

More tears spilled from the corners of Arya’s eyes.
Elder Brother’s heart constricted at the sight of this beautiful, damaged woman’s tears and if his feelings were influenced at all by the similarities to another Stark Lady who had left a lasting impression upon a young knight’s heart, then who could blame him?

“He must love you,” Elder Brother said. Lord Baratheon would not have come all this way had he not loved her.

Lady Arya sniffed again. “Oh he does.”

But then why were they not wed? Surely young Lord Baratheon must have learned something from his father’s mistakes?

“But do you love him?” Elder Brother asked, giving Lady Arya’s arm a comforting squeeze.

“With all my heart,” she whispered, remembering Gendry on his knees, love shining in his eyes, holding out his hand to her while she pointed Needle at his throat. “But . . . but he is far too good for me,” Arya added her voice trembling with sadness.

A Baratheon too good for a Stark?! Elder Brother had to bite his tongue to refrain from cursing aloud. By the Seven, this time the Stag would wed the Wolf or Lord Baratheon would answer to him!

They had walked through the smouldering huts now. All around them Brothers still hurried too and fro dealing with the aftermath of the fire. Elder Brother and his crying visitor were attracting curious looks.

Catching the eye of a Brother, Elder Brother asked that one of the women’s cottages was made ready with a fire and a bath. Then he led Lady Arya to the little herb garden with its stone bench where he liked to sit on the rare occasions he found he had no demands on his time. Elder Brother sat down beside Lady Arya and took one of her smooth, young hands in both of his old hands, marked with age and hard labour.

Elder Brother knew this mysterious, hurting young woman needed to talk and he had a very good ear. He intended to use the wisdom he had accumulated in his two, very different, lives to aid her if he could.

“Why do you say Lord Baratheon is too good for you?”

Arya had never discussed her feelings of inadequacy with anyone, not even Gendry and this old man holding her hand was a stranger. Yet he radiated goodness and warmth. Arya had seen enough evil and indifference to know how extraordinary people like Elder Brother were. ‘Twas a rare gift they possessed. Sansa had it too, although Arya had not realised it until recently; that calm, reassuring presence, the ability to listen and not to judge. Although they had only just met, Arya knew she was going to tell Elder Brother things she had told no one else.

To do this needed a different kind of courage than the sort she usually had. But she was so confused and so lost, she could not see her way forwards. Instinctively Arya knew that Elder Brother would guide her. Taking a deep breath, she began,

“I have tested Lord Baratheon’s patience and pushed him away at every turn. I have been selfish and . . . and . . . I have lied to him,” she sniffed, deeply ashamed of herself. To her relief and gratitude, Elder Brother’s face remaining implacable. “Not deliberately lied . . .” she qualified, not wanting Elder Brother to think she was that bad, “Not really, but I have concealed the truth,” he voice trembled as she came to the crux of it all, “I have done . . . so many dark things, terrible things he
“Yet he still loves you,” Elder Brother said, giving her hand another reassuring squeeze.

The old man could guess at the things Lady Stark hinted at. The Faceless Men had only one purpose; death. But Elder Brother knew plenty about death himself. He had been a knight, had killed men he knew nothing about, only because someone else had told him to. He had not been as different to Lady Stark as she probably thought. Yet he had changed. His life had been only darkness yet now he walked in the light.

“Do you see the garden to our left?”

Arya looked at the bare, grey earth in the shadow of the windmill and nodded.

“The ground is too hard and cold for anything to grow. You would think nothing could ever grow there again, but you would be wrong.” He smiled and Arya felt the warmth of his smile surround her. “Look to your right my dear.”

She did. That area of the garden, only a few feet away, was in full sun. Vivid green shoots had broken through the soil, seeming to shine with promise in the afternoon sunlight.

“The long winter is ended and spring has come at last, bringing hope and new life with her.”

They both looked at Arya’s belly and smiled as one, thinking on the new life growing there.

“What happened in the past cannot be undone Arya, but the future does not have to be the same. Things change. People change. You are changing already,” Elder Brother said with fatherly tenderness, giving Arya’s hands a final squeeze before letting them go. She immediately placed her hands on her belly, cradling the new life within.

Arya imagined spring growing into summer and Gendry’s babe in her arms; the innocent face framed with straight, black hair. Blue eyes would blink in the warm sunshine while Gendry, his identical eyes shining with pride, looked adoringly on. Arya pictured the three of them surrounded by love. Aye, she would do whatever was needed to make it so.

“Have faith. Just as the plants and your babe take time to grow, so do love and trust. Nurture them my dear.”

Sitting beside Elder Brother, listening to his kindly advice made Arya think of her father again. She studied the silver in Elder Brother’s hair, the deep creases of laughter lines around his eyes and the concern written across his face. Her father would have been about the same age. Arya’s heart swelled with feelings she had tried to suppress for so long; loss, longing and ultimately simply love. Mayhaps her father would have held her hands and offered her the same advice, had he been here, had he lived.

“Leave the past behind and embrace the future Arya.”

She flung her arms around the old man’s neck, taking him by surprise. As Arya pressed her face into his shoulder, Elder Brother closed his eyes and could not help but think what his own life might have been like had he listened to another old man’s advice many years ago; mayhaps he would have had a wife, daughters . . . sons. But, as Elder Brother knew to his cost, young men do not like to listen to old ones.

“The babe will change everything, but do not forget the girl you were Arya, for that is the girl Lord Baratheon fell in love with.”
“I won’t,” Arya promised solemnly, wishing she could.

Elder Brother drew away, holding Arya at arms length so he could see her face. He was pleased to see she looked more hopeful and less troubled than afore. He hoped Lord Baratheon knew what a lucky man he was. Elder Brother himself had not known it until ’twas too late. He heaved a regretful, heartfelt sigh afore he gave Arya his last piece of advice.

“Men can be . . .” Elder Brother paused and sighed again as he searched for the right words, “. . . stupid, stubborn . . . possessive, when it comes to our women. Remember that.” He almost added ‘remember his father and your aunt,’ but decided against it, after all, no one was suggesting starting a war for love here.

Arya nodded and could not help but smile. Stupid, stubborn, possessive; mayhaps Elder Brother knew Gendry after all.

As the old man walked her the rest of the way to the cottage, Arya realised she was still smiling. She felt lighter now than she had at any time since Storm’s End, as if an oppressive weight had been lifted and a curtain drawn back. She could see the way forwards and the future was bright.

-o-

Gendry could bear to be near Aegon no longer. He turned on his heel, balling his fists and gritting his teeth to save himself from murdering the King. The possibility did fleetingly cross his mind; for what was one life against many? Still, if there was any justice in the world, Sansa would send the selfish, fucking horse’s arse packing. Mayhaps Jon might be able to persuade Aegon down another route. There were dozens of more suitable women, hundreds, thousands! Why in seven buggering hells did Aegon have to want Sansa?

Nae, Gendry was not ready to murder Aegon in the shadow of a Sept. Yet. But it might still come to that.

He scrubbed his hands over his face as he strode away.

War.

Even the thought of it made his stomach turn to lead and his blood turn to ice in his veins.

He needed Arya. He needed to lose himself deep inside of her, he needed to make her his, posses her so thoroughly that nothing and no one could tear them apart. Not even another war. Seven hells, if he could shackle her to his side he would. If what he feared was truly coming, he wanted them bound together as tight as sailors lashed to the mast in a storm. Otherwise he feared they would be swept asunder by the tides of war.

Anger, dread and helplessness at the thought of what Aegon might do churned in his head along with the morning’s fear that he had lost Arya. Added to that was the ever present anxiety that he might lose her still. The pressure of all these unwelcome feelings surged in Gendry’s chest, igniting his temper like wildfire.

Elder Brother’s rules be damned!

Bloody Aegon be damned!
Arya was his, would be his tonight and if he had to wed her to get her, then all the better. Arya
would not like it all; there would be no Bran, no Godwood, no Jon and no Sansa, but, by The
Gods, she had put him though at least six of the seven hells today and ‘twas time she learned he
could be just as determined and stubborn as she was. Besides, two weddings were surely better than
one.

Earlier he had watched Arya stroll off with Elder Brother towards a row of little white washed
cottages. They were presumably the women’s quarters where Arya was supposed to sleep alone. The
seven hells would freeze over afore he let that happen. Tonight, and for every other night to come,
she was his.

Smoke rose from the chimney of one of the cottages, straight up into the clear, evening sky. He
headed for that cottage, only to see the damn Elder Brother appear on the same path coming from the
opposite direction.

Seven buggering hells.

Gendry lengthened his stride and increased his pace as did Elder Brother. ‘Twas as if they were
engaged in a race to see who would get to the cottage first; neither wishing to let the other see him
run, but both hell bent on winning.

With his longer strides, Gendry was able to catch up with Elder Brother a few steps before the door.
The older man carried a tray of food and a brown and dun robe folded under his arm. He was
scowling furiously at Lord Baratheon.

“I hope you were not considering breaking our rules on chastity, seeing as you are still unwed?”
Elder Brother asked, putting particular emphasis on the ‘unwed’ part, making his disapproval
perfectly clear.

“Aye and Nae,” Gendry replied tightly, in no mood for the older man’s bloody, holy rules. “I have
decided I will wed Lady Arya now. Tonight. I take it you can perform the ceremony?” Gendry
demanded, ready to twist Elder Brother’s arm up his back, physically if he had to, in order to get
what he wanted. He was taking no more chances with Arya, with anything.

To Gendry’s surprise, Elder Brother’s stony face broke into a genuinely warm smile. Gendry thought
the older man might even have looked relieved.

“An excellent idea!” Elder Brother proclaimed, “If you fetch King Aegon, I will fetch the Brothers.
Some sacred chanting by the more melodic of my Brothers would add greatly to the occasion.”

“No Brothers. No bloody chants and definitely no King fucking Aegon,” Gendry growled as he
tugged the tray out of an appalled Elder Brother’s hands.

Taking the few steps back towards the cottage but never lifting his hard gaze from Elder Brother,
Gendry rapped on the door with his fist, while balancing the tray in his other hand. “Arya, come
here,” he shouted through the door.

“I am in a bath,” she yelled back.

“Well get out of the Goddamn bath and come here!” Gendry demanded, “Or else I am coming in.”
He ignored Elder Brother’s disapproving mutterings.

Gendry let a smile curve his lips as he heard water slosh and the slap of wet feet against a stone floor.

“What do you want?” Arya hissed as she opened the door, just wide enough so he could see her
face, framed with tendrils of dark, wet hair.

“You,” he murmured. Seeing her like that, knowing she was his, made his heart swell so much in his chest that it took his breath away.

Her earlier irritation vanishing as she giggled and shook her head. Gendry realised he had not seen her so happy or playful since Storm’s End and it both delighted and thrilled him. His cock stirred against the laces of his britches.

“You should not be here,” Arya scolded with mock severity, but her eyes twinkled with mischief and delight. Despite the feelings of anger and apprehension that had settled in his belly since his conversation with Aegon, Gendry found the corners of his mouth tugging up in an appreciative, lustful smile as he raked his gaze over her.

Arya opened the door a little more, allowing him sight of one bare shoulder and breast, gleaming like ivory in the shadows. To Gendry’s mind, the droplets of water that glistened on the pale, soft curve of her breast and her dark, hard teat enhanced her beauty and enticed him more than the finest jewels ever could. His rapidly stiffening cock was proof of that.

“What if Elder Brother finds out you are here?” Arya asked huskily, her voice full of unspoken promise.

“He already has,” Elder Brother answered gruffly from just beyond Arya’s field of vision. The old man was at entirely the wrong angle to see any of her, Gendry had made sure of that, but Arya appeared to assume the worst.

“Gendry!” she yelped, jumping back into the shadows and slamming the door shut. But his boot was already in the gap, preventing her from closing it completely.

“Here, take this. For later,” he said, pushing the tray at her, finding her embarrassment only heightening his desire. He imagined a sudden blush heating that naked, ivory skin. Only Elder Brother’s irritating presence prevented Gendry from shouldering that door open and sucking one delicious, wet teat after another into his mouth.

Arya took the tray of bread and cheese cursing him under her breath while making sure she was well hidden behind the door. Gendry reached out to Elder Brother and pulled the folded habit from under the old man’s arm. Gendry then thrust the robe through the gap in the door.

“Put this on and meet us in the Sept as soon as you can.”

“Why do I have to do . . .” she started to ask.

He silenced her with a scowl. Why did she have to question him at every turn? “Will you just do what I tell you? For once?”

Annoyed by his demands and still embarrassed, Arya huffed and grabbed for the robe, only to find Gendry jerked it back so ‘twas just out of her reach.

“You will come to the Sept?” he demanded, needing to be certain of her reply.

“Fine,” she muttered from the shadows, tugging the robe into the darkness when he offered it to her again.

Satisfied for now, Gendry withdrew his foot from the door and let Arya slam it shut.
Now for the Sept.

-o-

Aegon was keen to be gone. If he returned to King’s Landing afore daybreak, Jon and Daenerys would set out at first light to retrieve Arya and Gendry, as was their original plan. He would be alone with Lady Sansa, or as good as alone. He could think of some errand that would remove the irritating presence of Willas Tyrell for the day and he would have Sansa all to himself.

A day was not long for a man to convince a woman he was her future, but Aegon was not like other men. Now he had made his decision, there was nothing and no one who could stand in his way. Lady Sansa Stark would be his Queen.

However, afore he left, there was still the matter of The Hound to attend to. For some inexplicable reason, Lady Sansa wanted the Brother who was once The Hound returned to King’s Landing alive and Aegon intended to deliver, assuming Arya had not killed him first. Aegon had expected he might have to hunt the Quiet Isle to find the Lannister lap dog, but the Gods were obviously good, as he had just bade his farewell to his father’s grave when a tall, well built man with The Hound’s distinctively burned face appeared in the yard. He seemed in a great hurry, making his way to a small hut against the dry stone wall. Surely there could be no other men on the Isle who fitted The Hound’s description so exactly?

Aegon watched unseen as the man dug around in the shed, which appeared to be filled with tools; mayhaps for digging the graves, and brought out a sack. The Brother proceeded to stuff it with a few items, which Aegon took to be his belongings. The man was packing to leave, Aegon was sure of it. Any lingering doubts he had that this Brother was not The Hound evaporated.

With his sack slung over his shoulder, The Hound began to make his way back across the yard.

“Going somewhere Brother?” Aegon drawled, standing up and out of the shadows where he had been watching unseen.

The man’s black eyes narrowed and the burned, ruined face twisted into a smile, or it may have been a sneer, Aegon found it hard to tell.

“You’re a Targaryen in a Brother’s robe.”

Aegon suppressed a sigh. The Hound was said to have been smarter than his brother The Mountain. If this was the extent of Sandor Clegane’s insight, King Aegon wondered how Gregor had ever managed to wipe his own arse.

“Aegon Targaryen the sixth, at your service,” Aegon said, with a low bow and a flourish that would have been much more impressive had he a hat with a feather in his hand and had he been wearing anything other than a Brother’s habit.

“King Aegon Targaryen the sixth, at your service,” Aegon said, with a low bow and a flourish that would have been much more impressive had he a hat with a feather in his hand and had he been wearing anything other than a Brother’s habit.

Sandor’s eyes raked over him, lingering on the sword and jewelled dagger Aegon wore in the rope belt around his waist.

Aegon smiled. The Hound still coveted weapons. Years of pious living and Elder Brother’s holy preaching had obviously not managed to change that. Once a warrior, always a warrior.

“Lady Sansa eagerly awaits your presence in King’s Landing,” Aegon said, crossing his arms, making sure the sword and dagger were in full view.
“She does?” Clegane asked suspiciously, dragging his eyes away from Aegon’s belt.

“I have a Dragon that could take us...” Aegon started, only for The Hound’s face to twist in horror as he rasped, “No Dragons. Never!” exactly as Aegon thought he would. The Hound’s aversion to fire was well known and what was a Dragon if not fire brought to life.

“A pity, but I have a horse nearby that needs returned to the Red Keep; a sand steed actually. I would pay handsomely for your service of course...”

That was obviously much more to Clegane’s liking. If The Hound had truly been a dog, his tongue would have lolled out, drooling with anticipation. Aegon had to be careful not to show his own delight, for although Clegane was playing right into Aegon’s hand, there was still more he needed.

“You will need a sword...” Aegon drew his out of his belt and held it up to the light as if examining it for flaws. Of course there were none. The sword was perfect and magnificent; ‘twas his after all, “...gold to ease your passage,” Aegon drew out the dagger and offered it hilt first to Clegane, with his best magnanimous smile, “This should do.”

The Hound’s eyes widened in disbelief as he took the proffered dagger. The jewels glinted in the light as he turned it over in his big, rough hands. Those jewels would ensure a man could live like a king, at least for a while.

Clegane gripped the hilt of the dagger and sliced it back and forth through the air, testing its balance, a grin tugging unpleasantly at the burned side of his face. Aye, still a warrior.

“All that I ask is that you give one of those jewels to the old man who has been looking after my horse. I shall hear of it if you do not.”

The Hound’s eyes narrowed suspiciously again, “Only one and I get to keep the rest?”

“Of course,” Aegon agreed with a casual wave of his hand, “You cannot appear afore Lady Sansa dressed like... that.” Aegon ran his gaze over the Brother’s habit and curled his lip disdainfully.

The unburned half of The Hound’s face coloured. The scarred half was already red and puckered, making no difference there. Clegane obviously thought Lady Sansa would give two figs about his appearance when he eventually showed up. It suited Aegon to let Clegane believe that, for Aegon wanted The Hound to be in his debt. It made little matter how Aegon achieved that, for Lady Sansa would surely send Clegane swiftly on his way after this stupid song debt was paid. Aegon could scare believe Lady Sansa had really meant a song, as in a tune with words, but apparently she had. That simply confirmed to him that Lady Sansa needed someone to save her from herself and he was the man to do it. She was far too naive and trusting for her own good.

The Hound would be sent packing, considerably richer than he had arrived and heavily indebted to Aegon and he would have earned Lady Sansa’s gratitude for bringing Clegane to her. They all got what they wanted. ‘Twas perfect.

To see his plan coming together so well, cheered Aegon’s mood, “Aye, you will need impressive new clothes to greet Lady Sansa. She must have been just a girl when last you saw her, but she is a great Lady now, sister to a King and second only in rank to Queen Daenerys. Why, she is almost a queen herself!”

Aegon was so delighted with his own private little joke he nearly laughed aloud. Sansa would be his queen, tomorrow if she would have him. The Hound looked even more uncomfortable.

With a flash of insight, Aegon realised Clegane could only be so concerned about his appearance...
and Lady Sansa’s status if his interests lay in the woman herself rather than merely collecting this
damn debt. Aegon cursed himself for a fool for having failed to realise it afore. Everyone who met
Sansa was charmed by her. Why should The Hound be any different? Still, Aegon had to bite the
inside of his cheek to stop from laughing aloud. What did this ruined man expect? That Lady Sansa
would be interested in him? Evidently the old dog did. ‘Twas all to the good, for Aegon had The
Hound exactly where he wanted him.

Sliding his sword back into his belt, Aegon drew himself up to his full height, which was almost as
tall as The Hound, squared his shoulders and, in his most regal voice declared, “The realm owes you
a debt Clegane. I owe you a debt.”

The Hound looked confused and suspicious in equal measure.

“For saving the lives of both Lady Sansa and Lady Arya of course,” Aegon explained, resisting the
urge to roll his eyes at the man’s lack of comprehension. “The Lannisters are not the only ones who
pay their debts.”

“I am done with the fucking Lannisters,” The Hound rasped and spat on the ground to underscore
his disgust.

“Yes, yes, of course” Aegon muttered while trying not to show his revulsion. “What I meant was, a
reward for saving both Stark sisters,” Aegon said, leaning forwards and watching Clegane’s black
eyes light up.

“Reward?” The Hound repeated, leaning in towards Aegon.

“Something better then gold,” Aegon whispered with a sly grin.

“There is nothing better than gold,” Clegane relied gruffly, but Aegon could see the interest in The
Hound’s eyes. Aegon’s grin widened. He intended to exploit that interest for his own ends.

“You have gold and jewels,” Aegon nodded to the dagger still held tightly in The Hound’s fist, “I
can make you a Ser right now. Lady Arya would like that,” Aegon said, with a sly smile.

“I spit on Sers,” The Hound growled to Aegon’s surprise and spat on the ground again. Aegon drew
his foot further back from Clegane’s favoured spot.

No Ser then. Aegon decided he needed more to tempt The Hound.

“How do you feel about Lords?”

The Hound titled his head to the side, assessing Aegon, as if trying to decide if this offer was too
good to be true. Clegane might be affecting an air of cool indifference, but Aegon had spent his life
reading people and Clegane’s prominent Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed repeatedly

Ah-ha! Clegane might spit on Sers, but a Lordship was apparently a very different proposition. A
Lordship meant lands and income and a title to pass to your sons and for your sons to pass on to their
sons. Aegon allowed himself a smile. He was about to hook The Hound.

“When your brother died with no heirs, the Iron Throne claimed his lands and title. As King, I can
bestow them on whomsoever I wish. Someone worthy.”

The Hound licked dry lips, almost salivating at the thought. Aegon knew he had him hooked and
was about to reel him in with one final temptation.
“The Clegane lands and more,” Aegon offered, “Too many Lords perished in the war. I have many Lordless lands in need of strong Lords to hold them for me.”

“You’ll get none stronger than me!” Clegane declared vehemently, his black eyes glittering with anticipation.

“Then swear your allegiance to me and arise as Lord Clegane.”

There was a pause. The Hounds face twisting again in that way that might have been a smile or might have been a sneer. “To you or to the bloody Iron Throne?”

Aegon was not about to let the Hound slip off his hook.

“To me. Swear fealty to me and you shall greet Lady Sansa as Lord Clegane.”

The Hound dropped to his knees like a stone.

Aegon grinned broadly over Clegane’s bowed head as he raised his sword and tipped it to both of Sandor’s broad shoulders. For what was to come, a King needed a loyal Hound at his heel.

-o-

Arya was loath to leave the little cottage with its bright, comforting fire. When she had heard Gendry at the door, her heart leapt. She had hoped that, despite Elder Brother’s rules, Gendry intended to sneak in and share the narrow bed with her, at least for a while. He would wrap her in his arms while she told him of their babe, then he would make love to her tenderly, all the while whispering their hopes and plans for the future to each other.

Her teats, already stiff from the blast of cold air at the door, tightened even more at the thought of Gendry’s warm, solid body covering her, pushing deep into her. She stroked her palms over her aching teats and the swell of her breasts. She could feel her body changing already; her breasts were fuller, heavier, more tender in her hands. She let her fingers glide lower, until they rested on the little swell of new life. She would think on the past no more. Only on her future; with Gendry and their babe.

Despite being bone weary, Arya longed for Gendry to be here, to keep her awake all night long. However, Elder Brother had put paid to any chance of that happening. He seemed to be a stickler for rules and had presumably brought Gendry with him simply to summon her to evening prayers. Arya did not want to go. She had nothing dry to wear save the Brother’s habit Gendry had given her earlier and besides, Septs always reminded her of Sansa and her mother. Arya did not want to cry any more today. She heaved an irritated sigh of resignation. She had given her word to Gendry that she would go to the Sept and she was not about to break another promise.

Frowning, Arya picked Needle up, only to realise she had nowhere to put the blade, save in the rope belt and to have a weapon in full display in a Sept would not present a good impression. Elder Brother was less likely to think the Brothers safe if she walked around displaying a blade in her belt.

So no Needle and no boots either. They were still oozing muddy water as they dried by the fire. She would have to go barefoot as well as unarmed. Reluctantly, she slid Needle under the pillow on the bed. She could not remember the last time she had been without it, sometime in the early days of her residence in the House of Black and White. She suppressed that unwelcome thought with a shudder.
Think not of the past, only the future, she told herself as she made for the door.

The Brother’s habit was scratchy and far too wide. Arya had gathered it in at the waist, tying the rope belt tight, but still felt indecently exposed by having no bitches or even small clothes under the robe. ‘Twas a scandalous and yet arousing feeling. How she wished Gendry was here to help her with it.

As she walked out of the door to the cottage, Arya realised just how wet and aroused she was. The cool evening air meeting the moisture at the juncture of her legs made between her legs tingle and sent a shiver through her whole body in a not entirely unpleasant way. When she turned to close the door, the rough woven material chaffed her sensitive teats and breasts compounding her aching need for Gendry’s hands upon them and her feeling of awkwardness at her attire. To make matters even worse, she now had to go and face a Sept full of holy Brothers.

Arya’s bare feet made no sound on the cobbled pathway that led to the Sept. In the twilight candle light flickered prettily in the Sept’s leaded windows.

This Sept was much larger than would have been expected on such a small isle. Although made of wood, it had a rather magnificent seven sided steeple. As she followed the path around, Arya was greeted by a wide entrance. The warm circle of light spreading out from the entrance looked inviting in the gathering dusk. As she walked between open doors carved with the likeness of the Mother and the Father, Arya was surprised to find that, instead of being full of Brothers ready for evening prayers, the Sept was almost empty.

A few novices were busy lighting candles arranged around the seven statutes that stood tall under the seven sided steeple. Arya immediately looked for Gendry and was surprised to see him kneeling at the feet of the Warrior. Although Gendry held to the Old Gods now, he had always, unsurprisingly, been rather fond of the Smith, yet tonight he chose the Warrior. Arya resolved to ask him why, but for now she left him to his prayer.

Of all the Septs she had been in, Arya had to admit that this one did seem to be particularly . . . holy she supposed was the word for it. Sansa and her mother would have loved it here. That thought was somehow comforting rather than upsetting tonight. There was an undeniable sense of peace about the place and as she turned slowly around in a full circle as she admired the place, Arya wondered how much of that was due to Elder Brother’s presence. He moved slowly and deliberately amongst the novices, smiling and murmuring words of encouragement. Arya supposed it had been a harrowing day for the boys watching their windmill, and near enough the whole island, burn.

One by one the novices were dismissed and filed out of the Sept. Most kept their eyes averted as they passed. A few regarded her with shy, yet curious glances. When she rewarded their inquisitive looks with smiles, the novices blushed furiously, hurrying out until only Elder Brother, Gendry and Arya were left in the Sept. Mayhaps she was early and evening prayers would start soon. She made her way down towards the alter where a grinning Elder Brother stood between the statutes of the Mother and Father waiting for her.

Chapter End Notes

To be continued . . .

Sorry guys. I have written another 6,000 words and intended to post one mega chapter, but Brazilian Guy tells me the second half needs more sex and who am I to argue with
that?!

I just need to tweak it (and add more sex) so I’ll post the other (hot) half on Sunday. Definitely. Promise.

I have been bad and not replied to any readers for a few weeks. I am just using every spare moment to write this. Please know I appreciate every single review or comment – the good and the bad (mercifully there’s not too many of those) but if they’re constructive I always take them seriously. Only way I’m gonna know what you think guys. Keep ’em coming and I will reply when I can.
We’re nearly there. Probably two weeks until the next (last?) one.

See you all very soon…
Gendry rose to his feet as Arya approached. The rush of love he felt for her was so, strong, so
overwhelming, it threatening to knock him back to his knees. She looked so much younger in the
Brother’s habit, with her slim ankles and delicate feet sticking out from under the ragged hem. Dark
circles under her eyes had come from either lack of sleep or crying or mayhaps both and, with no
sword at her hip; she looked more vulnerable than Gendry could recall ever seeing her afore.

Tension and fear coiled in his belly as he thought how close he had come to losing her and he vowed
to himself, there and then ‘twould never happen again. When he fought a battle, a cold determination
settled over him and he felt like that now. She was his and he kept what was his.

As Arya approached, Gendry held his hand out to her and, with only the slightest hesitation, she took
it. At last. He had waited so long for this; since he had first laid eyes on her trailing along behind
Yoren a lifetime ago.

As the two of them stood hand in hand at the alter, Arya was about to laugh and remark ‘twas like a
wedding, but Gendry’s intense expression and the burning look in his eyes stopped her. The
realisation that ‘twas no jape hit her like a fist in the gut.

“Elder Brother has agreed to wed us,” Gendry said calmly, as if he was discussing the weather, as if
she should have expected that, as if she should not be surprised, or angry.

“What?” she hissed, trying to tug her hand free from his. He only held on tighter, pulling her into his
arms while she struggled against him.

“You heard me.” Gendry gaze was steady, determined and stubborn. “We will wed here and now.”

“Nae!” Arya said through clenched teeth, shoving at his chest so hard that he took an involuntary
step back. “You agreed to wait. What about Bran? The Godswood?”

Having her refuse him, sent his anger flashing again. “I changed my mind,” he said tightly. Looking
down at her with steely blue eyes, he closed the distance between them again and clasped his hands
around her waist, determined never to let go of her again.

“’Tis for the best,” Elder Brother agreed from the dais above them with a sagely nod of his head.

Arya frowned, fighting the urge to rant, curse, run. The old Arya would have done all three and
mayhaps slapped Gendry for good measure, but she was done with all of that and she had their babe
to consider. Arya inhaled quickly and exhaled slowly, willing her anger to subside and her violent
thoughts to calm.

Had Elder Brother told Gendry she was carrying his child? Was this why ‘twas all so sudden?

As if reading her thoughts, Elder Brother said, “You two have much to discuss tonight.” He then
gave her an exaggerated wink over the top of Gendry’s head.

So Gendry did not know about the babe. Yet. But Arya felt as if she had been outmanoeuvred and,
from the smug look on Gendry’s face, he thought so too.

She had to avert her eyes afore she gave in to the temptation to punch him. Old habits died hard and
part of her mind was still racing; working how to break Gendry’s hold on her, calculating the
distance to the door, how best to evade his inevitable attempt to stop her, even how she could leave
this Sept burning in her wake if she wanted to. Arya gazed longingly out at the gathering dusk,
 wishing she was out there instead of having to confront Gendry, Elder Brother and her past in here.

“There is no need to rush into this. I am not going to run off again. I promise.”

“Rush?” Gendry snorted. “I have never heard of such a reluctant bride.” He should never have
agreed to wait in the first place and he needed her tonight. His cock hardened at the thought of
pushing inside her, deep inside, where he belonged.

As Arya felt her face flush hot with embarrassment and regret, the darkness outside the Sept seemed
even more appealing. She had broken so many promises, ’twas no wonder Gendry would not
believe another.

“Arya, look at me.”

She reluctantly turned her gaze back to meet the blue eyes that watched her so intensely the air
between them seemed to vibrate.

“You ran off and left me not knowing where or why you had gone or if I would ever see you alive
again.”

“But. . .” she began to protest, although she already knew he had had enough of her excuses.

“Nae,” he said forcefully, his voice low and dangerous. “No more. I want this. I have been patient
long enough and I will wait no longer.”

His body, held tight against hers, seemed to pulse with barely contained tension. She could feel his
chest rising and falling against her hands still pressed flat against his chest and see the muscles in his
jaw working. What had happened to the man who refused to fight her a few hours afore? Gendry
seemed ready to fight her on this now. Still, the hungry, nae ravenous way he was looking at her
made places other than just her face heat. A fire began to burn low in her belly and between her legs;
her teats ached for the touch of his lips, teeth, tongue.

Arya chewed the side of her mouth, uncertain what she should do. She gave Elder Brother a
pleading look, but he only raised his eyebrows and shrugged, saying “If you love each other I see no
reason to wait,” afore directing his gaze to her belly.

“Neither do I,” said Gendry, frowning down at her, his mouth a tight line.

Arya remembered Elder Brother’s warning, “Men can be stupid, stubborn, and possessive when it
comes to women,” and was Gendry not being all three? But she loved him. She had promised herself
she would try harder and she would.

“Do you really want this?” she asked Gendry softly.

“I do.”

If this was what he wanted then, after all her had done for her, she should do this for him. He loved
her enough to follow her here and, by some miracle he loved her still after she held Needle to his
heart. Arya owed it to him and to their babe to be a good wife. In order to be a good wife she had to
wed him first.
Telling herself Bran would understand, Arya nodded almost imperceptibly.

Gendry seemed intent on wasting no more time. “Quick as you like,” he growled to Elder Brother.

Elder Brother hurried through the wedding words while Gendry stood beside her as still as one of the seven statutes that surrounded them. All the while he gripped her hand as if ’twas all that was saving him from drowning.

This was not how Arya imagined being wed, despite not being sure if she had actually ever imagined it at all. She had not spent her childhood dreaming of her wedding day as Sansa had; she had been too busy trying to stay alive. Still, Arya had vaguely assumed ‘twould be in a Godswood and someone would have made her wear a dress. Wearing a Brother’s habit, in a Sept, with no pack around her and no feast to follow, was not how ’twas supposed to be at all.

She cast a sideways glance towards Gendry, his brows drawn together in concentration and his stubble darkened jaw clenched as he listened intently to what Elder Brother said. This might not be the wedding she had wanted, but she would never regret marrying Gendry. No one understood her like he did, in truth she was sure no other man would still be here, by her side, after all she had put Gendry through. No man had ever come close to making her feel the way he did and besides, her babe needed its father.

The marriage words washed over her. If anyone had asked her to repeat them, Arya would not have been able to remember even one. Instead of listening, she focused on the future and that golden image she had of the three of them bathed in summer sunlight. Could it really be that after all this time, happiness might truly be within her grasp?

‘Twas not until she became aware of an awkward empty silence and two sets of eyes fastened upon her, that she realised she might have to say something. Feeling guilty at being caught daydreaming at her own wedding she muttered, “Err . . . Aye?”

“That’ll do,” Elder Brother smiled benevolently, although Gendry continued to glare at her.

As soon as Elder Brother pronounced them wed, Gendry thanked him and, without a word to Arya, near dragged her out of the Sept. She had to trot beside her new husband to keep up with his long, impatient strides. His vice like grip on her hand never loosened as he strode through the darkness, pulling her along as if a pack of wolves were nipping at his heels.

Once they reached the cottage door, Gendry abruptly scooped her up in his arms, ducked his head under the door frame and carried her into the cottage.

“’Tis bad luck not to,” Gendry declared as he kicked the door shut and set her on her feet.

Elder Brother must have ordered the preparation of the room, for it was filled with candles and the fire burned bright in the hearth. A pitcher of honey mead stood on the table by the bed. Bread and bowls of fish stew sat on a stool by the fire. Arya tried hard to be cheerful. She supposed she would have a wedding feast, of a sort, after all.

Gendry unbuckled his sword belt and set the sword carefully by the door. Still standing behind her, Gendry wrapped his arms around her. All his focus had been on finding her and stopping her killing The Hound. Then he had the bloody conversation with Aegon and the damn hurried wedding. ‘Twas only now they were alone and she was in his arms, that he realised how close he had been to losing her. He silently thanked The Gods for giving her back to him. Gendry ran his hands over her shoulders and down her arms until they rested on her waist, needing to reassure himself that she was here, that she was his and she was whole.
Arya let her head fall back to rest on Gendry’s shoulder as he stroked his warm, strong hands over her. Drawing in a deep breath of his unmistakable scent sent little sparks of anticipation shooting all over her body. The front of his body brushed the back of hers, solid and reassuring. As he tilted his head to kiss her neck, the rough scrape of his unshaven jaw sent shivers of desire down her spine.

“I was scared I lost you,” he murmured huskily between kisses pressed along the curve that joined her shoulder and neck.

The needy moan that escaped her lips as his hands rose up over her breasts took her by surprise. The arousal she had felt afore she had set out for the Sept returned with a vengeance. She wanted him now and, for once, it seemed they were of the same mind.

Gendry pulled her shoulders tight against his chest, so her back arched and her bottom pressed hard against the unmistakable evidence of his desire. With his legs spread, he rolled his hips, while rocking her back against him.

“I shall never risk losing you again wife.” His voice thickened with emotion as he called her his wife for the first time.

She gasped as he ran his fingers down her shoulders and found her, oh so tender, teats, pinching them through the rough material of the habit. She had intended to tell him about the babe as soon as they were alone, but ’twas hard to think on anything save how much she wanted him while his hands roamed over her, the hard strength of his body rubbed against her back and, Gods be good, his rock hard cock pushed against her bottom.

“Pull up your robe,” he whispered, his breath hot and insistent against her ear.

That was the kind of order Arya did not mind obeying. As she bent over, Gendry ran his hands slowly from her breasts down to her waist, griping her hips so he could pull her arse even tighter against his erection. She bunched the hem of the Brother’s habit in her hands and slowly straightened up.

His breath caught as he dragged his eyes up from pink toes, over slim ankles and up shapely calves. Although he had seen her legs many times afore, had memorised every curve and long, supple sweep, the extra thrill of knowing he would be taking his wife for the first time made his heart hammer with anticipation and his cock throb and strain against the laces of his britches.

The robe stopped mid thigh. Unacceptable.

“Higher,” he said, his voice rough and low.

Arya hesitated. If she did not tell him about the babe now, the tender lovemaking she had anticipated was likely to be replaced by hard, urgent fucking.

“Higher,” he ordered impatiently.

Seven hells, she wanted this as much as he did. Her news could wait. Giving in to desire, Arya did as he asked.

Trailing the ascent of her robe, Gendry stroked his hands up the back of her thighs, to squeeze the deliciously curved, wickedly tempting, bare cheeks of her arse.

With the robe bunched at her waist, the lower half of Arya’s body was naked and exposed. She moaned with need, pushing back against his hands, wanting more. The feel of the warm leather of his britches and the hard muscles of his thighs pressed against her made the knot of pleasure between
her legs tighten with need. Standing on her tip toes, Arya rolled her hips until his cock was fitted right in the valley of her arse.

Sliding one hand around her hip, Gendry resting his palm on the soft curls, letting his fingers dip into the wet, silken folds below. Arya gasped at the first touch, needing more, needing him closer, inside her. She turned her head and reached one arm back, curving it around his neck. Fisting her hand in his long hair, she pulled his head down. Crushing his mouth to hers, she demanded his tongue, sucking, tasting sliding deeper until their tongues moved to the same sensual rhythm as their bodies.

“Fuck me,” she groaned into his mouth, arching into his erection as he pushed his hand further between her legs.

“Not yet.”

He teased her, fingertips stroking and spreading the evidence of her arousal down either side of those deliciously plump lips, carefully avoiding the tight little nub that she desperately needed him to touch. Arya tried to grind down on his hand, needing him to give her the release she strove towards, yet he steadfastly refused to even slide one finger inside her.

“You are so wet for me,” he breathed into her hair as he explored her with expert fingers. All the while he kept up the achingly slow, sensual rock and thrust of his cock against her arse. It would be so easy to make her come for him, but Gendry was not going to do that yet. He wanted her aching and desperate. He wanted her to know how he felt when she left him without as much as a backwards glance.

He broke the kiss, leaving her breathless and needy.

“Please . . .” she gasped, her eyes heavy lidded and glinting with desire in the fire light.

Stroking the back of her neck with his hand, he wound his fingers into her hair and tugging her head back to expose her throat.

“You are never going to leave me again,” he whispered roughly afore sucking and nipping that tender spot behind her ear.

His harsh tone was unexpected and cut through the haze of pleasure. He had never spoken to her like afore when in the throes of passion. She shivered and made no answer.

Denying her, he let his hand between her legs drop away and eased the pressure on her arse.

She rolled her head back against his shoulder and groaned in frustration. Why did he have to stop when she was so close? “Please Gendry,” she groaned; begging him, hating herself for doing it and at the same time not caring, “I just . . . need you inside of me. Now.”

“Nae. Not yet. Not until I say.”

His taking total control unnerved her, but also thrilled her in the strangest way. Her head was unsure of this new, arrogant Gendry, but her body had no such doubts; her body wanted more of him, all of him, deep inside her. Turning her sharply towards him he stepped backwards, pulling her with him, until he felt the back of his knees against the bed. He sat down, but kept her standing at arms length in front of him. By The Gods, she was beautiful, all long, long legs and heaven between her thighs. And he had her just where he wanted her; hot, wet and needy and also just a little unsure.

He tugged his boiled leather jerkin and shirt over his head in one go. Arya started to do the same with the Brother’s habit.
“Nae. Leave it on and bend over my knee.”

Another order and this one was enough to sharpen her mind and drag her back from the brink of her climax. He intended to spank her. His eyes looked black in the shadows, his expression unreadable. Her chest felt tight, as if she could not breathe deeply enough. The only sound was the crackling of the fire and his breathing, heavier than moments afore. She only realised she was holding her breath then, as she listened to his, every sense heightened.

Tension coiled in Gendry’s chest and spiralled down his limbs. His breathing was uneven, his hands shaking with pent up desire. He fisted them, hoping she had not noticed in the flickering light of the fire. He needed her, but he needed her on his terms. No more broken promises, no more excuses. Every man had his limits and he had been pushed way beyond his. Mayhaps ‘twas Aegon who had finally snapped his patience, but all Gendry knew was that he could take the uncertainty no more. She was his now and he intended to make sure she damn well knew it.

“What do you want?” His harsh, dangerous tone did not match his words. “You might enjoy it.”

And if she did not? What then? Could she make him stop? She instinctively knew what he wanted was not about love or even sex. ‘Twas about control. She chewed on her bottom lip, unsure of how to deal with this situation and him. Fighting, the conversation with Elder Brother and the surprise wedding had all exhausted her. Had she the strength left to fight him on this? Did she even want to?

Gendry watched her hesitate; saw the vulnerability he loved beneath the layer of armour she had built up around herself. But still it did not sway him. She needed her release. He needed release of a different kind.

Arya’s eyes flicked to the pillow where Needle lay hidden underneath. Seven hells, barely half a day had passed since the last time and already she was considering drawing Needle on him again.

“I need this,” he said, his voice rough with need, and ‘twas no lie.

She closed her eyes, forced herself to let go and surrender the control she had so jealously guarded. She never had to think of anyone except herself afore. But she did now. She loved him and he needed this. Mayhaps she would enjoy it as he said. She could do this. For him.

Keeping the Brother’s robe bunched up at her waist, she did as he asked and hesitantly laid herself across his knees. His leather clad thighs shifted under her, sliding easily against her bare skin.

Gendry took his time arranging the habit, lifting it higher until everything from her waist down was exposed. Her face felt as if ‘twas burning. She felt so vulnerable like this, with her bare bottom in the air, tense, waiting, unsure, needing him to give her release. The position, her nakedness, the cool air licking over the throbbing heat between her legs was also shockingly arousing. She wriggled, feeling restless, needy and unsatisfied.

Gendry’s hand on the small of her back pressing her down against his thighs sent anticipation, tinged with a sharp edge of fear, coiling low in her belly.

“Gendry . . .” she started, but could not finish for she did not know what she wanted.

He made no answer; instead he cupped the perfect globe of her arse with one rough hand. The contrast of his darker skin against the smooth creaminess of hers sent lust jolting through him. He had never known how provocative it would be to have a naked woman face down across his lap. He began to stroke her from the edge of the robe, letting his fingers caress supple flesh, feeling her arch up towards his hand.
Arya shivered with anticipation. The rough material of the Brother’s habit over her teats chaffed as she moved, heightening their sensitivity. ‘Twas intensely erotic to be prone, unable to see Gendry, only able to feel his thighs strong and hard under her, his fingers kneading her arse and the hot pressure of his erection digging into her side. Mayhaps Gendry had been teasing her all along and he intended only to coax her towards an unbearable peak, but he was so different tonight, so intense, that she doubted ‘twas all he had in mind.

As his fingers stroked lower, slowly tracing the crease where her bottom joined the top of her legs, she pressed up against his hand and parted her thighs slightly, inviting him in. His teasing fingertips slid down between her legs and then, with aching slowness back up. A needy little moan escaped before she could stop herself. She cursed herself for betraying how easily he could make her whimper and thought she heard him chuckle softly over the crackling of the fire and their own heavy breathing.

She was soaking wet, as he knew she would be. His fingers slid over the exposed folds, spreading them and her slippery wetness forwards, letting his fingertips graze her clit, making her moan, sending his lust flaring. Slowly, slowly he stroked up again, back and higher, right up to the tight little pucker now presented to him. He grinned triumphantly as he heard her shocked gasp then stifled, guilty moan of pleasure as his thumb applied pressure to that forbidden little rose. When he told her she was his, he meant all of her.

Was this what he intended? Arya was shocked and curious at the same time as he simultaneously claimed and caressed her bottom. Did she want him to stop or beg him to continue? Before she could decide, he abruptly withdrew his hand, removing the warmth that both stimulated and reassured her.

There was a pause, neither of them even drawing a breath until he said roughly, “Your father should have done this years ago.”

His hand fell, hard, sharp and purposeful. The sting and the shock made her yelp. Afore she had time to gather her wits he was leaning over her, the hair on his chest rubbing against her back, his breath hot against her ear,

“That was for breaking your promise.”

Arya bit her lip hard, not wanting to give him the further satisfaction of knowing how much it hurt. But already his hand was caressing her with exquisite tenderness. She exhaled with relief, thinking ‘twas over, willing him to slide his hand between her legs again and finish what he started. Instead he rested his hand on the very place where he had spanked her. Her smarting flesh felt hot and throbbed with the pain he had inflicted on her bottom, yet her traitorous body responded by releasing another surge of wetness between her legs. How could such pain bring pleasure? She had no time to contemplate it now, for his hand was gone again.

Did he mean to spank her a second time? Arya instinctively reached behind to try and protect her bottom with her own hand. Gendry simply caught her wrist and pinned it in the small of her back.

“Do you think once is enough for the seven hells of worry you put me through?” he asked in a low rasp. Arya heard the underlying tremor of tension in his voice as if he fought some internal battle with himself.

“Nae,” she whispered, clamping her thighs together and tensing her bottom in anticipation.

He wanted this, she reminded herself. She could do this. She could.

A second, stinging slap landed in exactly the same place as the first, sending a shock of pain shooting
through her and another, louder, yelp from her throat.

Nae, she could not do this. Not even for him.

Kicking and struggling, she tried to get up and away, but she had nothing on which to gain purchase except his thighs. He was much stronger and also determined to hold her still. The more she twisted and turned, the more pressure Gendry exerted on the small of her back to keep her firmly in place.

“Keep still or you will get more,” he said, his voice stained and rough.

The threat of more immediately made her stop wriggling but she could not bear another spank.

“I’m pregnant!” she yelled at the top of her voice.

He must have been shocked, for his grip immediately loosened, allowing her to roll off his knee and out of his reach afore he could recover his wits enough to stop her.

When she whipped up and around to face him, he had still not moved at all. The old Arya would have punched him, mayhaps even pulled Needle from beneath that pillow but instead she closed her eyes and took a deep, calming breath, desperately trying to quash the urge to lash out, the way she always had afore.

“This had better not be some kind of jape Arya.” he said quietly.

How dare he accuse her of that!

“Tis true,” she hissed, snapping her eyes open and fixing him with a furious stare that would have felled an aurochs, “I have missed three moon bloods and here . . . look!” She lifted the robe up to her waist again and turned side on, so her new little bump was silhouetted against the fire light.

His mouth dropped open.

“And my breasts ache! And I feel sick! And I cannot bloody stop crying!”

’Twas only her anger stopping her from bursting into tears now.

Gendry was on his feet and pulling her into his arms, silencing her with warm, tender kisses afore she could yell at him anymore. His lips were so soft, his caresses so gentle, that she could not hold onto her anger for long, but still, she would not open her mouth for him.

Breaking away, he closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers. He was going to be a father and he had just hit a pregnant woman. Twice. Three times if you counted her jaw earlier on. And that pregnant woman was his Goddamn wife.

Seven buggering hells. He was a poor excuse for a husband.

“Did I really hurt you?” he asked guiltily, breathing in the familiar scent of her hair, trying to slow his hammering heart. “I did not mean to.”

“Not really,” she sniffed, letting the rough habit drop back down to cover her tender bottom. “I suppose . . . I suppose I deserved it.”

“Nae,” he sighed heavily, shaking his head, “’Twas about me not you. You had me worried sick Arya and I wanted to punish you for making me feel so . . . helpless. I am so scared of losing you.”

Arya knew admitting to such a feeling was hard for him and to hear him say it aloud made her love
him a little more.

“There are pleasure houses in Braavos that specialise in . . . that sort of thing.” Arya confided, feeling the cheeks on her face heat as much as the ones on her bottom, “Some people must like it, but I do not think I am one of them.”

“Me neither,” he said with a rueful chuckle, pulling away slightly in order to show her the palm of his hand. The cut he had suffered when he had grabbed the point of her blade had reopened. A thin trail of blood snaked down his palm and curled around his wrist. “It hurts like buggery.”

Arya could not resist asking slyly, “And how would you know that?”

He narrowed his eyes and growled, “I have not told you about my adventures on The Wall with the men of the Nights Watch.”

Arya gasped in shock, only for him to burst out laughing. The tension between them broken, he picked her up and twirled her around afore launching them both towards the bed.

As soon as they fell across it in a tangle of limbs, he gasped, “Seven hells! The babe!” jumping back onto his feet, dragging her up with him.

“The babe is fine,” she scolded, trying to pull him back to bed, “And do not start treating me like some glass bauble Gendry Baratheon, for I can still beat you in a sword fight anytime, babe or no.”

“You think?” he drawled, allowing himself to be dragged back down onto the bed, making sure to plant one hand on either side of her shoulders so he could keep all his weight off her and the babe.

“With one hand tied behind my back,” she teased.

“Then mayhaps you would like being tied up more than being spanked?” he teased waggling his eyebrows at her.

She playfully swatted his chest, but ‘twas like trying to push away a rock; a warm rock that rose and fell against her hand with every beat of his heart.

“Tell me about our babe,” he asked, all of a sudden serious and intense again.

“’Twill be born in the summer,” Arya began, unable to keep from smiling at the thought, recalling the scene she had imagined where the three of them were together, bathed in golden summer sun.

“Boy or girl?” Gendry asked, planting a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Boy,” Arya answered without hesitation, somehow suddenly sure their babe was a he.

Gendry grinned down at her. “I was hoping for a girl as beautiful as her mother.” Although Arya thought ‘twas a lie, she appreciated the compliment. However speaking about their babe as a real, living little person brought all her old fears bubbling back to the surface.

“I am scared I cannot keep my babe safe,” she said, her voice trembling with unspoken emotions.

“’Tis our babe Arya,” he reminded her, pushing up to sit beside her on the bed. He drew her up and pulled her into his lap, tucking her head against his shoulder. “You have been alone too long, but you will never be alone again, for we have each other now.”

“’Tis just . . . ’tis just . . . I could not bear for anyone to hurt our child; for him to go through what we went through.”
“Or her,” he interrupted with a chuckle.

But Arya could not laugh. She was deadly serious and afraid, nae terrified for their babe. A part of her knew this was why she had not wanted to acknowledge the pregnancy earlier. She was far too scared; no longer for herself, but for her babe. Tears slid out of the corners of her eyes and down her cheeks.

Taking her bruised chin gently between his thumb and forefinger Gendry tilted her head up until she was forced to look at him through her tears. “I shall guard our babe with my life, Arya I swear,” Gendry said solemnly, “. . . and you too.”

“But . . .” she started to protest. He stopped her mouth before she could protest any more, tightening his arms protectively around her, not breaking their kiss until he was sure she was too breathless to talk.

“All I ever wanted to do was protect you Arya Stark, and now I have the sword to do it,” he grinned, looking over her shoulder at the new Valyrian steel gleaming in the firelight. “Just like in the song.”

“What song?” she sniffed, able to think only of the song Sansa owed The Hound.

“Tom ‘O Seven’s song,” he grinned.

“For you shall be my lady love,
and I shall be your lord.
I’ll always keep you warm and safe,
and guard you with my sword.”

He sang it badly and Arya groaned with dismay. To let him sing her stupid love songs and let him look after her went against everything she was, everything she had trained so hard to be. But despite it all, she was desperate to be loved, desperate to believe every stupid, romantic thing he said.

“I am going to protect you and our babe, whether you like it or not,” he murmured into her hair as he kissed the top of her head. “Anyway, you will not be able to stop me when your belly is so big you cannot see your toes and that one had tied behind your back.”

“’Tis serious,” she muttered, annoyed he was making light of her fears, that he thought this some sort of jape. She twisted away from him, intending to get up and away.

“Oh no you don’t,” he growled, dragging her back with arms as strong as ship’s anchors. “I told you I was never letting you escape me again.”

She huffed, knowing resistance was futile. Still, she folded her arms defensively across her chest. He shifted until the top of her head was fitted neatly under his chin and his arms encircled her waist, snuggling her against him.

“See how well we fit? We were destined to be together.”

When she still held herself stiffly, he blew out a long sigh.

“When you left me, hell bent on killing The Hound, I realised your list was not about revenge at all.”

That annoyed Arya even more. Apart from the fact that she did not want to think about, or talk about, the bloody Hound, how dare Gendry presume he knew anything about her list?

“I think you would not feel safe until every one of those people on your list was dead.”
She opened her mouth, ready to decry him, but was struck dumb. At that moment ‘twas as if the world had paused and her heart had stopped beating.

“Am I right?” he pressed.

She could not answer. How was it possible he could see what she could not? She had thought killing The Hound was to keep Sansa safe, but now Gendry had opened her eyes, she saw her list for what it truly was; a prayer for safety. All she ever wanted was to be safe, for her family and her pack to be secure.

Carefully, gently, Gendry smoothed his palms past her waist and then inwards until they lay below her belly button. With fingers spread wide, the tips just touching, he cradling the small swell beneath.

This time he did not try and sing the words, but whispered softly to her, “My featherbed is deep and soft, and there I’ll lay you down, I’ll dress you all in yellow silk and on your head a crown. For you shall be my lady love, and I shall be your lord. I’ll always keep you warm and safe, and guard you with my sword.”

Arya uncrossed her arms from her chest to place her hands over his afore she replied, “And how she smiled and how she laughed, the maiden of the tree. She spun away and said to him, no featherbed for me. I’ll wear a gown of golden leaves, and bind my hair with grass, But you can be my forest love, and me your forest lass.”

She knew, with a sudden fierce certainty that she had to put aside everything else; her own insecurities and all the killing and reach out to Gendry. Their babe deserved a mother brave enough to fight for his future. She had been alone too long and despite everything she did and said to the contrary, despite all her claims to be a lone wolf, she was desperate to be loved, desperate to believe every stupid, romantic thing he said.

“Our babe, this new life, is a new beginning for us both, an end to all the death and darkness. Mayhaps we should call him Azor Ahai,” Gendry said gently afore he kissed the end of her nose.

“And have him kill his wife in order to forge a sword? Nae, you might like that tale, but I do not, especially seeing as I am now a wife,”

“Aye, you are,” he grinned broadly, “And you are mine, you and that babe you carry. No man shall take either of you from me, for I shall follow them through the seven hells and to the ends of the earth if I need to.”

“Or to the Quiet Isle,” she teased.

“Aye, although since you arrived, ‘tis no longer very quiet.”

She pretended to be offended and push him away. He just held her tighter and hummed with delight as she wriggled against him. “Keep doing that and I shall be forced to finish what I started earlier.”
Hearing him say that sent a shiver of anticipation up her spine. “I am glad you are a man who keeps your promises.”

“I promised to make you mine wife and I intend to keep that promise!”

He angled his head to kiss her, but she braced her arms against his chest and tilted her head and shoulders back.

“First tell me what you have named that magnificent sword you intend to protect me with my Lord.”

He grinned and together they looked to the Valyrian steel leaning against the wall.

“I know I offered you the right to name her M’lady, but I was thinking of Fire; seeing as she is sister sword to Ice.”

Arya wrinkled her nose and pulled a face, “That sounds like a Targaryen name.”

“Aye well, one of the reason’s I thought on it was to piss Aegon off,” Gendry said tightly, not finding the matter as amusing as he had ‘afore he had his talk with Aegon earlier. “’Tis the name he always coveted for his House; if they ever got hold of some Valyrian steel.”

“And the Master Smith to work it.”

“Aye,” Gendry sighed sadly, thinking on both Aegon and Tobho and how neither one was likely to end well.

Assuming he thought of his old Master, Arya cupped her palm around Gendry’s bristled jaw, smiling to herself as he closed his eyes and leaned into her hand.

“I have thought of a better name.”

“Hmmm,” he murmured, turning his face further into her hand and giving her palm a long, slow lick with his tongue.

She giggled as a tingle of pleasure shot through her, curling her toes.

“Stormbringer.”

“Aye, Stormbringer,” he grinned, raising his eyes to meet hers, “’Tis perfect” he whispered, afore sweeping his tongue over her palm again.

She giggled again with wicked delight.

“I love to hear you laugh like that.”

“And I love your tongue.”

“I think ‘tis time to keep my promise and finish what I started wife,” Gendry grinned, wondering if being able to call her wife would always thrill him so. He gripped her waist and lifted her up. She elegantly raised one long, strong thigh across his lap as he turned her to face him.

“Let’s get rid of this.” He tugged at the Brother’s habit. Arya lifted her hands above her head and he had the robe off and discarded in a heap on the floor in moments. The cool air on her teats made them pucker and harden in readiness for his touch.

“By The Gods you are beautiful,” he murmured. “Your breasts are . . . “ he could not find an
appropriate word, for they were larger all ready and he was imagining them as big and round as melons, sitting above a huge belly swollen with his child. The image sent lust pounding through his veins.

“My breasts are . . . what?” she asked with a slight frown tugging at her brow.

“Magnificent,” he breathed in awe.

She giggled once more as she slid her hands around his neck and clung on tight. He liked that.

As he pulled her close up against him, her chaffed nipples rubbed against the hair of his chest, making her gasp. He immediately claimed her mouth with his, deepening the kiss, using his tongue and lips and teeth to tease little gasps of pleasure from her.

It only took him a moment for him to unlace his britches, freeing his cock to stand thick and proud between them. The heat from her punished bottom warmed his palms as he cupped the perfect globes of her arse. As his fingers kneaded the tender flesh, she moaned and rocked her hips forwards. He smiled into their kiss as her hand found his cock. Long, cool fingers wrapped around his girth as she guided him towards her entrance.

“Look at me.” His voice was soft but demanding.

Arya looked up to see the deep emotions shining in his eyes; lust yes, but also a burning, possessive love. Only after she had returned his gaze with an equally scorching one of her own, did she ease slowly over the tip of his cock, taking him inside her with excruciating, exquisite slowness. He filled her inch by throbbing inch, allowing her time to stretch and adjust until he was buried deep inside.

Arya closed her eyes, savouring the slow, delicious slide and the feeling of fullness and completeness being impaled upon him gave her. She used her knees to lift off him, rocking her hips forwards, desperate for the friction that would give her the release from the tension that had been building between them all day.

Gendry felt the unmistakable beginnings of her orgasm ripple through her. Too soon. Stilling her hips with his hands, he eased back to break their kiss, needing to slow them both down, right down, or he would last no time at all and embarrass himself like a green boy.

“Faster,” she gasped.

“Why hurry wife? We have all night.” He lowered his head and took one stiff teat into his mouth, channelling all of his love and desire for her into slow, sweet, sexy kisses.

She groaned from deep in her throat as she let her head fall back and brought her hands to her breasts, pushing them together, offering them up to him as a wedding feast.

He lavished attention on first one and then the other; licking, sucking and gentle nipping. Clenching his arse and flexing the muscles of his thighs and abs, he thrust deeper, pulsing his hips, all the while holding her still so he controlled their speed and their rhythm, rocking them slowly, so Goddamn slowly.

“Please . . .”

To silence her, he shifted his tongue’s attention from her teats to her open mouth, circling her tongue with his, kissing her with the same maddeningly slow tempo. Arya groaned desperately into their kiss, running her hands over his muscled shoulders, arms, chest and his ribbed belly, willing him to go faster, harder, deeper.
“Please husband….”

Hearing her call him husband shattered his resolve to go slowly. With all the frustration and pent up need of the last few days and all his desire for her, he drove up into her. She used her thighs around his hips to pull him tighter. Their bodies met together with a pounding force. Again and again and again. His thrusts grew faster, while she gripped him harder, straining together to find the perfect rhythm; hard and fast and ruthless. He could feel her on the edge, desperate for him to send her soaring over it. He pumped up into her as she bore down on him sharing the same frantic, desperate need.

Releasing her hips, he cupped her breasts, rolling her teats between his fingers, pinching them hard as he hammered into her. Her orgasm shoot skywards, clenching around him, pulling him deeper, tighter as his orgasm came rushing towards him. Their climaxes collided and blended; braking over them in waves. Her body trembled, her back arched as she shuddered on top of him, wresting every last drop of pleasure from him, until finally she melting against him, her head falling, exhausted against his sweat soaked shoulder. A growl of satisfaction rumbled from deep in his chest.

Their heartbeats thundered to the same rhythm as they fought to catch their breaths, exquisite pleasure, thick and warm, melting through their veins.

“Do you and the babe feel safe now?” he murmured against the damp tendrils of hair that curled and framed her face.

“Aye,” she breathed and snuggled tighter against him. He grinned contentedly into her hair. She was his.

-o-

Spent and satisfied, they lay curled together in the narrow bed. As Gendry’s fingers stroked gently through her hair, Arya felt her eyelids grow heavy with sleep. While she wanted to make love and talk about their plans for the future all night long, she was beyond exhausted. She felt sated, lethargic, as if she were boneless in his arms. But afore sleep claimed her, she remembered what she had wanted to ask him earlier, in the Sept.

“Why did you choose the Warrior over the Smith?”

She felt his chest rise under her as he drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Arya thought she might be asleep afore he answered, but eventually he said softly, “I was praying for the strength not to fight.”

“Hmm?” she murmured sleepily not understanding what he meant.

“To find another way. To avoid a war,” he said as he gently curled a strand of her hair around his finger.

“Hmm?” she murmured again, feeling even drowsier than before. He was speaking in riddles and she was too tired to puzzle them out.

“Go to sleep wife,” he whispered as he brushed his lips across her forehead.

For once, she was happy to do as she was told.
First, I have to thank everyone for their messages of support after the last non-chapter. I love you guys. Good job I hadn’t been able to read them that night or I would have been washed away in floods of tears. You guys rock my world.

Well, it was delayed, but it was big and long and hot and hard. Enough sex for ya Brazilian Guy?

Yet again, he was wonderful and inspiring, not to mention great fun to discuss spanking with. Couldn’t have got there without him.

Next chapter we’re gonna have Bran (at last!), Daenerys, Jon and maybe a few surprises . . .

See you in two weeks . . .
Viserion usually bucked and fought all the way back down into the Dragon pits, but a long night ride back to The Red Keep had left him almost as anxious to be home as Aegon. Almost, but not quite.

Dawn was breaking, bringing red and gold back over the edge of the world. In this light, the Red Keep looked as if ‘twas on fire. If only, then he could sweep down on his Dragon and carry Lady Sansa away. Then they would both be free.

Aegon had no idea where the outlandish notion of freedom came from, save riding through the cold night air with naught but a Brother’s habit for warmth. He had spent the long lonely hours huddled over the neck of his Dragon thinking. He had done a hell of a lot of thinking.

Everything, for all of his life had been dedicated to winning back his Grandfather’s throne, which should have been his father’s and now was his. He had the Iron Throne and what else? Nothing. And no one.

He had always thought being King would be enough; nae he had always been taught ‘twould be enough. Now he had it, he realised that reclaiming the throne for the Targaryens had not been his dream, it has been Varys’ and Jon Connington’s, it had been Daenerys’, seven hells, it had been most of Westeros’, but never his.

The realisation that he could walk away from it all and not look back had shaken him to the core. One day he had been Aegon the Bold, Aegon the Self-assured, Aegon the fucking Arrogant and the next he had been as lost as Valyria. Despite the crown he wore and all the power and status he could wield, he was hollow and empty inside.

That was the day he realised Lady Sansa Stark was as lost as he was. He had lived other people’s dreams for them and she continued to sacrifice all of hers for the good of Westeros. Yet the Iron Throne and Westeros and all of its people would continue the relentless struggle for survival long after Aegon Targaryen and Sansa Stark lay dead in their crypts.

They were made for one another, he was sure of it. They each would fill the emptiness inside the other and together they could be whole.

Viserion extend his wings, catching the weak morning thermals as sunlight reflected off those damn red walls, soaring higher, circling afore beginning his descent, spiralling, losing speed to glide down into the shadowed darkness of the pits. Aegon screwed his nose up as the acrid smell of Dragon shit assaulting his nostrils. A rumbling growl, akin to a cat’s purr, vibrated through Viserion’s neck and Aegon’s thighs. Far below Drogon and Rhaegal screeched blood curdling welcomes. Home sweet home.

Scale suits worn by the Dragon Maesters glinted gold and green in the morning sun. Tyrion had suggested their construction from carefully collected scales the three Dragons periodically shed. They were cumbersome and unwieldy, but by The Gods they worked. If he was totally covered, a man could survive a full on assault from Dragon fire. His skin would burn and peel from the searing heat, but he would live.

Half a dozen of these Masters were waiting with chains as thick as Aegon’s thigh, ready to shackle
Viserion as soon as he came within their reach. Aegon signalled at them to back away. Their dubious skills would not be needed by him.

A weary Viserion was quite happy to land gracefully in the centre of the sand arena of the pits and obediently fold his wings. He even lowered his neck to let Aegon slide off; the King’s stiff limbs protesting at being forced to move after hours cramped in the same position.

“What news?” Jon asked, striding briskly out from the shadows afore Aegon’s boots had even touched the sand. Jon stopped beside the Dragon to rest one hand on Viserion’s streamlined skull, but his attention was all on Aegon, waiting for his report from The Quiet Isle.

Aegon was, as always, fascinated by the effect Jon had on the Dragons. The sides of Viserion’s cruel muzzle had curved upwards, in what could only be a Dragon smile. Another deep, rolling purr of contentment rumbled through Viserion. Although he was standing six feet away, Aegon could feel the vibrations through the soles of his feet.

“For fuck’s sake Aegon,” Jon hissed impatiently when Aegon did not immediately deliver his news. Jon’s change of mood caused Viserion to roll one golden eye open, the lid slipping back sideways in that disconcerting Dragon way. “Is my sister alive or dead?”

Aegon clasped his fingers together and pushed them up above his head, stretching his arms, rolling his shoulders to loosen the tight knots in his muscle while shifting his weight from one hip to another. He grimacing as blood flowed back into his cold, heavy limbs, all the while rather enjoying making Jon wait.

“I presume you mean Arya?” Aegon eventually asked, unable to resist the opportunity to tease his Brother.

“You are such a fucking arse sometimes,” Jon snarled. Without warning, Viserion whipped his tail against Aegon’s thigh. The pain was both unexpected and stinging. With no leather britches and only the bloody Brother’s habit to protect him, his thigh would be throbbing for days. Aegon cursed under his breath, wondering if that particular assault had been the Dragon’s idea or Jon’s.

“Easy! Easy! They all live,” Aegon muttered, holding his hands up in surrender while stepping backwards until he was well out of the reach of Viserion’s viciously twitching tail.

“And are any hurt?”

“Only a windmill.”

Jon sagged with relief and began absentmindedly stroking the Dragon’s scaly head again. Aegon wondered what gift was better; being a warg or being impervious to fire.

“What happened to the windmill?”

“Viserion mistook it for a rival; with predictable results. I can only think he mistook the canvas sails for another Dragon’s wings.”

“I shall bear that in mind,” Jon said, finishing his ministrations to Viserion with a tug of one wickedly curved horn. The Dragon rumbled with pleasure again. “Where is the best place to land Drogon and Rhaegar?”

“One side of the island is given over to fields. Land there. ‘Tis not far to the Sept and what’s left of the windmill.”

There was something else Aegon had to tell his half brother and there was no easy or indirect way to
say it. “Our father is buried in the yard of that Sept.”

Jon lifted his head slowly and turned to Aegon. His expression was blank, unreadable, his eyes black as pitch, but every muscle, every movement radiated tension.

They were interrupted by the sound of jingling coins, they both turned to see Daenerys approach, swinging a velvet bag as she came.

“I was just about to tell Jon that he would need a hefty purse of gold, but as usual you are one step ahead of us,” Aegon grinned, hoping the arrival of The Queen would break the tension.

Although Daenerys smiled at the comment, her smile never reached her eyes, which Aegon could now see were red rimmed. Her face was blotchy and her hair less than sleek. ‘Twas unheard of. Daenerys always took great pride in her appearance, much as he did himself. But today he was wearing a brown and dun robe and she had obviously been crying. What a sorry excuse for a Targaryen King and Queen they were.

“As you seem pleased with yourself, can I presume Lord Baratheon’s mission was a success?”

Aegon and Jon nodded while the four Crows accompanying Daenerys tried hard to suppress their mirth at King Aegon’s dramatic change in appearance. While they would not dare comment on his appearance, Daenerys had no such qualms.

“By the Gods, what is that . . . thing . . . you are wearing?”

Aegon looked down, pretending he had only just noticed he was wearing a Brother’s habit.

“I lost all my clothes.”

Daenerys raised her eyebrows and said archly, “I do not wish to hear about whatever debauchery led to your being reduced to borrowing that. Just get changed. I find the sight of you dressed as a pious Brother strangely disturbing.”

Aegon clutched at his heart as if she had just wounded him. “You doubt I am pious?” Aegon gave Daenerys his best hurt and offended expression.

Daenerys gave him a don’t-you-try-that-with-me-I-know-you-too-well look and sniffed, “I would wager this bag of gold dragons and a whole lot more, that you have never tried to be pious in your selfish little life dear nephew. Not even once.”

“Touché,” Aegon admitted with a smirk, “However, I intend to try from now on. I find I have been most affected by my visit to the Quiet Isle.”

Jon shot him an enquiring look, no doubt assuming finding his father’s grave was causing him to behave so out of character.

“And pigs might grow wings and breathe fire,” Daenerys snorted, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Daenerys’ belief that he could not change; that he would always be an incorrigible rake stung. Aegon could be anything he wanted, ‘twas just that he had never wanted to be particularly good before. He had wanted to be King and he had made it so. If he wanted to be pious and win Lady Sansa’s hand, then by The Gods, he could do that too. Daenerys’ doubting his ability to change annoyed him more than he had expected and he found himself scowling down at his aunt.

“Stop pouting my sweet.” Daenerys patted his cheek, “It rather spoils the pious air you are trying to
cultivate.”

“We should make haste if we want to be there and back afore sundown,” Jon interrupted, signalling to the Dragon Maesters to release Drogon and Viserion.

As the massive portcullis gate that caged the Dragons was hauled upwards, the two Dragons began to screech at ear splitting volume and thrash their tails in excitement. Aegon drew Daenerys aside just as Drogon let loose a ferocious jet of fire that shot thirty feet across the yard. Men screamed and the wash of heat from the flames blew Aegon and Daenerys’ hair back.

Jon narrowed his eyes and focused his thoughts on the black Dragon. Almost immediately, Drogon dropped his great shoulders and languidly turned his massive, horned head towards Jon. Eyes of molten lava regarded the warg with a mixture of curiosity and grudging respect. At least no more fire spewed forth from those black, smoking jaws.

The suited Dragon Maesters began prodding Drogon and Viserion with long wooden staffs. The two Dragons lumbered forwards into the morning sunlight; Drogon’s smouldering, red, snake eyes never leaving Jon.

“My boys are in high spirits today,” Daenerys smiled indulgently, but neither Aegon nor Jon shared her enthusiasm for the Dragon’s conduct. ‘Twas the most dangerous time now; released from their cages, the Dragons were feisty, full of pent up energy and barely contained resentment towards their human captors. Though they had never spoken of it with Daenerys, both Jon and Aegon held the view that Drogon was now beyond even her command. If ’twas not for Jon being a warg, ’twould have been too dangerous to let the largest, black Dragon live.

But that was not what Aegon wanted to talk to Daenerys about. Taking her by the arm and inclining his head towards her so no one could overhear, he asked, “Why have you been crying?”

The Queen looked up at him with shimmering, sad eyes. “Jon told me about Arya’s . . .” Daenerys could not even bring herself to say the word babe.

Pulling her closer, Aegon murmured, “Your time will come.”

“My time has passed,” Daenerys said firmly, pushing him away. “I am delighted for Arya and Gendry. ‘Tis Jon I weep for, not myself.”

“He loves you deeply. No matter what,” Aegon sighed, wishing there was more he could say or something he could do.

“You will just have to have enough heirs for us all,” Daenerys scolded, making a brave attempt to shake off her melancholy. “What about Lady Shireen? She will make an excellent wife.”

Aegon’s eyebrows shot up. “I have honestly never considered that,” he said diplomatically. ‘Twas no lie. Shireen would be a useful alliance he supposed, but there were so many reasons not too; having Lord Baratheon as a Good Brother being the first and foremost amongst them.

“Then you should. She has child bearing hips and if you look beyond that greyscale, you will see she is beautiful, inside and out.”

“Hmmm,” murmured Aegon noncommittally. The woman he wanted was beautiful on the inside too. If Lady Sansa caught greyscale tomorrow or was as badly burned as that Hound, ’twould make no matter to him now. He had been bedding the prettiest women since he was but a youth and not one of them had made any impression whatsoever on his heart. It had taken a selfless woman with sad, blue eyes to do that.
Daenerys made ready to leave, fastening the velvet bag of coins to a thin, braided belt around her waist while Jon checked his sword belt and other weapons. Aegon did not want them back too quickly and he had thought of a good way to delay their return for a while.

“I saw a caravan on the King’s Road flying banners of white and grey. They were heading south. I presume ‘twas Brandon Stark and the party from Winterfell.”

Jon looked up from refastening his sword belt, displaying none of the excitement or surprise Aegon had expected. “Nymeria and Ghost left two nights ago. They are with Bran now.”

Aegon blew out a heavy sigh. Why had he forgotten about the Direwolves? Of course Jon would already know where the Northerners were.

“All the same, you could pay them a flying visit afore they arrive,” Aegon said, unable to resist chuckling at his own joke.

Jon merely shook his head, but Daenerys seemed taken with the idea. “We could stop on the way back. I am sure Arya would wish to see her brothers as soon as possible.”

Aegon’s ears pricked up. Brothers. There was more than one? “Rickon lives?” he asked, looking from Daenerys to a stony faced Jon and back.

Daenerys flushed pink, “Ooops! ’Tis supposed to be a surprise. Oh please do not tell Sansa,” she pleaded.

“Of course not,” Aegon agreed solemnly. He had no intention of provoking Jon’s wrath, at least not for something as trivial as that. Still, Daenerys mentioning Lady Sansa gave him the opportunity he had been waiting for.

“I thought Lady Sansa would have come with you, to hear the news,” And to greet me, he thought, imagining himself riding Viserion, catching sight of that unbound auburn hair blowing in the wind as Sansa waited atop a tower for her first glimpse of his return. Her soft, curvaceous body would be ready to welcome him and only him. Best of all, he would be the only one who could ease the worry and the pain in those sad, blue eyes. Aye, a man would never want to leave his home again if he had Lady Sansa awaiting his return. Banishing such wishful thinking, Aegon focused instead on maintaining his usual bored, disinterested facade.

“She has been in the Sept since you left, praying for her sister’s safe return,” Daenerys said.

Alas not mine, he thought.

“Pyp, would you take a message to Lady Sansa for me?” Daenerys asked, turning to one of her favourite Crows.

Pyp grinned, relishing the Queen’s attention. As he stepped forwards to receive his instructions, Aegon interrupted, “No need, I shall go.”

Daenerys gave her nephew a surprised, sideways look.

“’Tis important news and I should convey it myself,” he explained, hoping he had not seemed too eager. Aegon did not want to arouse any suspicions and ensure there was no possibility of interference until he had time with Sansa alone.

“She may have questions only I can answer,” he said, with what he hoped was a nonchalant shrug.
Daenerys face broke into a broad smile. “How very thoughtful of you. Mayhaps you are turning over a new leaf after all.”

Aegon bowed low to The Queen, in part to acknowledge her complement and also to hide the delight he was having a hard time keeping from his face. He would soon have Lady Sansa alone.

“The Quiet Isle and my headstrong sister await,” Jon said as he walked over to and climbed on Balerion’s back, every movement radiating grim determination. Daenerys gracefully leapt onto Rhaegal as Aegon and the Crows retreated to a safe distance.

With a final, ear splitting farewell cry to Viserion, first Drogon and then Rhaegal stretched their necks and extended their wings afore seeming to pounce and grab at the air. Monstrous leathery wings beat frantically at first, sending grit and leaves and great drafts of air scudding around the pit as the Dragons clawed for height. Aegon and the Crows were forced to shield their eyes against the debris and wind.

By the time Aegon was able to look skyward, the two Dragons were already above the walls of the Red Keep, spiralling, searching for the thermals that would take them soaring up into the clear blue sky and off to The Quiet Isle. Aegon allowed himself a swift, satisfied smile afore he turned on his heel, motioning for Pyp to follow him out of the pits. The Black Brother fell into step beside him.

“Do you know where Ser Duckworth is camped?”

Pyp chuckled, “If I didn’t, I could easily find him by following the path to his tent worn deep by servants carrying roast oxen and women seeking his bed.”

Aye, the ferocious appetites of the Golden Company’s captain were hard to miss, as was the ginger mane that made him look like a loveable marmalade lion. Rolly had been tasked with keeping the peace in the army encampment outside the city walls. Ser Duckworth’s air of affability made him eminently suited to the task and he made it look as if keeping so many men in line was easy. However, any misbehaviour or dissent in the ranks was ruthlessly crushed by The Duck. Those who knew him well and those who were foolish enough to cross him, were not fooled by his amenable appearance. Burning ambition, a ferocious temper and a will of steel were hidden under that deceptive, easy going exterior.

“Go t him and tell him to gather sixty of his best men. They are to wait for me outside the Royal Sept.”

“Sixty?” Pyp repeated carefully. The men of the Night’s Watch rubbed along easily enough with Golden Company, certainly better than Bad Company did, but nonetheless, they tended to keep to their own areas; the Night’s Watch guarded the Red Keep and Aegon’s larger Golden Company the city itself. The thought of sixty of Golden Company’s finest within the walls of the Red Keep made Pyp uneasy. He wanted to ask Why? He would have asked Jon, for they had been friends and brothers in arms long afore the Commander of the Nights’ Watch sat on the Iron Throne, but questioning King Aegon was another matter entirely.

“Aye, sixty,” the Targaryen King confirmed tersely. Pyp knew he was pushing his luck, but he screwed his courage up further and asked,

“Armed?”

Aegon stopped walking and turned to fix Pyp with a regal, ice cold stare. Pyp swallowed hard. Those unfathomable lilac eyes seemed to burn straight through him. Holding his gaze for far longer than Pyp found comfortable, Aegon finally drawled,
“What use are guards to me if they are unarmed?”

As suddenly as it had been turned on, the compelling, intimidating, invincible air of authority was gone and the Targaryen King was affecting that disinterested, lazy tone he was so good at, the one that fooled almost everyone into thinking he was a mere fop. But Pyp knew better; Pyp knew there was battle hardened steel under the silk Aegon usually wore. Pyp had seen Aegon hold ten thousand men in thrall and have every one of them prepared to lay down their life for him. Gendry might be the Commander they loved the best for they all saw themselves in him, Jon the one who held their loyalty for his unwavering determination to do right by them, but Aegon was the one born to lead and he scared the shit out of Pyp.

“Ser Duckworth and sixty of his best men,” Pyp confirmed, relieved to finally be able to break that disconcerting eye contact by giving a tight bow and marching off to carry out King Aegon’s orders. Seven buggering hells, he hoped Jon returned soon.

Aegon dismissed the rest of the Crows. Lady Sansa awaited him in the Royal Sept; even if she did not know it yet. He would have Duck and his sixty men swear fealty to Sansa, not to him. No matter what came to pass, Aegon wanted Sansa to be safe. Once Golden Company swore their oath, he knew Duck and the rest of them would die to protect her.

He would name them “The Winter Guard.” Aegon had decided upon the name during his midnight Dragon ride and was well please with it. He would dress them like the men of the Night’s Watch, in leather and fur, only white. Of course he would let Lady Sansa have the final say in how her guards looked, but he hoped she would agree with his choice. And he wanted Sansa to know they were hers to command. They would answer to no one but her, not even to him. Above all, even if he were dead, or worse, if she rejected him, he wanted Sansa to be safe.

Who would have thought that a woman could have made him a selfless man? Mayhaps they’d call him Aegon the Chivalrous after he was dead. He shook his head and smiled to himself as he set off to implement the next stage of his plan. For that he needed someone far less astute than Pyp.

Beyond the Dragon Pits he spied four men rolling barrels; presumably bringing ale from the brewery. Being a Dragon Maester was notoriously thirsty work; not only did the men foolish enough to volunteer for the job sweat like pigs in their Dragon scale suits; they seemed to prefer to do the job half drunk. It irritated seven hells out of Jon, but Aegon could not blame the men; when your life was likely to end shortly, either in an inferno or in a Dragon’s jaws, why not spend what was left of it in a pleasantly drunken state?

Snapping his fingers, he beckoned to the eldest man. “You are Murmison, are you not?”

The brewer’s eyes widened in surprise and he immediately bowed low, casting his eyes down as he confirmed his name with a respectful, “Aye Your Grace.”

Following Murmison’s lead, the other three also bowed low. Good. Aegon made it his business to remember something about everyone he met and invariably it paid off eventually. He recalled having a conversation with the Master Brewer several moons ago about watering the army’s ale down even further and Murmison’s name had been mentioned in a positive way by his Master. Aegon could not remember why, but why was irrelevant. The man could be trusted and he was awestruck that the King knew his name; ’twas enough.

“I need you to carry a message to Lord Willas Tyrell for me.”

The brewer quickly nodded his assent.
“Tell him that Lord Tyrion requires to converse with him urgently and he is to make all possible haste to the canal site.” The current excavations were half a day’s ride from the city walls. That should keep Willas out of the way for a while.

“Aye Your Grace.”

“And Murmison, if he asks any questions, plead ignorance.” Aegon favoured the kneeling man with a conspiratorial smile, knowing loyal Murmison would play his part well. The man nodded his confirmation.

“Do this for me and I will commend you, in the highest terms, to your Master. He is getting old and ‘tis about time we put our minds to appointing his successor, is it not?”

Murmison’s eyes shone with pride. Aegon would speak to the Master, for he believed a King should always keep his word. Such attention to detail was key to bigger things. Every man should be treated with respect. Tyrion had taught Young Griff, the arrogant boy, that lesson and Aegon the man had remembered it well.

Once Murmison was on his way, Aegon dismissed the older two and indicated for the apprentice to stay. “I have a task for you. Do you think you can also do your King’s bidding?”

The boy nodded so enthusiastically, Aegon thought his head might bob off.

“Go to the Tower and tell the Maester to send a raven to Lord Tyrion on my behalf. If the Maester gives you any trouble, tell him I will cut his cock off and feed to his beloved birds.”

The boy grinned with wicked delight.

“Willas is coming. Delay him overnight.”

Aegon had the boy repeat the message three times afore he sent him on his way. Tyrion would do it, Aegon had no doubt. They had an unspoken understanding since their days on the Shy Maid, that either would help the other when asked. The ‘understanding’ had been invoked infrequently, but every time to the great advantage of one of the parties and Aegon needed this advantage now. He needed Lady Sansa to himself for a day and a night. However, for some inexplicable reason, Tyrion seemed to like Willas and would no doubt extract a hefty price from Aegon for having to waylay the Lord of High Garden.

With Daenerys and Jon gone, Willas about to be distracted and Rolly on his way, Aegon could finally direct his attention to Lady Sansa Stark.

He had intended to change out of his dun and brown robe afore greeting her, but he had almost forgotten how pious she was. If Sansa had remained in the Sept all this time, mayhaps it would help her to see him in a different light if his appearance was also different. He would keep the Brother’s robe.

With his heart beating fast in his chest, Aegon set off for the Royal Sept. ‘Twas a fair distance from the Dragon pits in the bowels of the Red Keep to the Royal Sept, but afore he knew it, Aegon was at the doors of the Sept with no recollection at all of how he got there.

By The Gods, when was the last time he had been this nervous? Nerves never normally affected him, but his palms were sweating now and a trickle of sweat rolled uncomfortably down his back as he stared at the carved doors. He clenched and unclenched his fists and tried to regulate his hammering heart. He tried to focus on the ornate images of the Father and the Mother fashioned by some long ago master craftsman; so different to the Sept on the Quite Isle.
She was inside and when he stepped over this threshold everything would change, one way or another. But would it be for better or for worse? For the first time in his life, Aegon was about to open the impregnable walls he had built around his heart and he had no idea whether his surrender to love would bring him victory or death.

With a final murmured prayer to the Father and the Mother, King Aegon Targaryen the Sixth of his Name, and as much a fool for love as any man who had ever lived, pushed the carved doors open, ready to meet his fate.

-o-

The frantic clanging of a bell woke Arya up with a start. She sat bolt upright, dragging the cover off Gendry. He huffed and grabbed at it, pulling it back over his shoulder.

“Seven hells what is that?” Arya was instantly fully alert and already half out of bed.

“I think you will find the Brothers have just spied Drogon and Rhaegal,” Gendry grumbled sleepily, snaking one strong arm around Arya’s waist, preventing her escape.

Sure enough, at that moment the frantic cry of “Dragons! Dragons!” penetrated the sanctuary of their little cottage.

“Elder Brother will insist on greeting the King and Queen properly, so that just about gives us time to…”

With unexpected speed and impressive strength, Gendry suddenly hauled her backwards. Arya found herself pinned under a huge, hot slab of muscle, faster than she thought a sleepy Gendry could move. He was obviously wide awake now and, judging by the insistent pressure his cock was exerting between her legs, he was already hard and raring to go. Again.

Looking up at him through the curtain of his long hair, Arya could not prevent the little gasp of pleasure that escaped her lips as he rolled his hips against hers. Another day’s growth rendered his jaw black; reminding her of the way he looked in Jon’s solar seven moons ago. How could she not have recognised him then? The laughing eyes that saw her more clearly than anyone else, had not changed at all in all those years.

“What?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows as he watched her watch him.

“I love you, Gendry Waters,” she said, catching him unawares as she levered her arms against his shoulders and used her legs wrapped around his thighs to flip him over. She was top, albeit hanging over the edge of the narrow bed. “But ‘tis well past noon and I will not be caught by my big brother still abed with you.”

She had just enough time to worry about the smirk that appeared on his face afore she found herself swung over the side of the bed. Only one of his hands wrapped around her wrist and one of his legs hooded behind her knee prevented her from hitting the floor, or more accurately his sword. It had been carefully placed by the side of their bed during the night.

“Stormbringer!” she yelped.

She was instantly hauled back into bed and crushed to his chest while he craned his neck to see over
her shoulder.

“Damnation! I forgot I left it there.”

During the night, when they had been woken by the cold, Gendry had hopped out of bed to feed the fire. To Arya’s amusement, he had brought his sword back to bed with him.

“Do swords get cold too?” Arya had teased as he laid it carefully between them. He had given her an insolent look and not even dignified her question with an answer.

The two of them had lain on their sides, heads propped up with their elbows, looking down at the sword between them. Gendry stroked one finger down the flat of the blade, from point to hilt. A glowing trail of fire appeared under his finger tip, causing Arya to shiver. No matter how many times he told her ‘twas just Valyrian steel, she remained convinced that sword was somehow alive.

“Stormbringer,” Gendry murmured. The whole blade seemed to shimmer with light as he gripped the hilt. “This sword will belong to our son one day. He will wield it to protect the Stormlands. I pray that our son’s son and his son after him will wield it with honour.” And although he did not say it aloud, for he did not wish to worry Arya, he prayed he did not have to swing Stormbringer in protection of the Stormlands, or Westeros or any other damn place himself.

Sensing the burden he felt when he spoke of the future, although not understanding it, Arya covered his hand with hers. “And as long as the Baratheons wield that sword, they shall speak in awe of Gendry, the ‘prentice smith who rose to become Lord and made Stormbringer with his own hands.”

Gendry lifted his eyes from their hands to gaze at her with all the love he thought he would never have. “And they shall tell of how he won the heart of his beautiful Lady Arya Stark with patience, determination and his great big ….” He paused for effect and glanced down at his erect cock.

“They will not!” Arya shrieked, playfully slapping his shoulder.

“Sword! I was going to say sword!” he laughed as he carefully removed Stormbringer and set it on the floor at the side of the bed. He had loved her again after that and Stormbringer had lain beside them, forgotten until Arya had nearly fallen on it.

With their wedding night over, Arya planted a chaste kiss on the end of Gendry’s nose. “We must go and find Jon afore he finds us.”

Gendry groaned as reality came crashing back in upon him. Aye, he would have to find Jon and speak to him about Aegon. Letting Arya go, he dropped his forearm over his eyes and took a moment to offer up a silent prayer to The Gods. He prayed that there would be no more war and that this was not the only peace he would ever know.

-o-

As Gendry had predicted, Elder Brother had greeted King Jon and Queen Daenerys with a great deal of pomp and ceremony. Brothers and novices lined the route to the Sept, holding large, ceremonial banners, each depicting one of The Seven. Elder Brother led the procession, followed by the Dragon King and Queen.

Arya and Gendry walked, side by side, along the path from their cottage to the Sept. They had fallen unconsciously into step; shoulder to shoulder, both dressed in boiled leather, both with their hands on their sword hilts. Gendry loved being like this with her; not just physically close, but also in tune
with her. But why did he feel as if he was marching into battle?

They could see the procession from their own path as it wound towards the Sept. With every step he took, Gendry felt the warm glow of their love making ebb away, to be replaced by the cold, hard reality of the task ahead of him.

‘Twas not only Aegon that weighed on his mind, there was another matter. The plan had been that, after Gendry prevented Arya from killing Clegane, they would return to King’s Landing with Jon and Daenerys on the back of Dragons. But that was afore he knew about their babe.

Arya would not like this, but his need to protect her and their child, demanded he speak his mind.

“Mayhaps we should return to King’s Landing by another way?”

“Hmm,” Arya screwed her nose up, “Why? I was looking forward to a ride on a dragon.”

He blew out a heavy sigh. She was not going to like this at all. “I think we should hire a wheelhouse. Saltpans would be the most likely place to find one.”

“A wheelhouse?” she repeated slowly, her voice dripping with derision and contempt.

He let his gaze drift down to the buckle of her sword belt, sitting low on her belly.

“Because of the babe.”

As his eyes were on her belly, her finger jabbing his chest took him by surprise.

“If you think…”

Jab

“That I am…”

Jab

“The kind of woman…”

Jab

“Who will let you spank her…”

Jab

“And ride in a bloody wheelhouse…”

Jab, jab.

When he looked up from her jabbing finger, her eyes were boring holes in him. She shoved him away and stomped off down the path. Three paces away from him she turned and yelled over her shoulder, “Then you married the wrong kind of woman!”

Gendry blew out an even heavier sigh as he watched her storm off. He had been right. She did not like that at all. Still, he had no doubt he had married exactly the right woman for him.

He caught up with her at the entrance to the Sept where she stood awkwardly beside the row of Brothers, waiting on Jon and Daenerys.

-o-

‘Twas hard to try to ignore pig headed Gendry. Even his scent and the heat of him behind her, sent Arya’s heart racing and sparked that familiar, needy throb between her legs. Seven buggering hells, they had made love all night and half the day and yet her body still craved more. Tying to school her head to ignore him, even if her traitor body would not, Arya tried to concentrate on Jon and Daenerys. How regal they both looked.
Her brother was tall, dark and imposing in the black garb of the Commander of the Night’s Watch. Arya had never seen the black furs currently draped around his shoulders and they only added to his size and air of authority. Daenerys, in complete contrast, wore silver silk and a tunic of fine mail that sparkled in the sun light. Her waist length hair hung loose, blowing gracefully around her petite, curvy figure in the light breeze.

Jon nodded to Arya, smiling as he caught her eye and gently tugging on Daenerys’ sleeve to direct her attention to the door of the Sept. Instead of Daenerys’ usual, wide, welcoming grin, The Queen seemed only able to give Arya a tense, faltering smile. Arya knew immediately that something was very wrong.

Elder Brother halted the procession outside the Sept to bid Gendry and Arya a knowing “Good afternoon.” He added a wink for good measure and Arya felt her face flush hot.

Elder Brother then proceeded to ask Gendry very loudly, “Was your wedding night successful?”

Gendry glanced at Arya, who was now scarlet with embarrassment. He knew that, as there was no bloodied sheet to exhibit, ‘twas essential to proclaim consummation of the marriage in public. But did Arya know it? That way there could be no grounds for him to have the marriage set aside in the future. Not that Gendry would ever want to that, but some unscrupulous husbands did. Judging by the look on Arya’s face, she did not appreciate Elder Brother’s attempts to aid her.

“Aye,” Gendry replied even more loudly, “Very, very successful.”

Arya looked so furious, he thought she was going to punch him right there and then. ‘Twas nothing he could do about that just now, so instead he turned to Jon and explained, “We were wed in haste last night.”

Jon’s eyebrows shot up, but he no time to answer afore Daenerys threw herself on Arya, hugging her tight, crying, “Congratulations on your wedding and the babe.”

Arya gave Gendry a furious, accusatory stare.

She obviously blamed him for Daenerys knowing about the babe, but he had not even known for certain, so how could he have told The Queen? He gave Arya a shrug and a don’t-blame-me look.

‘Twas Jon’s turn to look embarrassed. “The Direwolves,” he said by way of explanation.

Arya glared at him too. Jon and Daenerys had known about the babe afore she had herself? Mayhaps everyone in the bloody Red Keep knew! For a fleeting moment, Arya considered changing her face, running away and leaving the whole bloody lot of them behind. But she would not. She had promised herself. Never again would she hide behind the face of another. So she made do with sending death stares to Gendry, Jon and Elder Brother in turn.

When Daenerys loosened the bear hug she had on Arya, The Queen’s eyes were shining with tears. Not only was Arya embarrassed and livid, she now also felt terribly uncomfortable. She did not have the skills to deal with a crying Queen in front of a whole island full of men. Arya’s preferred method of dealing with emotions was to ignore them completely, but how could not ignore this? She had not had time to think on how her news would have affected Daenerys. The Queen was desperate for a babe of her own and yet ‘twas Arya who was pregnant, without even trying. Arya had hoped never to have to have such a conversation with Daenerys and she had certainly not expected it to happen so soon.

“I am so happy for you, Good Sister.” Daenerys tenderly stroked the side of Arya’s face in what
seemed like a shockingly intimate gesture to Arya. “You will make a wonderful mother.”

The barren Queen’s selfless kindness was too much for Arya to bear. She was already wracked with uncertainty about her ability to be a good mother. Daenerys, on the other hand, would truly be a wonderful mother, yet never had the chance. Daenerys had given life and hope back to all the people of Essos and Westeros. Why could she not have the one thing she wanted above all else? ‘Twas simply not fair.

Still, if Daenerys believed Arya could be a good mother, mayhaps she could do it. “I shall try with all my heart to be a good mother,” Arya said, her voice trembling and on the verge of tears herself.

“Then you shall succeed Arya Stark, for you have never failed at anything you set out to do.” Daenerys gave her Good Sister a lopsided smile as she tried to blink back tears of happiness that were, at the same time, shameful tears of self-pity.

Overcome with emotion, Arya pulled The Queen into a tight embrace, whispering in her ear, “And you shall be a wonderful mother. I know it.”

Arya felt Daenerys’ chest heave as she gulped in a great, shuddering breath, afore she replied sadly, “Alas, I fear I shall only be the Mother of Dragons.”

As Daenerys’ tried to stifle her sobs, Arya lifted pleading eyes to Jon, unsure of what to do and knowing she was about to cry too.

Jon rested his gloved hand gently on his wife’s sob wracked shoulder. “Bran and his party are only a few days north of King’s Landing. We spied their camp this morning as we left the Red Keep. Why don’t we make a stop there on the return journey?”

“Really?” Arya gasped. At last. She would see Bran again. Now she really would cry.

Jon gazed tenderly down at his little sister and his wife, wishing with all his heart he could give Daenerys what she so dearly wanted. At least he could spare her from having to sit and cry through the ceremony in the Sept. “I am sure Elder Brother would not mind if you left right away.”

Daenerys nodded against Arya’s chest. With a final, gentle squeeze of her shoulder, Jon let his distraught wife go.

Jon and Gendry watched the two women who meant everything to them, walk away. Their arms were around each other, supporting each other, the way Good Sisters should.

“Shall we . . .?” Elder Brother motioned for them to continue into the Sept.

Knowing Jon had even less time for The Seven than he did, Gendry coughed and said, “I would like to show King Jon where his father is buried if you do not mind?”

Gendry knew ‘twas a slight to Elder Brother to ask. Jon was too well mannered to suggest it himself, but no one had ever taught Gendry manners. Elder Brother did not look too happy about the timing, but he gave his consent as Gendry knew he would have to.

King Jon and Lord Baratheon waited respectfully until the procession was safely inside the Sept. Once the doors were shut, the two friends made their way to the burial ground at the rear of the Sept. They walked in silence, save for the muffled sounds of pious chanting. Gendry lead his old friend to the spot where he had found Aegon sitting the day before.

Gendry did not relish the prospect of having to discuss his father’s killing of Rhaegar Targaryen
again. He would much rather have been dealing with the problems that threatened them here and now, rather than battles of the past. Still, he did not see how it could be avoided. Jon had to visit his father’s grave and a discussion about the future would have to wait until Jon had time to deal with his past.

Finding the weathered grey slab easily enough, they both stopped and looked down at the final resting place of the Targaryen Prince.

Jon stood, arms folded, legs planted wide and surveyed the grave impassively. “So here lies Rhaegar Targaryen,” he muttered, as if to himself.

Gendry decided there was no point in putting it off. “I have already told Aegon I am sorry for what my father did to yours and I say the same to you now. I only wish our fathers could have found the friendship we have.”

Jon nodded, but there was a long, awkward silence, with neither of them looking at the other, much less speaking. Gendry wondered uncomfortably what, if anything, he should say now. Thankfully ‘twas Jon who spoke first,

“I’m standing here, at my father’s grave side and do you know what I feel?”

Gendry shook his head.

“Nothing. Not a Goddamn thing.”

Gendry had never bothered visiting his own father’s tomb in King’s Landing, so he was not in the least surprised by Jon’s reaction. The things Gendry’s father had given him; his height, his strength and his fondness for wine, paled into insignificance compared to the things he had not given him; the safety of a family, a home, a father’s love and most hurtful of all, not even his bloody name. Robert Baratheon might have sired Gendry in a frantic moment of drunken lust, but he was no father.

Obviously having similar thoughts, Jon said, “Eddard Stark was my father. He raised me, not this Targaryen prince who died afore I was even born. To think of anyone other than Lord Stark as my father would be to belittle all that Eddard gave me.” John shook his head sadly, “Nae, this is not my father’s grave.”

Gendry had begun to pace back and forth. Jon was not going to grieve, so they had to speak of Aegon. As soon as possible.

Still hardly believing what Aegon had said, that war could even be contemplated by any of them ever again, Gendry said, “Then let us talk no more of the past and instead discuss matters that concern our future.”

Jon waited patiently, watching Gendry take six long strides to one side of Rhaegar’s grave, turn and pace six more back. Jon knew something was bothering his friend and ‘twas serious. Gendry was a plain talker and invariably blurted out what was bothering him, but ‘twas obviously a delicate, difficult subject Gendry wished to discuss. Jon prayed that there were no more problems with Arya – already.

“Aegon believes himself in love,” Gendry said finally, stopping his pacing to look square at Jon.

Jon’s only reaction was to raise his eyebrows and say “Good. A steady woman might keep him out of trouble.”

“Not this one,” Gendry groaned, scrubbing his hands over his face.
Jon cocked his head to the side, waiting to hear the rest of it.

“Seven buggering hells, there is no easy way to say this,” Gendry muttered, running his hands through his hair “‘Tis Lady Sansa. And he claims he will do anything to have her.”

Jon snorted. Was that all?

“Aegon may want her, but Sansa does not want him.”

“Are you sure?” Gendry challenged. “We do not know who she wants, save ‘tis not Joffrey, Tyrion or Willas. Aegon is a different matter entirely.”

“But he’s a . . .” Jon grimaced, struggling to find an adequate word to describe his brother.

“…A horse’s arse, a selfish cunt, an arrogant prick and the closest thing I have come across to a man whore,” Gendry finished for him. “But he is also charming, has a silver tongue and, as he told me himself standing right where you are now, what woman has ever been able to resist him?”

“Arya,” Jon grinned.

Gendry frowned, his anger flaring at being reminded of Aegon’s attempt to seduce his wife, even if ‘twas for allegedly noble reasons. “She is not like other women,” he ground out through his teeth.

“Thank the Gods,” Jon muttered, rolling his eyes skyward as if in gratitude.

Frustrated by Jon’s inability to see the danger, Gendry decided to try a different tack. “How often does Lady Sansa laugh?”

Jon thought for a moment and his expression became serious again, “Not often,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Aye, so those rare occasions where she does laugh, when she appears happy and carefree must surely stick in your mind?”

Jon tried to recall the last time he had heard his sister laugh. “When she dances,” he replied slowly.

“Aye. But not when she dances with Willas. Who is always waiting to take over when Willas’ leg means he can dance no longer?”

“Aegon,” Jon sighed, beginning to see what he had not wanted to.

“And does she ever laugh at your jokes, or mine, or anyone else’s? Even Sam’s?”

Jon shook his head.

“Nae, she only laughs at his.”

“Seven hells,” Jon groaned, massaging his temples with trembling fingers. Why had he never noticed afore? Aegon was always attentive to Sansa’s needs; always the first to bring a glass of wine or an extra cushion and how many times had he seen Aegon quietly watching Sansa? Too many to count. But then they all felt protective towards Sansa; grateful, aye and guilty too, for the deal she had made to save King’ Landing from starvation.

To bed Willas had been Sansa’s idea from the first, but they had all gone along with it. Aegon had not raised any more objections than the rest of them and besides, Sansa had overruled them all.
Jon had thought the attention Aegon paid to Sansa was merely a way of easing a guilty conscience. Jon did it too; not one of them would ever contradict Sansa, or argue with her and they made sure she wanted for nothing. But Aegon was the most attentive of them all. He always offered to carry messages for her or to her. Now Jon thought about it, why would a King do that, when there were servants and guards everywhere, all ready to obey? Seven buggering hells. Aegon had even offered to take the news to Sansa in the Sept this morning and, once again, Jon had thought nothing of it.

“Fuuuuck,” Jon swore slowly, realising all the warning signs had been there – right under his nose and he had failed to notice any of them. If only he had seen the danger earlier. Aegon could have manoeuvred into a peacekeeping mission to Volantis or somewhere even farther away, but ‘twas too late for that now. What would Willas do when he found out? By The Gods, what would Aegon do to Willas first?

“He said he was willing to do anything,” Gendry said softly, “Even war.”

Jon closed his eyes, unable to contemplate another war. He gave himself a mental shake. Instead of worrying about what might happen, he should deal with the practicalities now. “Sansa was praying in the Sept, when we left. Aegon went off to find her.”

“And he no doubt has some scheme to be rid of Willas so he can have him all to himself until we return.”

Jon cast a look at towards the sun. ‘Twas late afternoon. “We will not be back until near dawn.”

“Then we must hope that Lady Sansa is as impervious to Aegon’s charms as her sister,” Gendry said, hoping Aegon was not foolish enough to challenge Willas directly and also that Sansa was able to withstand the full force of Aegon’s legendary seductive skills.

Jon inhaled deeply and blew it out slowly. “Aye, we can only hope.”

No further discussion was necessary. Both men knew they had to return to King’s Landing with all possible haste. Even travelling by Dragon, Aegon had Sansa to himself for far too long. They headed back towards Drogon with heavy hearts.

Chapter End Notes

Still not finished. I hope no one minds me taking my time to set the scene for the next story. Bran next chapter though.

Heartfelt thanks to Brazilian Guy and Mrs Jessie Pinkman for their support.

My weekend has not turned out as expected. I was supposed to be in Amsterdam having a good time, but alas, unforeseen circumstances have prevented that. Still, I’m trying to remain positive. Every cloud has a silver lining and I now have nothing to do except write for the rest of the weekend.

So you might get another chapter Sunday. Failing that, it should be next Friday.
The Heart Tree

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Travelling by Dragon amazed Arya beyond her wildest expectations. ‘Twas exhilarating, astonishing, yet also strangely peaceful, soaring like a bird over trees and rivers, farmland and villages. ‘Twas a dream come true.

Being so high and free changed Arya’s perspective on more than just the landscape. She had hoped never to set sight on the cursed and broken towers of Harrenhal again, however, from cloud height, she found them fascinating rather than grim. She amused herself by wondering how many Dragons it would take to destroy what was left of the bloody castle. If three had been sufficient to melt The Wall, surely they could do the same to Harrenhal? Mayhaps she should speak to Jon about it. Now that would be a wedding gift she would really appreciate. The thought of it even kept her warm for a while.

Travelling by Dragon at night was something else entirely.

When the sun disappeared and the moon rose, the palate of warms reds and golds slowly fading into moonlight shadows had been nothing short of magical. Arya had not noticed the cold when there were snow capped mountains glittering to the North in the Vale of Arryn and silver ribbon rivers below. But when the moon disappeared behind clouds, pitching the night into almost absolute darkness, there was nothing to see and she had shivered so much, she thought she might shake herself right off Rhaegal’s back. After tumbling arse over end, she would die in a broken heap somewhere on the inky black ground below. Mayhaps someone would find Needle and, only then, would they know the pile of bones belonged to her. That thought chilled her even more, so she held on tighter to Daenerys and tried to stop shivering.

Despite the cold, Arya must have dozed off, as she was woken with a start by Daenerys’ patting her thigh and pointing down. The land below was cloaked in mist, except a dozen or so camp fires that looked like little islands of light in a murky sea.

As Rhaegal circled lower, Arya could make out the shapes of tents, corralled horses and even a bulky, black rectangle that could only be a wheel house. As they circled, she allowed her mind to drift, for the wheel house had reminded her of Gendry. Her? In a wheelhouse?! Mayhaps if her belly got so big that she could not get on a horse, she might consider it, but certainly not until then.

Recalling the hurt expression on his face when she yelled he had married the wrong woman did make her feel a little guilty. ‘Twas a stark reminder of how much they still to learn about each other. Unbidden, a long ago conversation from Braavos returned to her.

She had been hiding behind an ornate screen, eavesdropping on a gathering of rich merchant’s wives for the Kindly Man. However, to Arya’s frustration, the women had not discussed any of their husband’s cargos or contracts during the course of that long, hot, cramped afternoon. They had been much more interested in advising one younger woman on her impending marriage.

The Kindly Man had not been pleased when she returned with no information of use to him, but Arya had learned much. She had crouched and listened with rapt attention to advice on how a young wife should please her husband. The women had taught not only the young girl, but unbeknownst to them, Arya that afternoon. She had learned she must nod and agree to whatever her husband said, but could later to do what she saw fit. If he found out and was angry, she heard how to take him into
her mouth so he would forgive anything. Arya had used that advice on Gendry. The memory of how much he liked it brought heat flooding to her face and between her legs. But there had been one part of the women’s conversation that struck Arya as absurd at the time and she had forgotten all about it until now.

The oldest women had likened the impending marriage to a pair of boots. Arya had thought it a stupid thing to say, dismissing the old woman as senile, so she had been surprised when the rest of the woman had agreed. The old woman had told the new bride that, just like new boots, her marriage would pinch and chafe at first and mayhaps she would be tempted to push her new husband aside, like a pair of boots that did not fit. However, if she persevered, her feet would toughen up and the boots would stretch and she would soon wonder how she ever did without them. They might smell after a while (the women laughed uproariously at that) but they would protect her feet and carry her far. The young woman had scoffed and dismissed the comparison, as had Arya at the time. But now she was a wife herself, Arya finally understood what that old Braavosi woman meant.

She was certainly chaffing against Gendry’s attempts to spank her and make her ride in a bloody wheelhouse. Mayhaps she was chaffing him too. They certainly had much to learn about each other. While she was sure Gendry would not mention either spanking or wheelhouses again, there were bound to be more irritations and arguments, while they rubbed along together like that pair of boots. She hoped they would eventually be entirely comfortable together and he would not be smelly, but right now Arya had more important things to worry about, like how and where Rhaegal was going to land.

Outwith the circles of light cast by the camp fires, it was impossible to see anything, for everything was hidden by dense fog. They could end up on rocks or in the middle of a river or at the very edge of a cliff. As they flew nearer the ground, fear made Arya grip Daenerys’ slim waist a little tighter. But Arya need not have worried, for The Queen had obviously done this afore.

Banking Rhaegal into a tight turn away from the camp, Daenerys bent low over the Dragon’s head and gave some instruction Arya could not hear. Rhaegal’s ribs expanded under their thighs as he took a deep breath. There was a terrible, foreboding pause before a roaring, searing column of fire poured out of Rhaegal’s jaws, like some waterfall from hell. Flames hotter than the sun lit up the sky and the land for miles around, evaporating the mist below in an instant, to reveal fields and rolling hills, all lit by a harsh, orange light.

Daenerys had seen all she needed and brought Rhaegal swooping down to land in a terrifying, exhilarating rush. By the time they slid off the Dragon’s back, white fingers of mist were already trickling back into the temporary clearing made by the Dragon’s breath. ‘Twas going to be a long and difficult task to find their way to the camp in this fog.

By the time Arya had repositioned her sword and they stretched their stiff limbs, the mist around them was as high as Arya’s thigh, lying thick and heavy over the damp fields. Their voices sounded flat and unreal as they discussed which direction to take. Rhaegal did not seem to like the cold, wet earth and he was lumbering around in a tight circle as a dog might do, trying unsuccessfully to find a pleasing spot to rest.

“What if he decides to leave and we are stuck here?” Arya asked, unsure how likely that was. Before Daenerys could answer, the unmistakable thunder of horse’s hooves shattered the silence. From out of the dark and the mist a lone horseman galloped towards them brandishing a flaming torch that seemed to burn a pathway through the fog.

The fire light cast eerie orange and black shadows across the sharp planes of the horseman’s face and beard. With the furs around his shoulders and the grim set of his features, there could be no mistaking
him for anyone other than a Northman. Arya felt Daenerys reach for, and squeeze, her hand. Blood pounded in her ears and a feeling so long forgotten that Arya could barely remember it, gripped her heart. ‘Twas as if Winterfell, the North, the Starks and all her memories of them were compressed into one, indescribably wonderful feeling. She could smell the pines and the fresh, cold northern air. She could feel the strength and the love that used to surround her flood back to her like snow melt rushing into northern rivers. Arya closed her eyes and imagined she was standing under the Heart Tree in Winterfell, with the leaves all whispering ‘Welcome’. Her head told her she was standing in a misty field by the king’s road, but her heart told her she was back home.

Arya knew Bran was close by. She could somehow sense it; like a pack feeling, an innate awareness she could not describe or name. It just was. But the hard faced, bearded horseman bearing down on them could not be Bran, not after his accident and besides, Bran was two years younger than her and surely still a boy.

Yet butterflies flitted around her stomach, making her feel tense, nervous and excited all at the same time. She had not seen Bran since Winterfell; a life time ago. He would nearly be a man by now. Arya imagined him like Ty, but always sitting down. At least he was alive, unlike poor Rickon.

For so long she had believed them both dead. Even now, thinking about her youngest brother caused a spear of pain to pierce her heart. But she would think only allow herself to think on Bran. He was alive and out there somewhere. Somewhere close.

An icy gust of wind from the north suddenly cleared the mist from around the rider, revealing two pairs of golden eyes on moving black shadows, then a pair of vivid green eyes and finally, one familiar pair of red eyes on gleaming white. The rider was not alone and emerging from the mist was more than she had ever hoped to see. Her pack. A lump choked her throat so completely she could hardly breathe. Summer, Shaggydog, Ghost and Nymeria all together again. But that meant the rider pulling up his horse had to be . . .

“Bran Stark”

He leaned over the neck of his horse and offered his hand to Queen Daenerys. Arya found herself entirely dumbstruck, staring up at the man looming over them. The dark, shaggy hair and the thick beard made his age difficult to determine, but the shrewd, blue eyes belonged to a wise old man. How could this be the boy she had left behind in Winterfell all those years ago?

“Are you not going to greet your Brother?” Daenerys hissed, elbowing Arya in the ribs. With a start, Arya realised she was standing as still as a statue, gawping.

“You doubt ‘tis me?’” the man asked, his voice a deep, teasing rumble, his eyes crinkling with amusement. While he spoke aloud, she heard the same voice inside her head, Trust your instincts Arya. ‘Tis Bran, come to greet you with our pack. How could that be? Surely being pregnant did not make you hear voices in your head?

Our pack, the voice in her head said. Arya could hear the pride in those two words and this time she was sure someone unseen was talking to her and she had not imagined it.

Arya dropped her gaze from the stranger’s piercing eyes, looking for the source of the voice. There was no one else around, save the rider who claimed to be Bran, Nymeria, with Ghost at her shoulder, a grey Direwolf with yellow eyes that must be Summer and finally the biggest and blackest of them all; Rickon’s Shaggydog.

The sight of her youngest brother’s Direwolf tore at her heart, but that voice inside her head made a
comforting, shushing sound, as if ‘twere comforting a babe. The pain eased, although even the voice could never make it vanish completely. She dragged her eyes up, over the man and his horse. There were no stirrups to be seen and no legs protruded from the bottom of the great coat he wore.

“’Tis still the same design Tyrion drew for me all those years ago, only bigger now of course.”

It took Arya a moment to realise the rider had spoken the words aloud this time. Only Bran would know that. She could no longer doubt this wild Northman was her little brother and he seemed to be able to get inside her head.

Bran. She mouthed his name, but did not speak it aloud. Still he smiled and she knew he had heard her think it. But how could that be? She rolled it around her mouth again. Bran. His smile grew even wider.

“Jon is on his way and should arrive soon,” Daenerys said, oblivious to the secret, silent conversation going on between Arya and her brother.

“Alas no,” Bran said to Daenerys, giving her a sad smile.

Daenerys instantly grabbed for his horse’s reigns, “He is!” she declared vehemently, “He said he was coming here and Jon always keeps his word. He followed us from the Quiet Isle!”

Bran shook his shaggy head, his eyes solemn and serious, “He is already in the Red Keep, with the Baratheon.”

“My husband,” Arya gasped.

“I know,” Bran replied, with another smile.

“How? Why would Jon do that?” Daenerys demanded, fear and alarm making her voice sound shrill in the still, dark night.

The Direwolves had been still, watching and listening intently, but now they began to circle the group uneasy, as if sensing danger. Arya felt tension radiate from them; even Daenerys seemed to feel it. But when Bran spoke, his tone was calm and measured, “Many paths are converging tonight and many possible paths lie ahead. Even I cannot see the ones that will be travelled.”

“I must go to Jon.” Daenerys made to turn away, but Bran leaned down and caught her arm before she could. His relaxed demeanour vanished instantly. The air around them seemed to have been electrified by his harsh, commanding presence. The Direwolves stopped circling and pricked up their ears as he spoke,

“He will come to you, but not yet. None of us here can influence what happens in the Red Keep tonight, though ‘twill affect us all.”

Daenerys struggled against Bran’s hold.

“Go to him now and you shall never have the babe you crave,” Bran hissed.

Daenerys immediately stopped trying to escape and lifted her head to stare at Bran, her chin set and her wide, lilac eyes flashing defiantly in the torchlight.

“And how do you know this?” The Queen demanded with an icy, calm authority.

Bran let her arm drop. “Follow me if you wish to find out.”
“What will we do with him?” Arya blurted out, pointing toward the Dragon who watched them all through arrogant, slit eyes.

Bran never answered; instead his eyes took on a milky hue. Without warning the Dragon’s giant head dropped onto the ground with a dull, resounding thud. Shaggydog started growling and snapping at the sleeping Dragon, only for something, or someone to cause him to yelp sharply in pain and bound quickly back to the horse and his rider.

“The Dragon will sleep until I wake him.”

Arya glanced warily back up at Bran, whose eyes had return to normal, or at least what was normal for him. What was he able to do beyond warging? She had no doubt ‘twas him who had called Shaggydog back, but Jon could do that with Direwolves and Dragons too.

Bran was more than that, Arya knew it instinctively. She had felt his presence long afore she could see him and he had been inside her head, seven hells he even seemed to know what she was thinking. He had even hinted he knew what was going to happen in the Red Keep tonight and could tell Daenerys about a babe. Arya wanted to speak to Bran alone, to find out what he could do and to warn him how desperate Daenerys was for a babe and that she would clutch desperately onto any hope he gave her. But Bran was already wheeling his horse around.

As Bran swung his torch away from them, the Direwolves disappeared and the mist closed in once again.

“Does he expect me to walk through this?” Daenerys demanded loudly.

As if they had been summoned by The Queen’s complaint, two more torches appeared through the mist. ‘Twas two more Northmen on horseback trailing two saddled horses behind them.

“Mayhaps Bran read your mind.” Arya chuckled. Daenerys did not find the jape amusing and, if Arya was being honest with herself, neither did she. Apprehension pricked at her scalp, making her shiver. She suspected there would be more to make her shiver afore this night was through.

-o-

The Dragon pits had been illuminated by scores of torches in readiness for their approach. ‘Twas still dark and they had made excellent time to the Red Keep, for Jon had urged Drogon on and on.

Gendry suspected the big, black Dragon had been pushed much harder and they had flown much faster than on his one other Dragon journey with Aegon and Viserion. Aegon had let the cream Dragon glide often, presumably to preserve energy, but Jon had never let Drogon’s wings stop beating out that terrible, heaving rhythm. Every time the Dragon had seemed to slow, Jon had somehow forced him on, despite many ear-slitting, bad tempered screeches of protest from Drogon.

They had spied Rhaegal and the women not long after they left the Quiet Isle. Daenerys had been heading west and inland, in order to follow the king’s road home. Jon decided to take the shorter, riskier route by steering Drogon due south, straight across the Bay of Crabs and across featureless land. Without the snaking ribbon of the King’s Road to guide them, Jon would need to rely on the sun and stars to navigate and if there were no stars tonight . . .? Gendry did not let himself dwell on that, instead he placed his trust in Drogon and Jon to get them to the Red Keep on time.
Pyp was waiting for them with a dozen freshly slaughtered Aurochs and three score Crows. Too many Crows by far and all of them wearing grim expressions. Something had obviously already happened. Gendry could only hope they were not too late.

They had barely dismounted when Jon was shouting across to Pyp for news. Pyp replied with the Night’s Watch hand sign for “Not here. Not now.” What had happened in the time they had been away to prevent free conversation between The King and his guards?

Only once they were walking, with the Crows in a close phalanx formation around Jon and Gendry, did Pyp dare speak,

“King Aegon had me summon the Duck and sixty of his best men to the Royal Sept. I had no choice. If I had not done it, someone else would have. And he ordered them armed.”

Jon nodded grimly. He did not blame Pyp. He had known the man far too long to believe he would ever deliberately act in any way contrary to the interests of the Night’s watch or its Commander.

“Why sixty and why armed?”

“I watched as he ordered them to kneel and swear fealty to Lady Sansa; to protect her at all costs, even if it meant their lives.”

“What else?” Jon knew there had to be more.

“Aegon named them The Winter Guard, but that is all. As soon as you left, King Aegon went straight to the Royal Sept and he was in there with Lady Sansa the whole time. And Lord Tyrell left just after you on some urgent business. His squire told me he had been summoned to attend the canal sight by Lord Tyrion.”

Jon and Gendry both swore. Gendry asked what they were both thinking, “Did Aegon wed her?”

“Not as far as I know. He ordered the Septon and everyone else out as soon as he went in and Rolly never let anyone in. Unless the sneaky fuck wed her without a Septon?”

“But then it would not be legally binding in the eyes of either church or law,” Jon mused, “My brother is not stupid. If he was going to wed her, he would do it properly.”

“Did they go to the Godswood?” Gendry asked. Under the old laws, no Septon was needed there in order to claim a legal marriage.

“Nae,” Pyp shook his head. “I am sure of it. He was in there with her from first light until Rolly and the rest of them swore the oath a few hours ago.”

“Mayhaps she refused him,” Gendry wondered, daring to hope.

Jon snorted, “Or mayhaps he is up to something else.”

They all knew it could have been worse. Much worse. Aegon could have put Willas to the sword and carried Sansa off. Had he done that, they would have been at war with Highgarden already.

However, to Jon’s sharp mind, something about the story did not ring true. Why would Aegon go to all this trouble just to get some men to protect Sansa? “Did Lady Sansa accept Golden Company’s oath of her own accord?”
“Looked that way to me,” Pyp agreed, “She looked tired, but accepted it and thanked every one by
laying her hands on their bowed heads, in the old way.”

Jon cursed again. Aegon was nothing if not thorough. Duckworth would have hand picked those
men himself and if Sansa had accepted them, that oath was unbreakable. Every one of them would
die for her now. Aegon would only have done that if he thought Sansa in danger, but why go to all
that trouble when he could have just stolen her away? And if Sansa had refused to wed him, why did
she accept the oath? And what the fuck were they doing in a fucking Sept together for that length of
time anyway? The obviously answer would be fucking, but that made no sense either. They all knew
Jaime Lannister had fucked Cersi in there once, but Sansa was definitely no Cersi; she was far too
damn holy for that. The whole thing made no Goddamn sense.

“And where are they now?” Jon asked tightly.

“Sansa is in her rooms, watched over by The Winter Guard and Aegon went to the library.”

“No doubt to play his Goddamn harp.”

Pyp shrugged, “Probably. I left half a dozen of the boys to keep an eye on him, but he doesn’t seem
to be planning on running off anywhere.”

“You take Sansa and I’ll take Aegon?” Gendry suggested, smashing one fist into the palm of his
other hand. This time he would not miss Aegon and hit the wall.

Jon thought for a moment and said, “Nae. We both go to Sansa, for we will get the truth out of her.
Aegon could lie to my face and I doubt I could even tell.”

Gendry would have much preferred to have Aegon to himself, but as usual, deferred to Jon’s better
judgement. “Then to Lady Sansa’s rooms we shall go.”

-o-

Bran led the way and the four Direwolves trotted along beside him. Arya could not drag her eyes
away from that glorious sight. She had her brother and the Direwolves back.

She had never thought of Nymeria and Ghost as a pack, but four was different, four was enough. Six
would have been perfect. Grey Wind and Lady should have been here too, she thought with a sigh.
Arya wondered how Sansa would feel when she saw the four Direwolves fully grown and together
again. Old wounds would be reopened, but hopefully time and love would heal them.

A welcoming party awaiting them at the camp; a semi circle of expectant Northern faces; all furs,
beards and dark hair. The only one Arya recognised was Hodor.

Jumping down from her horse, she flung herself upon him. He wrapped his huge arms carefully
around her, repeating, “Hodor, Hodor,” happily as she squeezed his unyielding barrel chest as hard
as she could. ‘Twas mayhaps because of his newly stooped back, or mayhaps simply that she had
grown herself; but Hodor was not as tall as she remembered. He was really only a head taller than
Gendry, but when she was a girl, she had thought him tall enough to touch the sky.

Arya was aware of introductions taking place behind her and she reluctantly let go of her gentle,
childhood giant to see Bran introduce a short, slim woman with a long brown braid and emerald
green eyes to Daenerys.

“My wife; Meera of House Reed.” It made Arya’s heart glad to see Bran beam with pride and love for his wife.

“May I call you my good-sister?” Daenerys asked, taking both of Meera’s hands in hers and turning on all of her considerable, regal charm.

“I would be honoured,” Meera replied, curtsying low to The Queen.

“Oh, me too!” Arya cried, striding over to welcome Bran’s wife. Hodor followed in order to help Bran from his horse.

Trying not to watch Bran struggle with the complicated arrangement of straps that held him in his saddle; Arya focused her attention on Meera. She instantly felt Bran had found a good match, for Meera’s green eyes seemed every bit as shrewd and knowing as her brother’s. But Meera’s eyes were still those of a young woman, whereas Bran’s seemed old as time.

Although Meera greeted her warmly enough, Arya felt a distance between them, as if Meera was assessing her. Her new good-sister congratulated her on the babe. Arya thought with a sigh that it seemed everyone in Westeros knew she was pregnant afore she did herself. They were still exchanging pleasantries when she heard Bran’s voice again, like a whisper inside her head. He was asking Meera,

What do you think my love?

She is indeed as like Lyanna as they say.

Arya turned sharply to look at Bran in shock and disbelief. He was having a conversation with his wife about her, without them speaking aloud. The whispering in her head stopped immediately she looked at Bran, although he smoothly continued his conversation with Daenerys. When Arya turned back to Meera, her brother’s wife was still smiling blankly at her, as if nothing had happened.

Before she could decide what to make of all that, a young man’s voice cried out, “I’ve got it!” and everyone turned to see a youth staggering from behind a tent carrying a barrel. His face was obscured by the foliage of the plant in the barrel. All conversation stopped and the boy dropped the barrel at his feet with a thud. He looked surprised to see two new faces.

“They’re here already?” he asked rather belatedly.

Arya gasped in shock, for she was looking straight at her brother Robb as she had last seen him in Winterfell.

Bran let out an exasperated curse. “Well there go two surprises at once,” he huffed before he introduced the boy. “Arya, you no doubt remember our younger brother as being rather more charming than he is today. That barrel he just dropped is your wedding present.”

“The tree is fine,” the youth grumbled, wiping his dirty hands on the front of his tunic.

“Rickon? Is that really you?” Arya gasped, unable to see past the image of Robb and desperately trying to recall whether Robb had so much red in his hair or such wide hands. Robb would be much older now, had he lived. But Rickon was a babe!

“Well, I was Rickon last time I checked,” the boy drawled insolently, earning himself another curse from Bran.
Arya was unsure she was going to be able to reconcile this youth and his surly attitude with the memory she had of her chubby baby brother. “Do you remember me?” she asked hesitantly.

“I remember I used to think you were another brother and not a sister. You always dressed like a boy.”

Arya looked down at her boiled leather britches and her sword and smiled. “I suppose I still do.”

Rickon shrugged and said, “Not really. You’ve obviously got teats now.”

This time ’twas Meera who scolded him roundly for his crudeness, while Rickon wailed “What? I was telling the truth. She has!”

Arya could only laugh. She had two brothers back. She could not remember being so relieved ever in her life. She laughed so hard she could not stop and had to take great gulping breaths of air.

Although Meera was a good deal shorter and looked as if she weighed half what Rickon did, she shoved Rickon towards his sister. He dragged his feet as he walked over to Arya and self consciously held his arms open, so his big sister could greet him properly. As Arya wrapped her arms around her little brother’s stiffly held shoulders, tears spilled from her eyes and whether they were tears of laughter or relief she could not say.

When Arya had finally stopped laughing and crying and let Rickon go, he told her proudly, “We brought you a Heart Tree for the Stormlands.”

“For Storm’s End,” Meera corrected.

“That’s what I said,” Rickon muttered sullenly.

Bran interceded in support of his wife. “You said ‘the Stormlands’. ‘Tis not meant for just anywhere in the Stormlands. ‘Tis to replace the Heart Tree in Storm’s End that Stannis Baratheon burned.”

“I think she could have worked that out for herself,” Rickon replied sarcastically.

Daenerys, ever the diplomat, stepped between the two brothers afore they came to blows. “Have you started squiring yet Rickon?”

The youngest Stark’s face lit up instantly. “Nae, I was kept at Greywater Watch by Howland Reed, until the war was over. They don’t even have enough dry ground there to build a tourney field,” he added sourly, making it sound as if being a guest of House Reed was no different to being held in a dungeon.

“He is Lord Reed to you and he saved your life,” Bran growled, obviously furious that his wife’s father was being disrespected by an ungrateful Rickon.

Rickon pulled a face and shrugged.

Daenerys clapped her hands together afore another fight could break out. “Excellent!” she exclaimed, “You must come and squire for King Jon and King Aegon. They will make a great Knight of you!”

“When can I start?” Rickon whooped enthusiastically.

“I think you’ll find that you need my permission as Lord of Winterfell,” Bran drawled, afore Daenerys could answer.
“If you are Lord of Winterfell, then why does Jon Snow have Ice?” Rickon shot back smugly.

Although Arya thought ‘twas a fair question herself, no one else seemed to. Daenerys obviously did not like hearing her husband referred to by his bastard name and Bran stiffened in the saddle, looking as though he would happily strangle Rickon if he could get his hands on him.

“Please Bran?” Arya interrupted, with her best wide eyed, pleading look, “‘Twill do the boy good.”

Bran continued to glare at Rickon, but still, he answered Arya’s plea with a begrudged, “Seeing as you asked so nicely.”

“Thank you. And thank you for the wedding gift also. I could not have asked for better,” Arya said, hoping Bran could not read her mind as she guiltily imagined the melting towers of Harrenhal. Now that would have been a much better wedding gift than a tree.

Bran gave a dismissive nod to Rickon, who whooped and declared he was off to pack. Arya though The Queen’s idea to keep Bran and Rickon apart was masterful. Her two brothers seemed to be as different as oil and water. Arya hoped Jon would be the one to oversee Rickon’s training and not Aegon, as Rickon seemed well on his way to being as arrogant as Aegon already. Mayhaps Bran could be persuaded to send Rickon to Storm’s End. Mayhaps ‘twould be better for all. Davos and Old Lem would soon knock that cockiness out of him and she would be able to keep a very close eye on her baby brother. After all these years, Arya was loath to even let Rickon out of her sight. ‘Twas wonderful to have her Winterfell pack around her again. She had even managed to forget about Bran’s warnings about the Red Keep for a while.

-o-

Jon, Gendry and their murder of Crows marched through the corridors towards Lady Sansa’s chambers. ‘Twas not yet dawn. The Red Keep lay silent and, apart from them, deserted.

There could be no doubt the Winter Guard heard them coming, for the noise of their boots and sheathed steel echoed down the long, empty corridors. All the same, Rolly Duckworth affected an air of surprise, pushing off Sansa’s door, where he had been leaning and greeting them with a wicked, wide grin. The other four guards stood smartly to attention, two on either side of Sansa’s door.

“King Jon, Lord Baratheon,” Rolly acknowledged, standing to attention, but far too slowly for Jon’s liking. As usual, Jon bristled at the Duck’s attitude. Aegon might let his pet away with such lax behaviour, but ‘twould not be tolerated by Jon.

“What are you doing here?” Jon demanded, letting his gaze drop to Rolly’s meaty fist. ‘Twas wrapped around the hilt of his sword and Jon gave that a disapproving look. “You know the Red Keep is out of bounds to Golden Company.”

“We are not part of Golden Company anymore Your Grace.”

“So I hear,” Jon replied, his voice low and threatening, “But a different name doesn’t change my rules.”

“We are following King Aegon’s orders, Your Grace,” Rolly replied smartly, standing to attention, but grinning with his trademark, jovial expression.
Jon suspected the Duck was enjoying this conflict between the two Kings, rather too much. Still, Jon found himself in a difficult position. Both he and Aegon were always at pains never to contradict the other’s orders; ‘twas the hardest part of joint rule. That was why they kept Golden Company and the men of the Night’s Watch apart; in order to avoid situations such as this.

“We’ve sworn to protect Lady Sansa,” Rolly said proudly, “Over our dead bodies and all that.”

“I intend to discuss that with King Aegon,” Jon fumed. “But we are wasting time. ‘Tis Lady Sansa I want to speak to – not you.”

Rolly peered out of the nearest window into the black night. “‘Tis a rather unsociable hour for a visit.”

“Don’t push us Rolly,” Gendry snarled, nodding towards at the Crows arranged behind him, reminding the Duck of the overwhelming odds against him. The silence was deafening. Lord Baratheon started for his sword a breath afore Rolly conceded, “Of course, providing Milady agrees.”

“She’ll agree, or The Winter Guard will suffer its first casualty,” Jon snapped.

Hurrying to attend to King Jon’s wishes, Rolly rapped his knuckles on the door.

There was a long, excruciating silence.

Rolly knocked harder, while calling out, “You have visitors Milady.”

A sleepy voice answered, “At this hour?”

Glowering at Rolly, Jon stepped forwards and shouted, “‘Tis Jon. I need to speak with you.”

After a few moments, they heard the bar of the door being raised. It opened to reveal Lady Sansa in a green silk robe and nothing else. Auburn hair tumbled loose around her shoulders, over the swell of full, generous breasts. The green robe clung to every dangerous curve, ending just above delicate, bare feet. Three score men stood transfixed.

“You did not say you had brought an army with you!” Sansa gasped, retreating quickly behind the door. She was a beauty already, but her flushed cheeks, dishevelled hair and near nakedness made her every man’s dream come to life.

If they were treated to views such as this, ‘twas no wonder The Winter Guard were prepared to die for her, Jon thought sourly as he pushed past Rolly and into Sansa’s room.

“Leave us!” Jon shouted once he and Lord Baratheon were in the room. The door closed behind them with a reassuring ‘Thunk’. No one would overhear this conversation.

Lady Sansa walked ahead of them, towards a table with an ornately carved box in the centre. Her hair hung down her back in rich, golden red waves, ending just above the flair of her hips. Green silk flowed over a well rounded bottom and down long, shapely legs as she seemed to glide in front of them. The robe and the enticing sway of her hips showed off her figure to devastating effect. Gendry had to avert his eyes.

Once she was seated, Sansa began tracing the outline of carving on the box with one delicate finger. She did not look up as Jon and Gendry crossed the room or even when they both stopped and bowed respectfully.
With a deceptively calm demeanour, Jon said, “Our apologies for disturbing you so early.”

Sansa kept her attention on the box in front of her. She seemed to find it fascinating; certainly much more interesting than the King and Lord who stood before her. It seemed as if the battle of wills between Jon and Sansa had begun.

Jon gritted his teeth with ill disguised frustration at being kept standing. Lord Baratheon coughed uneasily, while Lady Sansa continued to ignore them both.

“What were you doing in the Sept with Aegon?” Jon asked eventually, his voice seeming far too loud for the stillness of the room.

Sansa finally looked up, arching one elegant eyebrow. A smile briefly flitted across her lips afore she said, “Praying.”

Jon’s nostrils flared slightly. To those who did not know him well, he still appeared calm. “All day and half the night?”

“Aye,” Sansa replied, smiling sweetly up at them as she clasped her hands in her lap. Aegon had warned her that this would happen and she had planned accordingly.

“What were you praying about for so long?”

Sansa gave them a dazzling smile. “My prayers are between me and The Seven.”

“And Aegon,” Jon gritted out, his self control slipping.

Sansa pursed her lips and gave no answer.

“Do you mind if we sit?” Although Jon asked politely, ’twas clearly not a request. He sat down and gestured for Gendry to do the same.

Without taking his eyes from Sansa, Jon began drumming his fingers lightly on the table.

Sansa waited patiently for him to say something. While she waited, she rolled her shoulders slightly, in order to relieve the tension caused by their sudden appearance. If her silk robe happened to slide somewhat off her shoulder, then ’twas their fault for calling at such an inconvenient hour.

Lord Baratheon’s eyes flicked to her bare shoulder, and then sharply away. Sansa had to bite back a smile of satisfaction.

“I see you have your own guards now,” Jon said coldly, his eyes boring in to her.

“Yes,” Sansa agreed, refusing to elaborate. She was determined to give Jon no cause to chastise her, for she had done nothing wrong.

He drummed his fingers again, the silence stretching awkwardly between them.

“Why?”

Sansa gave a little shrug as if ’twas a matter of no consequence. Her robe slipped a little more.

“You have your Crows, Daenerys has the Unsullied, Aegon has Golden Company, Lord Baratheon has Bad Company…” Sansa turned to Gendry, waiting for his acknowledgment, but apparently he still could not look at her. She smiled and continued, “…and Arya is obviously a Faceless…”
“Yes, yes, we all know what Arya is,” Jon interrupted, not wanting to be reminded of exactly what Arya was. Gendry glared at him.

Sansa arched that elegant eyebrow again. Jon’s icy self control was obviously not as unassailable as he liked everyone to think.

“King Aegon offered me my own guard and I thought, why not?” she giggled, shaking her hair out. That caused her silk robe to slip again. This time ‘twas Jon who hurriedly looked away.

“Can you not cover yourself up?” he snapped.

“Oh!” Sansa gasped, jumping up. Her sudden movement drew both men’s attention, as she knew it would. Too many years of having to please too many men made this too easy. She wanted Jon and Gendry gone and this would rid her of them far quicker than any arguing or pleading or stamping her foot.

“I had to dress in such a hurry,” she murmured, pulling the robe up over her shoulder. ‘Twas loosely tied. The tug on the shoulder, combined with just the right wiggle, caused the silken belt to come apart. With a slow inevitability her robe fell loose. Sansa had the sides of the robe clutched together in moments, but not afore she had given them a glimpse of everything.

“Seven hells Sansa,” Jon growled, “Have you no shame?”

He dare speak to her of shame? Did he not realise she had to bury that emotion years afore in order to survive? Sansa bristled, no longer bothering to keep the sharpness from her tone.

“You were the ones who woke me in the middle of the night, questioning me about my prayers,” she snapped, jabbing one forefinger at them, while holding her robe almost closed with her other hand, “And why shouldn’t I have guards like the rest of you?”

Studiously avoiding looking anywhere except at her face, Jon took a deep breath and spoke more calmly, “Did Aegon propose to you?”

“Nae.”

For some reason, the slow smile that spread across Sansa’s face as she denied a proposal, made Gendry think of cat with an injured bird under his paw.

“If he did, would you accept?” Jon demanded, biting out each word.

Sansa narrowed her eyes and folded her arms while Jon leaned forwards, waiting for her answer. By The Gods, he was bringing out the worst in her. Did he not know she had been lying for years? The most awful part of it was, she had been lying to herself. She had been pretending to be someone and something she was not ever since she had been taken her to the Red Keep to be Joffrey’s bride.

She looked Jon square in the eye and said it again, “Nae.”

Jon could not keep the relief from his face.

Of course she had told him what he wanted to hear. Sansa always knew what men wanted to hear.

“And what about Willas?”

“You need not concern yourself with Willas.”

Sansa saw the flicker of suspicion in Jon’s eyes. He should be asking questions, demanding more
Sansa knew the bargain she had made with Willas, for the sordid nature of it offended Jon’s noble sensibilities. He wanted the carts from Highgarden, but he did not want to dwell on what brought them here and kept them coming. Jon wanted out of here and he wanted not to have to look back.

Sansa tilted her chin and held his gaze, defying him to question her further. Finally he nodded and rose from his chair.

“Then we shall trouble you no longer.”

Lord Baratheon stood too and both men bowed. They walked smartly to the door, anxious to be away. Sansa followed, just as anxious to see them go, although she was too good to ever let them know it. Jon paused at the open door and turned back. Sansa could see Ser Duckworth hovering behind Jon but, of course, that was why The King had stopped.

“Keep your Winter Guards out of trouble,” Jon said loudly. “There are already too many guards in the Red Keep for my liking.” The veiled threat was more for Ser Duckworth’s benefit than hers, but Sansa also received the message loud and clear. Any excuse, any hint of fighting with the other guards, and Jon would destroy Aegon’s gift to her.

“Of course,” she replied sweetly, inclining her head in a respectful nod.

As soon as King Jon was out the door, she raced to it and, ignoring the glimpse of Ser Duckworth’s concerned face, shut the door and slid the bar in place.

Have you no shame? How dare Jon ask her that, after everything she had done for the realm? He should ask himself the same question.

The rage she had fought to keep under control pulsed through her now, blurring her vision. She paced the room, clenching her fists so tightly her nails cut into her palms.

She had done as they agreed, told Jon what he wanted to hear, but had it been enough?

Jon would never resort to violence with her. But Jon, or rather Lord Baratheon, would exercise no such restraint with Aegon. Although she had seen no sign of Lord Baratheon’s legendary hammer, she doubted he would have need of it, for his huge fists could do the job just as well.

Sansa prayed Aegon had taken heed of her pleadings to go to Varys or to the safety of Golden Company. But he claimed ‘twould be cowardly to hide and, The God’s knew, being craven was not one of his faults. How could he be so unconcerned? And would he be able to refrain from goading Jon further? Gods be good, she could not bear how worried she was about Aegon.

Sansa sank to the floor and covered her face in her hands. What had she done?

-o-

‘Twas much later; after all the introductions, after everyone had congratulated Arya on her wedding and, more importantly, her pregnancy, that Daenerys finally got Bran to herself. Well, not all to herself, but alone enough to discuss the matter that had been eating at her since their first conversation. Arya and Meera remained, but Daenerys trusted them both not to speak of this beyond the walls of the tent. Dawn was beginning to break over the horizon and Daenerys’ heart was in her
mouth as she finally addressed Lord Stark,

“You spoke of my having a babe . . .” After all this time, dare she hope that she might one day hold a babe of her own?

The atmosphere in the tent changed immediately; the very air around them seemed to crackle with tension.

Bran leaned forwards, his knuckles white where he gripped the arms of his chair and fixed Daenerys with a piercing stare. “’Twas blood magic made you the Mother of Dragons was it not?”

Daenerys tilted her chin defiantly and nodded.

Arya’s spine prickled with apprehension at the mere mention of blood magic. She had tried to forget the thing in the bucket in Tobho’s forge, but she knew she never would.

Bran eased himself back in his chair, his face twisted with the revulsion Arya felt. When he spoke to Daenerys his voice was low and hard. “The same magic that brought forth your Dragons killed the son in your womb and keeps you barren.”

Arya was stunned and horrified by this revelation. Yet Daenerys remained icily calm.

“I have consulted with every Maester and purveyor of magic between here and Sothoryos and none can give me the answer I seek. Can you?”

Bran regarded her long and carefully afore he sighed wearily, “I do not know. The blood of Kings was used to weave the magic. Only the blood of Kings can break it.”

“You do not know?” Daenerys repeated bitterly, “I thought you said you could see the future.”

Bran leaned forward again, his eyes narrowed to cold, blue slits. “Aye, the future and the past. Both are part of the same tree; the roots of the past and branches of the future spreading in all directions. Some things are clear and some things are yet to be decided.”

“You said what happened in the Red Keep tonight would decide the future,” Arya blurted out.

Bran closed his eyes and nodded, pursing his lips as if contemplating something beyond their sight. “It takes root even as we sit here,” he said quietly, “None of us can change that, for the seeds were sown long ago.”

Arya could only think of Gendry and pray he was safe. She wanted to ask Bran, and at the same time dreaded his answer. She cast a sideways glance at a shockingly pale Daenerys, who was no doubt thinking the same about Jon.

As if reading their thoughts, Bran said, “King Jon and Lord Baratheon are safe, for now. But they will reap what they have sown in the Red Keep. One way or another.”

Arya sagged with relief. Gendry and Jon were safe. But her relief was only fleeting. What about Sansa and Shireen? Ty, Bad Company, Brienne and all the rest? What of them? Arya had not realised there were so many people she care about in the Red Keep until now.

“So who is not safe?” Arya asked, shocked by the tremor of emotion she heard in her own voice. A few months ago she had no one, was no one, had no family, no pack and yet tonight she feared for dozens. How quickly everything had changed.
“No one is safe from themselves,” Bran said enigmatically. Arya sensed he knew more than he was telling. Closing her eyes, she reached for the connection with him she had felt earlier, when he was inside her head. Who? She asked, without moving her lips or making a sound.

She felt, rather than saw his surprise. He had heard her, the way she had heard him – inside his head. But as soon as she had made the connection, Bran severed it, slamming that door to her, but not afore she had a glimpse of what he saw. Sansa. ‘Twas Sansa who was not safe tonight.

“Come here.”

Arya was so shocked, so worried for Sansa, so disorientated by that voice in her head, that it took her a moment to realise Bran had spoken, but not to her.

Daenerys was already rising and walking to him. As the Mother of Dragons stood in front of Bran’s chair, Meera caught Arya’s attention and shook her head. Arya’s mouth had just opened, for she was intent on demanding that Bran explain about Sansa, but she shut it again without saying anything. Meera was right – this was Daenerys’ time.

When Arya looked back, The Queen had her dress raised to expose her legs and her slim, pale belly. Bran’s hand hovered above Daenerys’ stomach, yet there was nothing sexual about the scene. Bran’s focus was entirely upon the flat expanse of Daenerys’ skin between her navel and the soft curls of silver-blonde hair below.

Arya and Meera watched as Bran, still without touching The Queen, pinched his long fingers together and drew his hand back, as if pulling on some unseen thread.

Without warning, something erupted from Daenerys’ flesh. It did not pierce the skin. Nae, ‘twas much worse than that. Her skin was punched out from within by something with a gaping mouth and teeth that stretched her skin almost to breaking. Something alive. Bran jerked his hand back in shock and the beast followed, dragging Daenerys forwards with it, as if both were still attached to that invisible thread.

For a moment, none of them moved, until Daenerys’ stumbled. That seemed to break the spell that held them transfixed. She would have collapsed on top of Bran, had Arya’s assassin’s reflexes not sent her leaping between them. Arya gripped Daenerys by the shoulders as The Queen realised what she had just seen; there was something inside her, something alive and evil.

“Get it out! Get it out!” she screamed hysterically and, to Arya’s horror, Daenerys started clawing at her own belly.

Arya tried to grab her good-sister’s wrists, for already The Queen’s nails had gouged red trails in her own flesh. But Daenerys fought like a mad woman as something with a backbone writhed and twisted under her skin. Arya could not hold her wrists still long enough to prevent Daenerys tearing her own skin off.

“Bran! Help me!” Arya shouted in panicked desperation.

The Queen suddenly stilled. Her eyes rolled back in her head until only the whites were visible. Then she dropped like a stone. Arya only just managed to catch her head afore it slammed against the ground. Cradling her good-sister’s head, Arya looked up at Bran in anguish. Her brother’s eyes must have been closed, for they jerked open again to bore into Arya’s.

“I had not anticipated this. You must fetch Jon. Now.”

“Aye,” Arya mumbled, easing herself from under Daenerys’ lolling head. Meera had crouched on
the ground beside them and carefully accepted The Queen’s weight from Arya.

“Take Rhaegal and send Jon here,” Bran ordered, but even his voice held a trace of panic.

“I…I cannot,” Arya said, as she rose to her feet half dazed. She could not banish the image of that thing leaping from Daenerys womb and she had no idea how to ride a Dragon.

“You can. I shall show you how, but you must go now.”

Bran must have called for Hodor without Arya hearing, as the big man was already lumbering into the tent. Hodor lifted Bran effortlessly. Somehow Meera was pushing Arya out of the tent, insisting she follow Bran. Now.

Arya took a final look over her shoulder at Daenerys lying sprawled on the ground. She wanted to go back, but Meera’s demands to leave became too urgent to ignore.

The ride back through the mist might never have happened, for all Arya could remember of it. Bran had led her to where Rhaegal lay sleeping, exactly as they had left him. Arya slid down from her horse, but Bran did not have that option. Without Hodor, he had no alternative but to stay in the saddle. Arya would have to do this for him.

“Sit astride the Dragon. Place one hand on Rhaegal and give me your other.”

Arya did as she was told, resting one hand on the warm Dragon scales and lifting the other to take Bran’s outstretched hand.

As soon as their fingertips touched, she felt a dizzy rush of sensations. She could see herself through Bran’s eyes, sitting on the Dragon, holding his hand, looking pale and lost. She could also feel Rhaegal, relaxed, breathing deeply, the twitch of tired wings and his coiled, magnificent, Dragon strength.


She had no idea if Bran was speaking aloud or forming the words in her head, but it made no matter. She did what he said; breathing slowly in and out, letting her mind settle and expand to accept the consciousness of the Dragon and her brother.

“See? Do you feel it? Is it not wonderful? You are a skinchanger Arya, like me, like the children of the forest. I can teach you. ‘Tis not just power over wolves, but Dragons and people too.”

Yes, she felt it. What Bran was showing her was nothing like the flashes of Nymeria she had in her dreams. This was huge, all encompassing, thrilling and the power of it . . . to control a Dragon, to control a man!

Arya gathered her new found skill and reached out, not to the Dragon, but to Bran. ’Twas as if she peeked behind a curtain and saw the real Bran, not Lord Stark the cripple and all that entailed, but the man who was frightened for his brothers and sisters tonight, the man who was not born to be Lord of Winterfell and worried he was not equal to the task, the man who fucked his wife with his hands and his tongue and his mind, because his cock would not work, the man who was jealously of whole men who could give their wives sons, although he would never exchange his gift, for the use of a cock and legs.

“Enough!”

The word was shouted inside her head and out, making her ears ring and her head spin as he shoved
her away. She swayed and could not tell if Bran had pushed her with his hands or his thoughts, or both, but the door she had opened was slammed in her face and barred against her.

“Do not do that again!” ‘Twas a threat, not a warning. Bran was lashing out in anger and shame. She had an image of herself kneeling in the snow, or was it in the House of Black and White? The Kindly Man was wielding a great sword above her head. As she wondered if he really was going to give her The Gift as punishment for leaving him, his face changed and ‘twas her father holding the Ice above her head and she was kneeling in the snow again and she was a deserter of the Night’s Watch and she knew she was going to die. The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword.

Just as suddenly as the vision appeared, ‘twas gone and she was left reeling from the vivid horror of it, with tears streaming down her face.

“Do not presume to reach inside my head again Sister, for you will not like what you see.”

She shook her head to rid herself of the images and of Bran’s voice.

“When you want me to show you how to ride this Dragon or not?”

This time, she heard Bran’s voice only with her ears, not inside her head. His warm hand gripped her icy cold one.

All she could do was nod.

“Dragons are cunning, wicked and greedy, but they will do as their Master bids, especially when tired, as this one is.”

Arya nodded, deliberately turning her face away from Bran’s, for she did not want to see those visions of her and her father reflected in his eyes.

“You will find it easier to maintain contact by touching him. Talk to him constantly with your mind. Dragons are easily distracted. Do not allow him to be. Keep repeating the word ‘home’. Visualise the Red Keep, Drogon and Viserion and he will take you there.”

Arya nodded again, placing both palm’s flat against the scales, feeling the warmth and Rhaegal’s consciousness seep into her through her hands.

“I can teach you so much more Arya. You will not need to touch, or even see. There is much more Arya, so much more…”

Bran gave her another vision; this time of an old, old man tangled in the roots of a tree, staring at her with one red eye that bored into her very soul. This time ‘twas Arya who slammed the door against him.

“You are learning already,” Bran laughed. His voice echoed chillingly in the cold, empty air. “That shall have to do for now. Send Jon. Tell him his Queen’s life is at stake and he must hurry. Now Arya. Go now.”

She felt Bran draw back the veil of sleep he had laid over the Dragon. The mighty beast stirred under her.

“Remember . . . home.”

Aye, home. Arya tried not to think on Storm’s End or Winterfell or Gendry as the Dragon lumbered
to its feet and stretched stiff wings. She would not, could not, think on Sansa or Daenerys or blood magic or babes or anything else.

Only home and the Red Keep.

Chapter End Notes


And, in case it confused anyone, the correct description for a group of crows is a “murder”. I did not mean Jon and Gendry and the murder of Crows were actually off to kill someone. Not in this chapter anyway.

It will be 2 weeks before you get more. Thanks to Brazilian Guy for his expert martial advice. For everything.
Chapter Notes

First, an author’s note, explanation and apology.

I know I said Friday. I know this is Sunday and it’s only 6,000 words, but I’ve had an unexpected and awful change in my family circumstances and I have had little time to write. Unfortunately this doesn't look like changing anytime soon.
Thank you, as always, for reading and I can only hope you will bear with me for as long as it takes.

L3j

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shireen froze; shock and horror making her hold her breath and press herself deeper into the shadows.

At the sound of the library door opening, she risked a breath to blow out her candle. Praying she would not be noticed, she stood rigidly against the shelves of books, not daring to breathe, watching with growing alarm as a tall figure stopped in the doorway. Although it wore some kind of skirt or robe, there could be no doubt that the figure silhouetted in the rectangle of light was male.

‘Twas the middle of the night and Shireen had no wish to be caught abroad, alone and in her night gown by any man at this hour. Not for the first time this night, she cursed her inability to sleep in the Red Keep. She should have woken a servant and called for a sleeping draught, rather than deciding to put her sleepless hours to use and satisfy her curiosity on the matter that had been keeping her awake for several nights in a row.

She could only hope she had been quick enough to snuff out her candle afore the man saw her. Why had she been so foolish as to put herself in this position? She was unchaperoned in a castle full of strange men; every one of them armed to the teeth. Instinctively she knew ‘twas a warrior she faced now. Not only was he tall, but he was powerfully built. As he reached back into the corridor to draw one of the torches from a wall sconce, she noticed with an increasing sense of dread that he moved with the easy grace of a cat. If ‘twas some old Maester or some simple scullery maid come to set the hearth for the morning fire, Shireen might have been able to sneak around the shadows on the far side of the library and creep out unseen. The chances of sneaking past this warrior were non existent.

As the man shut the library door behind him, the flickering torch he now held aloft illuminated his bowed head and broad shoulders. She had to stifle her groan of dismay. Of all the men it could have been, why did it have to be him? The light glinting on long, sliver hair confirmed she was shut in the library with the Targaryen King himself. The dancing flame revealed the sharp, unforgiving angles of his high cheekbones and straight nose. As he looked up, concentrating on lighting the next torch, she got a good look at the serious, mayhaps even troubled, expression on his far too handsome face.

By blowing out her candle, she had already made it plain she did not wish to be discovered. With every passing moment, it became harder to announce her presence. She should have spoken up immediately, but she had not, so what was she to do now? Cough politely? Call out his name? Mayhaps he had a sword and would think nothing of running the intruder through first and asking
questions later. What in seven hells had possessed her to come to the library in the middle of the night anyway?

Even as Shireen asked herself the question, she already knew the answer; her damn curiosity. When they still talked to each other, her mother had never ceased telling her only daughter that curiosity would land her in trouble. Shireen’s inability to just accept things as they were certainly seemed to have landed her in well and truly in trouble tonight.

Shireen recalled an alcove a few steps back and she silently retreated towards it, still pressed against the shelves of books, her slippered feet making no sound. Mayhaps the King was looking for some particular book just as was she. Mayhaps he would find the book he sought quickly and leave without finding her. Mayhaps she would be lucky tonight. Shireen stepped back into the alcove and tried not to breathe.

Only bothering to light the first torch and the fire in the hearth to keep the chill night air away, Aegon settled himself in his favourite chair and picked up his harp. He needed to think and he did his best thinking here; in quiet solitude, letting his fingers glide over the strings and play whatever tune they would. As his graceful hands traced, old, familiar patterns and as sad, sweet music drifted from his harp, he knew he did not have long left. The die was cast, the pieces in play. He had ensured Sansa would be safe, no matter what, but as for what would happen next; he could not say.

Aegon Targaryen had never run away from anything in his life afore and it seemed rather late to start now, besides, his conversation with Lady Sansa Stark has not gone as he had anticipated . . . or mayhaps it had. They had talked and talked and talked and then she had wept over him. Normally he despised tears; he considered them used by women to manipulate men, but Sansa’s tears had not been like that. Never in his life before had he the urge to do whatever was necessary to stem a woman’s tears and he had seen a hell of a lot of women cry; normally over him.

Women had an annoying tendency to fall in love with him and he inevitably left them sooner or later; hence the tears. But Lady Sansa was different from the rest in so many ways. He already knew he would never leave her as long as she wanted him, knew he would protect her from any harm, no matter the cost, even if it meant his own life.

He could scare believe it himself; all these years of being a selfish, self serving prick and yet a pair of sad, blue eyes had been enough to breach the defences he had so carefully built up from boyhood. He knew the intensity of his feelings for Sansa Stark made him weak and he despised weakness, yet he was helpless to fight it. He wanted her. He wanted to possess her; wanted it so badly he could hardly think straight at the very time he needed all of his wits at their sharpest.

Sighing, he began another melancholy air on his harp. Jon would be here soon, no doubt with that bastard Lord Baratheon at his heels. Should he lie to his brother? Aegon had never been one for lying; bending the truth to suit his needs was as far as he had gone afore, but as Sansa said, one person’s truth was another person’s lie. Mayhaps she was right, mayhaps ‘twould be better not to tell the truth for once.

Aegon’s jumbled thoughts were interrupted by a sudden loud, but decidedly ladylike, sneeze. It had not come from outside. Seven buggering hells, he was not alone.

Swiftly setting his harp down and grabbing the torch from the wall sconce, he strode towards the source of the sneeze. Although unarmed, Aegon was confident he was more than a match for any woman; even one with a weapon, providing of course the woman was not that damnable Arya Stark.
Expecting to find a maid or a thief or even bloody Arya Stark, he was taken aback to be met by Lady Shireen Baratheon stepping out from the shadows with a haughty look on her face and a caustic attitude,

“These shelves are so thick with dust, ’tis no wonder I sneezed. Your maids should be thoroughly reprimanded!”

Aegon’s surprise was replaced by curiosity. Lady Shireen wore only her nightclothes; and not the practical, matronly sort of nightclothes he expected her to wear either, but fine silk and lace clinging to exactly the sort of childbearing hips that Daenerys had recommended to him the day before. There was obviously a side to Lady Shireen she had, so far, kept well hidden. Her true nature was not the only thing well hidden; the greyscale that marred her face was almost entirely covered by a sweep of black hair, tied loosely below the ear on that marked side.

He must have been staring, as she self-consciously smoothed one hand over her hair and with an almost apologetic shrug said, “Lady Sansa suggested I wear my hair like this.”

Aegon could not help but smile at the mention of that lady’s name, “It suits you well,” he said warmly as Lady Shireen blushed and averted her eyes from his.

“But that does not explain why you are sneaking around my library in the dark wearing only your night clothes.”

As if only now remembering she was not properly dressed, Lady Shireen clutched her nightgown tighter to her chest. Aegon had to resist the urge to chuckle, as she obviously did not realise that, in doing so, she only pulled the material tighter over her breasts, accentuating their decidedly ample curves.

“At Storm’s End I was busy from dawn to dusk. I fell into my bed every night and slept like a log. But no one ever actually does anything here.”

Aegon could find no fault with her argument so far. Despite himself, he found he was amused. He raised his eyebrows, waiting on her to continue her explanation.

“All I get to do is needlework or gossip or be paraded afore every unmarried Lord or Ser that Queen Daenerys can find. So what do you think I am doing in a library? I cannot sleep and I am looking for a book to read. Besides, no one told me ’twas your library,” Shireen said sharply, afore adding a more respectful, “Your Grace,” as an afterthought. She knew she really should not speak to a King like that, ’twas hard to remember to treat him as one when they were alone together and she was in her night clothes. After all, he was just a man and, judging by the way his lilac eyes swept all over her and lingered most irritatingly on her chest, he was just as predictable as the rest of them.

“As King of Westeros, all of the Red Keep and everything in it is mine and you would do well to remember that,” Aegon smirked, rather enjoying this unexpected encounter and the opportunity to think on something other than the impending confrontation with Jon.

The lady scowled and opened her mouth, as if to give him a tart retort, then thought better of it and snapped her mouth into a tight line. Her brows were still drawn together in an indignant frown and damnation she looked just like her bloody cousin in that fit of high dudgeon.

Still, Aegon was delighted to find his night time intruder was not the meek, decidedly boring young lady he had taken her for. Lady Shireen was surprisingly spirited and, now the greyscale was hidden, not unattractive, provided you could see past that big boned, black haired Baratheon look, which he obviously never could. Aye, Lady Shireen would make some man a fine wife one day, but ’twould
not be Aegon Targaryen. However, a short diversion from his troubles was just what he needed and she seemed well equipped to provide him with one.

“Tell me what book you are looking for. Mayhaps I can find it for you and we can both get back to what we would prefer to be doing.”

For some reason that question caused Lady Shireen to blush to the roots of her hair, avert her eyes again and clutch that already straining nightgown even tighter to her bosom. ‘Twas a simple question, yet no answer was forthcoming from the lady. Aegon chuckled as he set his torch in the nearest wall sconce and leaned casually against the shelving, “You intrigue me Lady Shireen. I thought you merely a timid country mouse, yet you swagger around my castle at night, half dressed and seeking books of an illicit nature.”

Shireen was sure King Aegon was the rudest man she had ever met. He thought her a timid, country mouse?! Well, the timid part was usually true, but she knew she had to come out of that dark recess bold and confident, otherwise King Aegon’s legendary, rapier wit would have her fragile self esteem shredded to ribbons.

The moment she had arrived in the Red Keep and experienced the dismissive stares and vicious tongues of the Court, Shireen had known that confidence was the best, in deed her only, form of defence. The weak would be trampled underfoot by those climbing the ladder of ambition and she had no intention of being crushed by any one of the degenerates here, not even the Dragon King himself.

“I never said what type of book I was looking for and ‘tis a symptom of your wicked mind that you think I would be looking for such a book!” she huffed, trying to appear affronted by his suggestion, when in fact he had hit the nail on the head at the first attempt. This King was too damned perceptive by far.

“So tell me the name of the book then,” he asked, his smile widening as her indignation increased.

Shireen pursed her lips and glowered at him. She was used to straightforward, gruff men like her father, Ser Davos and even cousin Gendry; men who said what they meant and meant what they said. But this Targaryen King was different and too hard to read. She had no experience of such men, unless you counted Edric Storm and she tried very hard not to remember him.

King Aegon was smiling, but she was not sure if he was smiling at her in amusement, for she had thought for a moment she had seen a flicker of something else in those disconcerting violet eyes. She had thought it might be surprise and something else. Respect? Mayhaps he was not used to people addressing him merely as an annoying man, rather than a King or mayhaps she was a fool for imagining there was indeed more to him than the vision of the arrogant, fashionable, fop he presented to the world.

“I do not know the name of the book, for if I did, I would find it easily,” she bit out sarcastically, afore adding another, “Your Grace,” as an afterthought to sweeten the acid of her tongue.

Aegon was finding it harder and harder not to laugh. If the lady could turn her thoughts into actions, he had no doubt he would have been transformed into a toad by now. By The Gods, this was just the sort of diversion he needed.

“Tell me the subject matter and I will find you the book then,” he offered amiably. He would keep up the pretence of being mildly disinterested, but in truth, his curiosity had been well and truly piqued. Now he was on to her, there was not a chance in any of the seven hells that Lady Shireen was going to get out of here before he discovered whatever little secret she was trying to hide and he
had no doubt she was hiding something.

“I shall come back another time…” the lady began, starting towards the door. He immediately pushed himself off the shelves, blocking her way.

“Come, come, no time like the present,” he murmured, taking a step towards her, noting with satisfaction that she immediately took a step back.

Aegon was well aware of the effect he had on women and frequently used it to his advantage. All his adult life the fairer sex and some of the more effeminate men had been awed and dazzled by his mere presence. He liked to think that, had he not been King, half the population of Westeros would have reacted to him in the same, flustered way. Being King simply meant women were more willing to forget about their husbands, lovers and disapproving family members and give in to the lustful feelings he tended to inspire.

“Tell me the subject matter of the book you seek Shireen,” he purred, deliberately using only her first name in order to unsettle her further and taking another step towards her. She took another step back and he had her backed up against a bookcase. There was nowhere else to go, unless ’twas past him.

He fully expected her to lie and tell him she was seeking a book on baking blackbirds into a pie, burst into tears, or some equally ridiculous thing, but this lady was obviously made of sterner stuff.

“All right then,” she declared caustically, tilting her chin up to meet his gaze with those sky blue eyes that were so disconcertingly like her cousin’s. “If you must know, I was seeking a book on kissing.”

“Kissing?” he repeated incredulously. He would have been less taken aback if she had said ‘Sexual positions from the south’ or ‘man love,’ for there were several such books that on those subjects that he had read thoroughly, but kissing? Who could write a whole book on that and who, apart from Shireen, would want to read it? Kissing was just a prelude to that other, much more fascinating, subject.

“Aye, kissing,” she muttered, “Go ahead . . . laugh. I know you want to!”

“Why would I laugh?” he asked, shaking his head, keeping his expression solemn, “But I admit I am intrigued. Why do you not just . . . practice?”

“I have been,” she shot back defensively, “That is why I want to read a book about it.”

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Aegon decided he had heard enough. ‘Twas more proof of why he steered clear of virgins; far too much work for too little reward. Books on kissing indeed.

“There are no such books,” he said authoritatively, before strolling back to his favourite chair. “Come back when you want to know how to please a man in bed or have him please you. There are plenty of books about that.”

He sighed wearily as he sat back down, kicking his legs up on the opposite chair before hastily dropping them to the floor again. He kept forgetting he was still wearing the damn Brother’s habit. Raising his legs might give Lady Shireen a glimpse of more than she bargained for.

Ignoring her, Aegon picked up his harp and began plucking another, sad melody. He fully expected Lady Shireen to scurry back to her obviously lonely bedchamber, but to his mild irritation, she appeared afore him again. He chose to forget her and play on. He suspected she was such a well mannered thing that she would leave once he made it clear her presence was no longer welcome. But, by the time he had finished another mournful tune, she still had not moved. He was finding it hard to think with her standing there watching him with those damn Baratheon eyes.
“Leave,” he said imperiously, without looking up.

The lady did not speak, but he was aware of her shaking her head. This time he did roll his eyes.

“Lady Shireen,” he sighed in exasperation as he set his harp down, “Has no one told you ‘tis treason to ignore a direct order from your King?”

Ignoring his question, she said brightly, “I have a proposal for you.”

He raised his eyebrows and finally deigned to look up at her. Lady Shireen was looking uncommonly pleased with herself – another annoying expression she shared with her bloody cousin.

“Not interested,” he drawled, but even that bored response did not seemed to dampen her enthusiasm.

“An experiment. . . like the Maesters do.”

He looked up at her through insolent, heavy lidded eyes. “Nae. Go away.”

“There is no need to be rude,” she chided, “At least hear me out afore you dismiss me.”

Seven hells, no one else dared call him ‘rude’ to his face. He was King and he could say whatever he damn well pleased and no one dare think it rude! But somehow her standing afore him in her nightdress, looking young and vulnerable and so damn virginal made him feel like an evil ogre. Mayhaps this was what ’twas like to have a little sister he thought morosely. Jon certainly seemed unable to deny Sansa and Arya anything and he unexpectedly found himself caught in the same trap with Lady Shireen.

“Alright, let me hear this proposal then,” he sighed, kicking his legs up onto that other chair, no longer caring what Lady Shireen saw or not. If he was going to have to listen to her, he would at least be comfortable while he did it.

Her eyes flicked briefly to his bare legs, afore she frowned disapprovingly, but she began her proposition nonetheless.

“As you know, my cousin Lord Baratheon and Queen Daenerys have decided to find me a husband.”

“Aye . . .” Aegon drawled slowly, wondering where in seven hells she was going with this,

“In the past few days, the Queen has attempted to pair me off with Prince Trystane Martell, Lord Andar Royce, Ser Lyn Redfort, Ser Owen Fossoway of Cider Hall, Ser Raymun Fossoway of New Barrel. . .”

She went on, but Aegon had already lost interest. By the sounds of it, Daenerys had been her usual through self. Shireen must have met almost every man of marriageable age currently in attendance at Court and seemed to remember all of their names when even he had trouble remembering which of the Fossoways were the red apples and which were the green. He held up his hand and stopped her mid flow.

“I get the idea. But what has this got to do with me?” Aegon asked somewhat warily. Surely the little virgin was not so naïve as to suggest that he might be a more suitable match for her than that any of that motley crew of Lords and Sers? But had Daenerys herself not suggested such a match? Suddenly Aegon found himself wishing he had made Shireen leave before she had a chance to begin this awkward conversation.
“I have kissed most of them,” Shireen declared resolutely, “I only declined to kiss the ones who were too old or whose breath stank too pungently. I made myself try with the rest.”

“Good for you,” Aegon murmured vaguely, still puzzled by where Shireen thought she was going with this.

“I want a love match you see.”

Aegon’s eyebrows shot up. By the Gods, she was more naïve than he thought. The little fool thought a love match possible? Women of her rank had no choice in who they wed. Alliances were decided on the basis of which match brought the most in terms of land and strength. Even he, as King, would tear the realm apart if he followed his heart. If a King could not have his heart’s desire, what chance did a lady like Shireen Baratheon have? A love match indeed. He could not stop himself from smirking at the lady’s naïveté.

“I do not see what you find so funny. Lady Arya said I should settle for nothing less and Lord Baratheon agreed.”

Aegon cocked one eyebrow in surprise then blew out a long, low sigh. ‘Twas so preposterous he did not doubt ‘twas true. So Lady Arya proposed and Lord Baratheon acquiesced. It proved Lord Baratheon was under the she-wolf’s paw to a greater extent than Aegon had suspected.

“So you want a love match,” Aegon said wearily, “But what in seven hells has that got to do with kissing?”

“How can I love someone I do not enjoy kissing?”

Aegon had to think about that. He had kissed hundreds of women and would have said he enjoyed kissing them all, but had not loved any of them. Kissing them had merely been a means to an end. He had wanted to lift their skirts and, unless they were paid to do it, women generally did not let you plunder their hidden treasures unless you at least kissed them soundly first. Had he ever kissed even one of those women for the enjoyment of merely kissing? The answer was, surprisingly – nae.

He had fully intended to kiss Lady Sansa Stark and not merely a chaste kiss either; a deep, passionate kiss full of promise. He had wanted to kiss her so thoroughly she would be needy, breathless, trembling for him and only him. He had promised himself he would show her exactly what she had been missing all these years, but he had not. His Lady wanted to talk and he had been more than willing to listen. Then, to his eternal surprise, he had found himself talking too about all the things he had never told anyone else and had never thought he would. Sansa affected him like no one else ever had and his head was still not right because of it.

Above him, Lady Shireen was still talking, warming to her theme, “I am certain that I will never be able to love a man unless I find kissing him enjoyable, therefore I intend to kiss them all and discount those ones who do not . . . um, thrill me, which, so far, is all of them.”

He had to drag his thoughts back from Lady Sansa to the black haired lady in front of him. The mere thought of kissing Lady Sansa certainly thrilled Aegon in a way he had not thought possible. He pondered the implication of this revelation. He thought he loved, Lady Sansa, nae, he was certain of it! In which case mayhaps Lady Shireen’s reasoning was surprisingly sound.

“All right. Let us say I agree with your theory. What has it to do with me?”

“I propose an experiment as I suspect there may be a flaw in my reasoning.”

“What flaw?” Aegon asked, finding himself leaning forwards, intrigued by the lady’s theories.
Science and the mysterious ways of the Maesters had always interested him. ‘Twas quite a rare trait in Westeros; the majority of men of his acquaintance and almost all of the women, seemed content to wallow in their ignorance, preferring not to look beyond the source of their next meal. Sam, Tyrion and, to a certain extent Jon, were the few who shared his fascination with and thirst for knowledge. He was surprised, and a little delighted, to find that Lady Shireen did too.

“What if I meet a man who repulses me, but who has learned to kiss well?”

A man who repulses her??? Aegon finally realised his place in her so-called ‘experiment’. Never, never, ever had he been so insulted in his life.

His immediate reaction was to bellow at her to get out; however a King did not lose his temper, no matter the provocation. Instead, he fixed her with a glacial stare and used that voice of his that Margaery told him could freeze the seven hells,

“That is the worst idea I have ever heard. I suggest you remove yourself from my repulsive presence. Now.”

It gave him some small measure of satisfaction to see the bold Lady Shireen looking startled, and even a little scared, by his harsh reprimand.

“I…I…that is to say…” she stammered, blushing profusely.

He had her well and truly flustered and damn if he wasn’t beginning to enjoy himself again.

“I…I do not find you repulsive Your Grace, quite the contrary. I was merely referring to some of my recent suitors.”

So she did not find him repulsive after all. Just as well, for that was an insult he could never forgive. ‘Quite the contrary’ she had said. Now that was more like it. Keen to increase her discomfiture, he stood up and leaned towards her, bracing one arm against the bookcase beside her head, looming over her and forcing her to look up at him. He also got a bird’s eye view of her generous breasts and noted with dispassionate interest that the sight did nothing for him. Looking at a well endowed woman’s breasts had always provoked a certain frission in his loins afore, but now . . . nothing. That must be the effect of being in love with another woman he thought with a sudden clarity; no more following his cock wherever it led him. His life was obviously about to change beyond all recognition. Whether it was for the better or not remained to be seen.

“Stop staring,” Lady Shireen snapped, drawing him out of his reverie.

“Was I? I beg pardon Milady,” he murmured, letting a smile curve his lips. She really was so easy to rile. Even though he had no intention of tupping her and certainly no intention of kissing her, he was enjoying the diversion. He had forgotten how much fun virgins could be.

“So I don’t repulse you after all?” he teased.

“Of course not,” she shot back, looking up at him with striking blue eyes that were far too much like her cousin’s, “You are ridiculously beautiful, as you well know. I’d have to be blind not to notice,” she sniffed haughtily.

Ridiculously beautiful? That was a compliment wasn’t it? Then why did he just feel like he had been insulted?

“So are you going to kiss me or not?” the Lady demanded with a high-handed tone that made him chuckle.
“Of course not you silly girl. Why in seven hells would I? Ridiculously beautiful though I am, you have no carnal interest in me. I certainly have none in you and, despite what you seem to think, I don’t make a habit of despoiling virgins.”

He was pleased to see she blushed an even deeper shade of red.

“And besides. . .” he added with another chuckle, “Your big bull of a cousin would kill me. He has already warned me not to touch you.”

“But I don’t want you to touch me,” she argued doggedly, “and I certainly wouldn’t let you despoil me. I just want you to kiss me . . . for research. I’ve already explained it to you and I really do not see your problem with it.”

He shook his head. “Keep kissing your many suitors Milady and I am sure you shall find one you can tolerate eventually, though whether he will be able to tolerate you is another matter entirely.”

Considering the matter closed, King Aegon made to leave, pushing himself off the bookcase, but to his intense surprise, Lady Shireen grabbed the front of his Brother’s habit and dragged his head back down towards hers.

“I have already found a man whom I can . . . tolerate, as you so charmingly put it, but he is not really a suitable match.”

Aegon’s eyes widened, surely she was not about to declare he was the poor man she could tolerate?

“No you!” Lady Shireen hissed, as if reading his thoughts, “Your arrogance certainly knows no bounds. Does it?”

Aegon had to laugh. Mayhaps ‘twas partly with relief. He was not going to have Lord Baratheon’s nearest relative mooning around after him like some love sick pup after all.

“Stop laughing at me,” she ordered, “This is serious!”

And indeed, the stern expression on her face conveyed exactly how seriously she took her kissing experiment. ‘Twas all he could do to stifle more laughter. By The Gods, Jon and damn Lord Baratheon would be arriving with the dawn. War was looming and yet he was still able to find distraction in the unlikeliest of places.

“I need to know if what I feel when kissing T . . .” Shireen almost revealed Ty’s name in her frustration, managing to stop herself just in time. She did not want to have to explain to this arrogant King that she suspected herself to be hopelessly in love with a lowly squire. Taking a deep, calming breath, she continued, “I need to know if what I feel when I m kissing a certain person is unique. You are renown as the best kisser in the Kingdom and I have decided that, if I can kiss you and still feel nothing, then ’tis not something that T . . . he, has learned and I should just accept the inevitable and marry him.”

“I am renowned as the best kisser, am I?” Argon drawled, amazed he was managing to keep his face straight, “Then why have I never heard of this great honour myself?”

“I don’t know! ’Tis what Lady Sansa and Queen Daenerys said!”

“Lady Sansa said that?”

The words were out afore he could censor himself. Damnation, he hoped Lady Shireen had no idea of his feelings for Jon’s sister. “And the Queen too?” he added hastily, “I merely find their assertion
strange, for I have obviously kissed neither of them.”

“Obviously,” Shireen agreed, relaxing her fisted grip on his robe slightly, “But I believe they have the right of it. So can we just get on with this?”

He was about to tell her again ‘Nae’, but then he had a very clever, very wicked idea.

“Lord Baratheon will be livid with us both if I kiss you,” he drawled, knowing he was goading her, knowing the formidable Lady Shireen would be more determined than ever to proceed.

“I do not care. I shall tell him I made you do it . . . if he ever finds out. But why should Gendry ever find out?”

Because that was exactly what Aegon wanted.

“I do not keep secrets from my Brothers-in-arms,” Aegon said stoutly, “So you must not deny it if he asks. I too doubt Lord Baratheon will ever find out, but, if he does, do not tell him you made me do it – that would offend my manly pride. And do not mention experiments either. You will make me sound like a gullible ninny. Tell him we happened upon each other by accident and . . . that we could not help ourselves.”

Lady Shireen looked up at him suspiciously. Damnation! That expression made her look like the female version of her bloody cousin. ‘Twas not going to be easy kissing her – not when she looked like that. In fact, this might prove to be the hardest kiss he ever had to bestow. He steeled himself for what was to come. ‘Twould all be worth it. He hoped.

“Swear you shall say we could not help ourselves or you’ll not get your damn kiss.”

“Alright. Although I think you are a fool. If I were you, I would prefer Gendry never to find out about this.”

Aegon felt a pang of remorse. Shireen thought she was manipulating him to get the kiss she wanted, when, in truth, he was the one doing the manipulating. She thought him merely a ridiculously beautiful flirt, when in truth he was seven hells of a lot worse than that. He was a conniving bastard, about to exploit her innocence for his own ends. He bit back any lingering feelings of compassion. This could work out very well for him indeed. What better way to throw Jon off the scent than to have Lady Shireen swear they were engaged in a tryst at the very time Jon would assume him to be seducing Lady Sansa. Oh, Lord Baratheon would be livid and he would have some explaining to do to Sansa, but the result would be well worth the cost.

“I assure you I am no fool my dear and, in return for your oath, you shall have your kiss.”

Regarding her as a Dragon might regard a tethered goat, King Aegon the Devious tilted his head and lowered his lips to meet those of the innocent, exquisitely gullible, Lady Shireen Baratheon.

Chapter End Notes

No idea when I’ll get the next chapter written. You know who is going to walk in on them though. Hint – it’s not Ty yet. His time will come, but it’s not in the next chapter. Hope you can hang on in there even though chapters will be shorter and less frequent.
Author's Note

I can hardly believe it’s been two months since I last posted here. To be honest, it seems a lot longer. Unfortunately this isn’t another chapter but there is something new, so please read on…

First, I have to apologize again for stopping when I did. As you may have gathered, there was a sudden, unanticipated, medical crisis in the family that required all of my time and attention. With every Friday and Sunday that passed, I would feel the anxiety, frustration and perhaps even shame of not being able to finish the story I had started 14 months before. However, not only did I have no time to write, I was not in the right frame of mind either.

Having devoted so much of my free time to the Reluctant Bride and having the rhythm of my week revolve around it for so long, meant that having it forcefully taken away left me almost bereft, at a time when I had enough unpleasantness to deal with. So, after a couple of weeks of guilt and missing it terribly, I had to (in the words of a certain, unavoidable, song) let it go.

Letting it go did lift a burden. However, eventually the long, daily commute to the hospital and the general misery did encourage my mind to wander off to other, happier, places than the one I found myself trapped in. Gradually Arya & Gendry began to seep back into my mind.

Alas, these escapist thoughts were not about giving the Reluctant Bride the happy ending she deserves, but of an altogether darker story. I found myself plotting it out and planning the characters and dialogue during that boring, daily commute to the hospital and during the night time hours when anxiety wouldn’t let me sleep. It was something to distract me from the every present worry. The storyline built and built in my head until I felt I had to get it out, if only to clear my headspace. So, once again feeling guilty about the Reluctant Bride, I started jotting bits of this new story down on empty envelopes in the waiting rooms of hospitals and on scraps of paper at work.

The result is a new Gendarya story. I could have, perhaps I should have, left this until I had finished the Reluctant Bride, but I found I needed to put this unexpected story to rest. Hopefully after that I can get back and concentrate on the one I really should be finishing.

So, if you have a look, you’ll see the first chapter of a new, shortish story, Gendry Stark, Lord of Winterfell, has just been posted. It isn’t an ideal situation, but I hope you understand why I did it and why I felt I had to do it.

Unfortunately, although my mother is currently out of hospital, this seems to be only a temporary reprieve and I just don’t know what the future holds for her and consequently for the Reluctant Bride. I will finish it, but I need time and I need to be in a good frame of mind to do it and I simply don’t know when those two necessities shall coincide. All I can do now is ask you to bear with me and thank you all for your patience, comments, reviews and PM’s of support during the past two months. They have raised a smile in an otherwise bleak and unhappy time.

Best wishes to you all for a happy, healthy and creative New Year.

L3j
The King's kiss

Chapter Notes

Well, it’s been a while and so much has changed. My mum is much better (thank you for your kind wishes) and I feel able to start writing this happy story again. However, the biggest changes have been in HBO land. Gendry disappeared off in his little rowing boat perhaps never to return, Shireen is dead and apparently Aegon never even existed. Sigh. Brazilian Guy is depressed because he thinks his ship has sailed. As I once again wrote about my bold Shireen and my wonderfully arrogant Aegon, I couldn’t help but wonder what future fic readers will think.

“Arya x Gendry – wasn’t there once a thing with them?”

Time will tell and I did promise to finish this. I haven’t abandoned Gendry Stark Lord of Winterfell – but that is paused at a convenient place and I’ve wandered where my muse has taken me which is back to the library in King’s Landing where Shireen is about to test her kissing theory and Gendry and Jon are on the hunt for a missing King.

So dear Gendry, Shireen, Aegon, Loras and every other character HBO has abused (even more than us fic writers)

This is for you . . .

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feeling rather overwhelmed by what she was about to do and with whom, Shireen closed her eyes. That didn't help. With her eyes closed all she could see was Ty - hurt and disappointment etched on his beloved face.

Unable to stand that, she opened her eyes. King Aegon loomed above her; his hair and eyes glinting like silver in the torch light, illuminating the planes and angles of his beautiful face perfectly.

If it had been Ty about to kiss her and not King Aegon, Shireen knew there would have been dragons roaring in her belly and not a few stray butterflies. Surely that meant something? She was nervous, but more because this experiment was her idea than because she wanted to kiss the man before her. Although she was about to be kissed by a King, an expert and the most handsome man in the whole of Westeros, she would still rather it had been Ty.

“Stop it Shireen!”

The King caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted her head so she had no option other than to meet his penetrating gaze. He was clearly annoyed. “You cannot be thinking about another man while expecting to kiss me.”

“I . . . I can’t help it,” she stammered. Gods, how could King Aegon possibly know what she was thinking? She supposed he must have so much experience of women he could write a book about it if he chose, but he was far too busy doing to be bothered with merely writing about it.

“How can you expect your experiment to be a fair one if you are already sabotaging the results?”
Shireen wasn’t sure if the King was angry or if he was teasing her. “I... I’ll try,” she promised, attempting to banish Ty from her thoughts. It didn’t work. The vision of Ty she had in her head looked anguished now, as if he was pleading with her not to do this.

With a sigh, Aegon lowered his head, but not to kiss her, only so his head was resting against hers, his mouth against her ear, his breath hot against her neck. Mercifully he had chosen her unscarred side. Of course he had – a King certainly wouldn’t want to kiss greyscale. Ty didn’t mind though. Now she thought about it, he had probably kissed her ruined cheek more often than the other. Knowing Ty he would have done that deliberately to prove how much he loved all of her.

To her surprise, King Aegon murmured, “’Tis harder than I thought. A kiss isn’t an isolated act, it involves looking, touching, feeling. I hadn’t realised how much work ’twas until now.”

Shireen wasn’t sure if Aegon was talking to himself or to her. But he was right. Had it been Ty here instead of the King, she would have had strong hands around her waist or mayhaps roaming upwards to cup her breasts as impertinent Ty was wont to try to do. She smiled at the memory.

“Shireen!”

King Aegon speaking her name startled her, snapping her attention back to him. He had lifted his head and was frowning down at her.

“Do you think a man can’t tell when your attention wanders to another?”

“Ummm...” She had never thought about it before, had no cause to.

“Well they can. Now stop thinking about your unsuitable match and concentrate on me.”

Before Shireen had a chance to apologise again, Aegon’s lips were brushing over hers; surprisingly soft, warm and yet... doing nothing more for her. If anything, the butterflies that had flitted around her stomach flew away. But she wasn’t about to give up on her experiment that easily. This had been her idea and this was her chance to prove her theory once and for all.

Reaching up to his broad shoulders, she pulled the King firmly down towards her while standing on her tip toes and crushing her chest against his, her hips against his thighs. When he gave an involuntary gasp of surprise, she seized the opportunity to thrust her tongue into his mouth.

Aegon froze and for a moment, Shireen thought he was going to push her away and curse her for being so bold. But before she had a chance to panic, she felt his arms snake around her waist and his tongue begin to dance slowly against hers. With relief that she was not to be chastised, Shireen relaxed into the King’s embrace. She could do this, ‘twas not so bad. Aegon certainly knew what he was doing and he was the right age for her, tall and strong and didn’t smell too bad either. She should be enjoying this, melting against him, feeling her teats harden and between her legs moisten as happened every time Ty kissed her. But she was fully aware ‘twas the magnificent Aegon Targaryen’s hands upon her and not Ty’s and ‘twas a King kissing her and not a lowly squire and yet... between them there was... nothing.

Hadin’t this been what she wanted to know? What she had wanted her experiment to prove? ‘Twas only Ty made her feel that way, made her want to give him everything and forever. She should thank the King for showing her the truth.

Aegon felt Shireen pull away and ‘twas not a moment too soon. His mind was not involved in this kiss at all, thinking only of Sansa, but his body did not seem to know the difference. He had already
decided to give this foolish experiment his best efforts, for reasons that had nothing to do with assisting Lady Shireen and everything to do with his own selfish need to distract Jon and bloody Lord Baratheon from his true purpose with Lady Sansa Stark. But Aegon had made the mistake of closing his eyes when it became clear Shireen was going to kiss him properly.

The problem was, although his mind knew the practical reasons for the kiss, his body cared nothing for such schemes, nor the Lady’s greyscale nor her unfortunate Baratheon looks. He was a man who was used to tupping every woman he wanted and spending so much chaste time alone with Lady Sansa had left him aching with frustration. His blue balls didn’t care that his love was currently safe in her rooms, protected by her Winter Guard and his cock cared only that he had a soft, willing woman in his arms.

The sound of the door opening, the flickering of the torches and the knowledge that someone was there watching them, took too long to penetrate his sex starved brain. By the time he dragged his lips from Shireen’s and looked up, ’twas too late to hide what they were doing - even if he had wanted to.

Jon stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the light behind. ’Twas too dark to see his expression, but Aegon didn’t need to be able to see to know that the great, hulking shadow at Jon’s shoulder was Lord Baratheon and that he was furious.

Shireen realised they were no longer alone a moment after he did; her sharp intake of breath and her hastily shoving at his shoulders was confirmation enough of that. Still, Aegon was reluctant to let her go; after all, this was what he wanted - wasn’t it? To be discovered in a compromising position with Lady Shireen and for Jon and Gendry to be diverted from his true intentions towards Lady Sansa Stark. Aegon’s hands rested on Shireen’s waist, but the Lady somehow slipped from his grasp as her cousin shouldered his way past Jon and into the library. Lord Baratheon’s rage was obvious in every long stride he took towards them.

"Get your hands off her you fucking, lying, piece of shit!"

Aegon immediately held his hands up, mainly to show he was unarmed rather than to obey Lord Baratheon's order.

"Gendry, calm down," Shireen pleaded, putting herself between Gendry and his quarry, "'Tis not what you think!"

Having agreed to her experiment because it suited his own ends, Aegon wasn't about to let Shireen reveal the real reason for their kiss. "Remember what we agreed," he hissed.

Shireen turned sharply around. Her shock that he still wanted to stick to their 'We couldn't help ourselves' story in the face of Lord Baratheon's anger was written all over her flushed face.

"You gave your word," Aegon reminded her. If he was going to have to endure Lord Baratheon fury, Aegon was anxious that it at least serve a purpose.

Bewildered, Shireen turned back to her cousin who was fast bearing down upon them. Gendry’s blue eyes were blazing with a violent intensity that reminded her of The Others. Holding up her hand, as if that would be enough to halt his progress, she stammered, "We . . . we couldn't help ourselves."

Then Gendry was upon them, batting Shireen's outstretched hand away as if 'twere a mere reed in his path. She turned towards Aegon with wide, pleading eyes, wishing he would run.

Aegon gave her a reassuring smile. Shireen was playing her part well. ’Twas all to the good.
"When I said you could marry anyone you wanted, I did not mean HIM!" Gendry yelled as he jabbed a thick finger in Aegon's direction.

Shireen wrung her hands, feeling helpless and rueing the fact that her family’s words were, “Ours is the fury.” Never had they seemed truer than at this moment.

"Marry?!" Aegon scoffed, "Who said anything about marrying?"

The noise Gendry made was akin to a wounded Aurochs.

Gendry's fist grabbed Aegon’s monk's habit just as the King caught Shireen’s mortified expression. Humiliating Shireen made Aegon feel every inch the cold, manipulative bastard he was. He deserved what was about to happen - ‘twas the Gods punishment for his selfishness. His last confrontation with Lord Baratheon in this very library hadn't ended well; Aegon had been lucky to escape with his looks intact. It seemed as if his luck was about to run out.

"She's a maiden and you are a . . . Filthy! Lying! Manwhore!" Gendry bellowed as he drew his elbow back, ready to deliver the blow.

"Twías only a kiss," Shireen wailed,

"You'll kill him!" Jon yelled,

and Aegon pleaded, "Hit me anywhere but my face!"

all at the same time.

Gendry took no notice of any of them. His iron fist hammered into Aegon's face with a satisfying crack that sent blood exploding in all directions.

Then everything seemed to happen at once; Shireen and Jon rushed towards Gendry while Aegon twisted and writhed, sputtering curses through blood soaked hands, only to be rammed violently up against a bookcase by Lord Baratheon.

“That was for taking advantage of my kin,” Gendry spat, cocking his fist again.

“Noooooo!” Shireen wailed. She was nearest and grabbed at Gendry’s arm, trying to stay the blow. He shook her off easily, sending her stumbling backwards into Jon who was rushing headlong towards the fight.

“And this is for being an all round cunt!” Gendry landed a thumping kidney punch that took Aegon to his knees, gasping desperately for breath.

Still trying to steady Shireen as best he could, Jon lunged for Gendry. Wrapping his arms under his friend’s, he hauled Gendry back, grunting “Leave him . . . alone.”

Gendry, being bigger and heavier was only stalled, not stopped. As the two of them grappled, Shireen seized her opportunity. Swinging a savage punch at her cousin, she screamed “How dare you!” at him like a wildling.

Instinctively anticipating the blow, Gendry pivoted around. He avoided Shireen’s fist, but unwittingly dragged Jon into its swinging arc.

’Twas impossible to tell who cried out first - Shireen with horror for hitting her King, or Jon with the shock of it. Then Shireen promptly burst into tears.
Still on his knees, Aegon managed to hiss through his blood and pain, “Happy now? You big, stupid bastard.”


This time Jon was ready – clasping his hands together behind Gendry’s neck and hauling him backwards with all of his strength.

“Let me at him!” Gendry raged, “He’s had this coming for years! How many other maids has he ruined?”

Jon grunted with the effort of restraining a furious Lord Baratheon, already knowing he wasn’t going to be able to hold him much longer. If Gendry did not stop soon, this was only going to end one way; with swords drawn and in blood. That could not happen. Jon couldn’t let that happen. He needed to think. He needed to end this now. If only Arya were here, she would be able to calm Gendry, or at least hold her damn Needle to his throat. Arya.

“By the time I’m through with him, he won’t be able to fuck any more maidens . . . or Ladies!”

“Stop it!” Shireen sobbed, dropping to her knees beside Aegon and stroking the sides of his blood smeared face with trembling hands.

“Don’t touch him!” Gendry bellowed.

“I say who I touch and who touches me!” Shireen screamed hysterically, “Not you!”

“I am sorry,” Aegon murmured, covering her hands with his own blood soaked fingers, causing Shireen to wail even louder.

“Sorry for what?!” Gendry roared, fighting against Jon’s increasingly tenuous hold. “If you fucked her, I’ll kill you with my bare hands!”

Arya, Arya, Arya, - Jon offered up his sister’s name as a prayer to the Gods, beseeching them to give him strength.

Jon?

Hearing Arya say his name, Jon whipped his head towards the door, thinking she must be standing there, believing the Gods had somehow answered his prayer. But the doorway was empty.

Jon? Is that you?

’Twas definitely Arya talking to him, her voice strained with urgency and fear, but she was nowhere to be seen. With a start, Jon realised he was hearing his sister’s words in his head rather than with his ears. How could that be? Mayhaps the Gods moved in mysterious ways and who was he to question their gift? He should accept gratefully.

Thinking on his sister, he tried to speak to her, the way he spoke to Ghost – silently.

“In the library. Hurry Arya, hurry.”

“I’m nearly there.”

Knowing Arya was somehow close at hand gave Jon the strength to hold Gendry longer. Shutting his mind to the shouting and wailing around him, Jon focused all of his concentration on keeping his fingers laced tight together, his arms braced behind Gendry, his weight balanced and his thoughts on
his dear Arya. Hold, hold, hold.

With his eyes closed, ‘twas Gendry’s suddenly ceasing to struggle that alerted Jon to her presence.

“Arya?” Gendry and Jon both gasped as one.

She stood in the doorway, her chest heaving with exertion, her eyes wild and frantic as she took in the chaotic scene before her.

“Arya, what’s wrong? Why are you here?” Gendry asked. Aegon and everything else save his love was instantly forgotten. He tried to step forwards, over Aegon. This time Jon let him go.

Arya rushed into Gendry’s arms as they came together halfway across the library. By the flickering torchlight, Gendry stroked and kissed her hair while Arya buried her face against his chest, both of them lost in their lover’s embrace. But Arya only allowed herself a moment’s comfort afore she lifted her head to look towards her brother, his own chest heaving with the effort of having held Gendry back.

Before Arya said a word, Jon knew something was terribly wrong. The fear and panic he had heard in her voice, heard in his head, hadn’t been for Gendry. As their grey eyes met, Jon knew instantly ‘twas more and much worse than that.

“Daenerys?” he gasped.

“She needs you Jon. You must go to her. Bran says now!”

Jon was already running. “My horse!” he bellowed, hoping there was someone out in the corridor who might hear.

“No! Drogon. You must take the dragon. Bran says hurry. ‘Tis something inside Daenerys.”

Jon heard Arya’s words with his ears, but his head was filled with a terrible vision of something writhing under Daenerys’ pale, stretched flesh - something evil. The image swayed, veering up sharply as if someone had lifted their head and Daenerys’ beautiful face came into view, contorted with terror and panic. She was screaming; the sound of his wife’s fear so harrowing that Jon’s blood turned to ice in his veins.

Daenerys tore desperately at the thing trying to claw its way out of her belly, leaving bloody red weals on her own skin. Then, without warning, her eyes rolled back and she fell to the ground.

Jon halted in his tracks, his hand trembling against the door frame, having to steady himself and right his thoughts. Had his vision been true? Could that be real? He turned slowly around, to face his family and friends in the library. All eyes were upon him. One look at his sister’s ashen face told him ‘twas she who had seen the horror lurking inside Daenerys.

“Go to Bran. He needs you. Daenerys needs you.”

Jon heard Arya speak although her lips never moved.

“’Tis the gift we have. More than skin changing - the power over men’s minds. Bran will explain, but hurry.”

Jon nodded once towards Arya, acknowledging what had passed between them and what he must do. And then he was gone.
Chapter End Notes

---

Short I know, but I’m easing myself back into this and it seemed a natural place to stop. I didn’t want you to have to wait ANOTHER week (because 7 months is long enough!)

Before you go, can I direct you to a brilliant new, heart wrenching video of our OTP? put

Arya / Gendry - Demons (Season 5 Spoilers)

into the usual tube and enjoy! (I should declare some self interest – you’ll see why at the end).

I’ll be back asap...
Gendry watched them intently but he was confused by the half of a conversation he heard and the looks, heavy with unspoken meaning that passed between Arya and Jon. It seemed Arya had indeed met with Bran, but their reunion had not gone smoothly. Arya’s telling Jon of “something inside Daenerys” struck fear into Gendry’s heart. He could not help but remember Tobho’s forge and the monster that had leapt from the bucket there, desperate to devour the blood dripping from Daenerys’ palm.

He suspected Arya’s thoughts were not dissimilar to his own. She had her hand pressed to her forehead as if she was pained and, as Jon left, he had to catch her in his arms when she sagged against his chest.

Something deep and dangerous was at work here and Gendry’s anger with Aegon was nothing compared to his fear and apprehension for Arya, Jon and Daenerys – for all of them.

Stroking his hands reassuringly down his wife’s back, Gendry murmured, “What happened with Bran?”

Instead of answering, Arya squeezed her eyes closed and he felt a shudder run through her. If a Faceless Assassin quaked, then it must have been an awful thing indeed.

Rather then press her for information, Gendry pulled Arya even tighter against him. No doubt she would tell him when she was ready. For now he thought ‘twould be best to get her away from here and to the quiet of their room. He started to steer her towards the door, but Arya resisted, turning back asking, “What happened here tonight?”

Although she addressed all of them, there was a long, awkward silence while Baratheon and Targaryen drew each other dangerous, evil looks afore anyone spoke.

“Lord Baratheon committed treason,” Aegon said grimly, his face still a mess of blood.

Gendry snorted and snarled, “He got what was coming to him.”

Arya looked from one to the other and back. Neither seemed keen to elaborate, preferring to try and outstare each other. ‘Twas obvious what had happened. Arya should have asked, ‘why?’ She turned to Shireen. Her friend’s version of events was likely to be more fulsome than either Gendry’s or the King’s.

Shireen sniffed miserably and looked to Aegon. He tried his best to give her a bloody, lopsided smile while giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. That immediately struck Arya as odd. Since when had that Targaryen arse been so thoughtful and to a Lady like Shireen Baratheon who could offer him nothing? Or at least nothing a man like Aegon Targaryen would want.
Shireen’s voice was unsteady and her eyes downcast as she finally answered, “Aegon and I were . . . were reading together and, well . . . one thing led to another . . .”

Gendry cursed under his breath but Arya ignored him, being far more interested in the subtle, reassuring encouragements Aegon was giving Shireen.

“King Jon and Lord Baratheon . . .” Shireen paused and took a deep, steadying breath afore she finished hurriedly, “. . . caught us kissing.”

Arya blew out a sigh of relief. ‘Twas only kissing. Breaking Aegon’s nose seemed a rather harsh punishment for such a small thing.

Judging by the way Shireen avoided looking at Aegon and bit the side of her mouth nervously, Arya suspected Shireen wished the kiss had not happened. Yet it appeared Aegon did not, despite his bloodied face. He was being so attentive. Curiouser and curioser.

Without letting Shireen’s hand go, Aegon growled, “Aye, ‘twas only a kiss, yet that aurochs broke my nose and landed a low blow. I’ll be pissing blood for a week.”

Arya felt Gendry tense beside her and take a step forwards. She immediately placed a warning hand upon his bicep. Horse’s arse or no, ‘twas still treason to strike a King and Gendry would be lucky to escape this without consequences. Arya knew from experience that Aegon could not be trusted. He suited only himself and was as slippery as a snake. ‘Twas best to end this now afore Gendry did something they would all regret.

“‘Twas only a kiss you say?” Arya asked the pair on the floor.

“A kiss from a dirty manwhore, when she is a pure, highborn maiden! And of my blood!” Gendry yelled before either Aegon or Shireen could answer. ‘Twas clear that to Gendry the most intolerable aspect of the whole act was that Aegon had sullied a Baratheon. Arya tightened her grip around Gendry’s bicep, feeling it flex as he clenched and unclenched his fist in preparation for another round.

“Aye, ’twas only a kiss,” Shireen said shakily, her arms tight around Aegon’s chest, trying to restrain him while Arya held Gendry back.

“Well, if you agreed to it . . .” Arya said reasonably, trying to defuse the situation.

Shireen bobbed her head briefly to confirm she did.

“. . . then who are we to interfere?”

Gendry spluttered furiously at that. “Who are we?” he repeated, glaring down at Arya while trying to shrug off her grip on his arm. “I am Lady Shireen’s guardian and head of her House and I promised Davos I would make her a good match. You know that Targaryen would make a shit of a husband.”

“Ha!” Aegon scoffed from the floor, “Says nobody’s prize! Ladies were hardly falling over themselves to wed you afore Jon raised you up, were they bastard?”

“Shut up!” This time ‘twas Arya yelling at Aegon.

Afore Arya could say anymore, her sister’s cool, authoritative voice silenced them all.
“I came as soon as I heard you were returned sister.”

Arya whirled around to see Sansa standing in the door while several huge guards fanned into the room - each one bearing a torch. The light and the atmosphere in the room changed immediately. If Arya had thought Gendry tense afore, he was pulled tight as a bow string ready to let fly now.

Arya did not know these guards, but Gendry obviously did. The biggest, widest one with a shocking head of orange hair said jovially, “I don’ see you fer an age Smith and here we are again, twice in one night!”

“Duck.” Gendry acknowledged grudgingly.

Arya had no time to ponder what Gendry and this ‘Duck’ had been doing earlier that night because at that moment Sansa looked behind her sister and saw King Aegon covered in blood and slumped on the floor, while Shireen clasped him to her breast.

Sansa’s first thought was to run to Aegon, to kneel beside him, soothe him, comfort him and take care of his wounds, but Shireen had got there first and seemed to be doing a great job already. Shireen refused to meet her gaze and the guilty look on Aegon’s blood soaked face told Sansa everything she needed to know.

“‘Tis not what it looks like,” Aegon said, his voice calm, authoritative and his words clearly meant for Sansa alone.

“Really? Pray tell me what ‘tis then,” Sansa asked coldly.

Aegon did not reply, at least not verbally. His eyes, still locked with Sansa’s, remained defiant and no one else dared speak, although Arya suspected a silent conversation was taking place between her sister and the King. Instead of the thoughts that had somehow passed between Arya and Jon, Sansa and Aegon seemed to be communicating with their eyes; furious blue with inscrutable purple.

If Arya had thought Aegon’s behaviour towards Shireen strange – then her sister’s towards Aegon’s was even stranger. What was this Targaryen to Sansa?

While everyone else waited to see what Sansa and Aegon would do, the guards who had arrived with Sansa placed themselves at strategic intervals around the library’s walls. Arya felt rather than saw Gendry’s hand slide to the hilt of his sword.

The one called ‘Duck’ noticed too, grinning slyly as he wagged a warning finger towards Gendry. In any other circumstances, Arya would have placed her hand upon on her own sword and her back against Gendry’s, that way the two of them could take on the whole of Westeros together. But she did not. These men obviously knew Gendry and had arrived with Sansa, who seemed perfectly at ease in their company. Could this day get any more confusing?

Arya turned in a slow circle, assessing the men who surrounded them, committing their faces and their positions to memory while calculating their strengths and their weaknesses. To Arya’s dismay, she saw far too little vulnerability that she could exploit. These were no ordinary guards; every one of them was seasoned and bloodied and a fearsome warrior in his own right. Together they were a daunting prospect, even for a once Faceless Assassin.

“Who are these men?” Arya asked her sister warily.

“My own company of guards,” Sansa answered, as it ‘twas a matter of no consequence. Curiouser and curiouseer.
The King himself added, “Sworn to protect your sister above all else. I named them her ‘Winter Guard.’”

Aegon had arranged for Sansa to have her own guards? Why? Sansa and Aegon Targaryen? Surely not? What about Willas Tyrell? Arya decided her eyes and her mind must be deceiving her, for it had been a very long and very trying day.

But if Arya was imagining things, then so too was Gendry, for he addressed Sansa directly, saying, “You are wondering what happened here. Allow me to explain. Our Targaryen King was doing what he does best – despoiling maidens. Only this time he picked my kin for his pleasure.”

Arya gazed up at Gendry, her mouth hanging open. He had just shamed Shireen in front of a room full of strangers. This would be all around the Red Keep come the morning. Why in seven hells would Gendry do that? Shireen had turned a violent shade of scarlet, extricated herself from Aegon and was staring fixedly at the floor while Sansa had turned deathly pale.

“‘Twas only a kiss!” Arya said loudly, hoping to limit the damage caused to Shireen’s reputation. She poked Gendry in the ribs. Hard. While glaring at him furiously. “You heard them both admit it.”

Sansa had spent all of her adult live cultivating an impenetrable façade to hide her true thoughts and feelings, but even her mettle was tested by that revelation. Had she any doubts that Gendry spoke the truth, Shireen’s shame and the defiant guilt in Aegon’s amethyst eyes confirmed it. How could he? After all they had said, all they had shared in the Sept?

Looking directly at Sansa, Aegon said forcefully, “I have already told you - ‘tis not what you think. We shall talk, you and I.”

“I think not,” Sansa said icily while Gendry grinned - a very smug, self-satisfied grin Arya had never seen afore. Why was he so pleased with himself when Shireen and now Sansa were so obviously upset? And why was Sansa upset at all? ‘Twas only a kiss! What in seven hells was going on here?

Aegon seemed enraged by Sansa’s refusal to talk and his fury was only made worse by Gendry’s gleeful enjoyment of the situation.

Unperturbed, Gendry wrapped his arm around Arya’s shoulder. “It seems you have important matters to discuss. I think Arya and I had best leave.”

“For the Stormlands I hope?” Aegon snarled loudly, drawing guffaws from the assembled Winter Guards.

To Arya’s amazement, ‘twas Sansa who interrupted the crude laughter. “An excellent idea Your Grace. Now the war is over, why should any of us linger here? I think I shall also take a trip - to the Reach. I think I am long overdue a visit to Highgarden.”

Sansa’s words might have seemed innocent enough, had she not fixed Aegon with the coldest, hardest expression Arya had ever seen on her sister’s normally serene face.

Until then, Aegon had remained on the floor, bloodied and angry but controlled. Sansa’s mention of Highgarden sent him surging to his feet, driven by a possessive rage, stronger than any he would ever have imagined, confirming to him what he had already suspected - that Sansa Stark was his and that no man would ever touch her again.

“Nae!” Aegon growled menacingly, stalking towards Sansa in an unmistakable, territorial way.

Seeing the dark, murderous expression on the King’s face, Duck stepped forwards, putting himself
between the King and Lady Sansa.

Sansa simply ignored the two men and, to Arya’s surprise, took hold of her elbow and steered her sister towards the door.

"I have yet to thank you for sparing Sandor Clegane's life. You must tell me how you found him. Is he in good health? I am anxious to see him."

Arya was bewildered. First Sansa fought with Aegon, then she wanted to go to Highgarden with Willas and now she was enquiring about the Hound?

"Clegane is bringing my horse to The Red Keep. The horse Arya stole," Aegon said from behind them, far too loudly. He obviously wanted Sansa to hear, obviously expected her to turn around. She did not and continued walking quickly towards the door.

“Sansa!” Aegon called after her, sounding more anguished than angry. Arya almost felt sorry for him and tried to twist around to see if he was following, but Sansa hauled her forwards with a strength Arya hadn’t know her sister possessed.

Behind them they could hear Gendry calling on Shireen, adding bossily, ‘Tis the Stormlands for you too Lady.”

Arya rolled her eyes. She couldn’t blame Gendry for wanting to keep Shireen well out of Aegon’s way, but the whole point of Shireen coming to the Red Keep was to find a husband. Arya decided she would have to deal with Gendry and Shireen tomorrow. There were other, more pressing matters to consider right now – like why her sister was marching her out of the library at great speed.

“Where are we going?”

“Anywhere, as long as ‘tis away from him,” Sansa hissed.

When they were half way along the corridor, which was occupied by more of Sansa’s guard, Arya managed a swift look over her shoulder. A pleased looking Gendry and a shamefaced Shireen were following. Seeing no sign of the Targaryen, Arya tugged her sister to a halt, spinning her around.

“Care to explain what all that was about?”

“Nae.”

Arya’s patience had been worn thin after a most trying day and now this.

“Are you really going to Highgarden?”

“Mayhaps. You have yet to tell me how Sandor Clegane fares.”

“But I thought you held no affection for Willas Tyrell?”

“Did Aegon really give Sandor his sand steed? How long will he take to get here?”

“Sansa!” Arya yelled in frustration.

“Ladies. Enough.” Gendry said, appearing beside them. “Let us continue this discussion in another place and at another time.”

Arya was not prepared to argue with that. She could take no more tonight and Sansa was already stalking off, pointedly ignoring Shireen who had yet to lift her eyes from the floor.
“Let us go then,” Arya sighed wearily. At least they were going to return to the Stormlands. The sooner the better.

-o-

Sansa hadn’t gone far when she noticed Ser Duckfield at her shoulder. Good. She needed to make plans and she needed to know who she could trust and who she could not.

“May we speak privately?” Sansa asked the big, flame haired man.

Rolly indicated to the other guards that they should move away.

When she was satisfied they could not be overheard, Sansa said, “I want us to speak openly and honestly with each other.”

“Of course Milady,” Rolly grinned. This assignment to guard King Jon’s sister had already proved to be much more entertaining than he had anticipated. “I’m yours to command.”

Sansa toyed with the decorative tassel hanging at her belt as they walked. “You have known King Aegon for many years I believe.”

“Aye Milady, since he was barely tall enough to swing a practice sword.” Rolly chuckled as he remembered how timid and hesitant Aegon had once been – so different from the man he had become.

“Yet you are sworn to me now.”

“Aye,” Rolly declared emphatically, puffing out his chest.

They walked on a while longer. Lady Sansa continued to stroke the silk tassel at her waist thoughtfully. She obviously had something on her mind, but ‘twas hardly Rolly’s place to ask what.

‘Twas some time afore Sansa spoke again. “If I were to give you an order and King Aegon another which conflicted with my own, whose order would you obey?”

Rolly frowned, not wanting a repeat of the scene in the library. Aegon had seen the sense in leaving Lady Sansa to cool down this time, but that might not be the case again. Aegon was mercurial, whereas Rolly was steady and he liked things in black and white. He also didn’t like being asked difficult questions. He couldn’t just tell this beautiful Lady to ‘fuck off’ as he would anyone else whose questions he didn’t want to answer.

“We are sworn to protect you, above all else,” Rolly said tactfully, hoping that would be an end to it.

“But your loyalties, Ser Duckfield - where do they lie?”

She’d got him there. At one time he would have answered without hesitation, ‘Golden Company’, at another, ‘to Ser Harry Strickland’ but by far his longest service had been to House Targaryen. Still, he’d taken a liking to this girl with the sad eyes. She might be renowned as the most beautiful woman in the whole of Westeros, but Rolly suspected much of that beauty radiated out from the goodness within.

“I swore an oath to you Milady and I ain’t ever broken my word.”
“What if I wanted you to protect me from King Aegon?”

Rolly’s eyebrows shot up so far they disappeared under his coarse, orange hair. He wasn’t the kind of man who liked to think on problems that hadn’t arisen yet. Gold in his pocket, a hot meal in his belly, a woman to warm his bed and he was a happy man. When Aegon had asked him to pledge his allegiance to Lady Stark earlier in the day, Rolly had not thought much beyond the chance to get out of those damn tents and into a nice soft bed in the Red Keep. He certainly hadn’t expected his new oath would put him in direct conflict with the very man who had asked him to swear it!

Women threw themselves at Aegon and why not? He was a King, young, handsome and he knew how to pleasure a Lady. Wasn’t a woman alive who would want protection from him! Until now. Rolly chose his words carefully as he answered her question with another one of his own, “Why would Milady want that?”

She looked up at him with those damn haunted blue eyes, looking so vulnerable he would have laid down his life there and then for her had she asked it of him. Instead she said quietly, but firmly, “I need to know Ser.”

Seven hells, but this Lady was persistent as well as breathtakingly beautiful. Rolly wondered if there was a man in Westeros who would be able to deny her anything she asked of him. ‘Twas no wonder young Griff appeared to be smitten.

“But Aegon ‘aint ever abused a women,” Rolly stated firmly, “You need have no fear o’ that. I swear on the seven,” he slapped one meaty, hairy knuckled hand to his breast for emphasis. “Truth be told, I ain’t ever met a man who loved women more.”

Sansa huffed at that and muttered, “So ‘twould appear.”

Rolly finally realised why she was asking all these questions of him. She was annoyed by Aegon’s dalliance in the Library with Lord Baratheon’s kin - the Lady whose face was ruined by greyscale. As if Lady Sansa had anything to fear from such damaged goods! The two women could hardly be more different and Aegon was no fool! He wouldn’t sheath himself in sackcloth when he could have silk and Lady Sansa Stark was certainly silk o’ the finest thread. And it seemed she would not tolerate Aegon’s sticking his cock anywhere he wanted.

‘Twas a King’s right to have any woman he wanted, highborn or low, married or not, especially an unmarried King like Aegon. Ha! Young Griff was going to have to keep his britches laced in future if he wanted to plunder Lady Sansa’s treasure.

Rolly decided ‘twas no bad thing. A married man, whether he be a King or no, shouldn’t dip his wick where it didn’t belong – ‘twas one o’ the reasons Rolly had never married. One woman would never be enough for him, unless she was a Lady like Sansa Stark and there was only one o’ them.

Rolly chuckled to himself. It looked as if Aegon had finally found his Queen.

Rolly found himself grinning broadly. Gods be good, there would be more Targaryen princes to train in the martial arts afore long and what handsome lads they would be, given their dam and sire.

Lady Sansa interrupted his pleasant daydream by asking, “Will you answer my question or not Ser Duckfield? I need to know where your loyalties lie.”

Damn, but she wasn’t going to let this go without an answer and Rolly didn’t want to answer. After all these years Aegon was family to him - like an exasperating younger brother and nothing came afore family. But fuck it! If the Gods were good, Lady Sansa would be family soon too and besides,
Aegon could damn well look after himself. Lady Sansa couldn’t or else she wouldn’t be needing guards, would she?

His mind made up, Rolly answered, “As long as you don’t expect me to hurt ‘im, your wish is my command Milady.”

“Good!” Sansa trilled, clapping her hands together, clearly delighted. She favoured Rolly with a devastating smile that banished any doubts he might have had. Aye, ‘twas worth it just to see her happy. He almost laughed at himself. Watch yersel’ Rolly my boy, or you’ll be fallin’ into the same trap as young Griff and that Tyrell Lord.

“So we’re off to Highgarden are we?” he asked, mainly to distract himself from that smile, those eyes, that hair, that lush body. Seven hells, everything about her was distracting.

“Mayhaps.”

Rolly took a deep breath and stared straight ahead, not thinking on Lady Sansa. “But you told Aegon we were going to the Reach.”

“I did,” Sansa said airily, “but a Lady can change her mind, can’t she Ser Duckfield?”

Women! Rolly shook his head in disbelief. No matter how many he had, he would never understand a single one o’ them. They were never satisfied. This one had a King within her grasp and she wanted to piss off to the Reach. His job was not to question why, just to keep her safe.

Mercifully, they were now at the door to Lady Sansa’s rooms. Dawn was breaking over the horizon and Rolly decided he needed to find a soft feather bed and a warm woman to fill it. Alas, it seemed his Lady wasn’t done with him yet.

“One more thing Ser Duckfield. When Sandor Clegane arrives, will you make sure he is sent to me?”

Rolly cocked one eyebrow in a wordless question.

“I have a debt to repay. I am anxious to get it over with.”

“A debt? To the Hound?” Rolly’s forehead wrinkled with concern.

Sansa laughed, although it seemed to Rolly ‘twas a nervous laugh, devoid of humour.

“Do not worry so,” she smiled and patted his cheek in a way that was at once both soothing and arousing. “‘Tis only a song.”

“A song?” Rolly repeated, confused. Mayhaps he had misheard her, but Sansa’s swift bob of her head confirmed he had not.

“May I ask how you came to owe the Lannister’s dog a song?”

She flushed a beautiful shade of pink and cast her eyes away. “’Tis a long story. He saved my life a long time ago, and Arya’s too, although I did not know that until recently.”

She shrugged as if having her life and her sister’s saved by the same man ‘twas a common occurrence. “So I owe him a song for it.”

“A song?” Rolly repeated again, but this time incredulously. “If I’d saved a beautiful woman and her sister, I’d be expecting seven hells o’ a lot more than a song.”
Sansa flushed redder still. “I . . . I had not thought on that. I suppose a man would . . .”

She suddenly felt dizzy and Ser Duckfield’s disbelieving expression was not helping. Sansa bid him a hasty good night and shut her door, collapsing against it once ’twas closed.

Alone, she was determined not to think on Aegon and the crushing disappointment she had suffered at his hands tonight. She had thought him different, but all men were the same. Even just now Ser Duckfield had proved once again that all men thought with their cocks.

Instead of dwelling on Aegon, Sansa cast her mind back to the night of the Battle of the Blackwater. Sandor had come into her room then, drunk, demanding his song. She had been a maid then and newly flowered. She had a vague notion that he had wanted more than a song, but had not the experience then to know what all men desired.

She had been terrified of him then, but with hindsight ’twould have been no worse to lose her maidenhead to him than to the other, whose name she still could barely say. At least Sandor cared a little for her. Hadn’t he? Her head swam as she re-lived those events through the eyes of a woman instead of a girl.

He hadn’t only cared a little for her – Sandor had risked his life for her, had saved her from the mob and from some of Joffrey’s more sadistic schemes. That night she had thought Sandor’s coming to her room, offering to take her away had been an act of drunkenness or mayhaps she had even thought ’twas what any true knight would have done. How naive she had been!

Ser Duckfield was right – if Sandor Clegane was coming to collect his debt, he would expect more than a song. She had been too young then, too naïve to realise it, but she had no such excuses now. However, even a sand steed would take a few days to travel from the Quiet Isle to King’s Landing. So she still had time. She must make the most of it . . .

Chapter End Notes

Hope to see you next Sunday!
Fire and Ice

Chapter Notes

Hello again. This chapter brings us to the end of Jon and Daenerys’ story – at least for now. Thank you sooooo much for coming back after what has been an unacceptably long delay. The problem has been that the weather finally got good here in Scotland. After the worst summer ever, we started reaching the heady heights of 18 degrees and it stopped raining! Woohoo! So I had to make the most of that and get out there instead of sitting inside typing.

Weather allowing, it shouldn’t be as long until the next chapter is up. Only a few more loose ends to tie up and a few more chapters to go . . .

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Never had Drogon fought so fiercely against being mounted. The dragon might have fed, but he had been ridden hard all the way back from the Quite Isle and was clearly in no mood to leave his pit again so soon. But Jon had to leave and he had to leave now. The message from Bran and the images from Arya had shaken Jon to the core. Daenerys needed him as never before and nothing was going to stop him flying to his wife’s side. Not even an obnoxious dragon.

For the first time in their relationship, Jon aimed a kick at Drogon’s armoured flank. There was no doubt who felt the impact more. Fuck Drogon. There was more than one dragon in the Red Keep tonight. But Rhaegal was even more tired than Drogon, having just arrived with Arya. That left Viserion - well rested after Aegon’s return a full day afore the other two. The problem with that was Viserion was bonded to Aegon and as fickle as its master. Jon would never normally have attempted to ride the white dragon or take Viserion without Aegon’s permission. Nevertheless, Jon was desperate enough to do it today.

Viserion eyed the King disinterestedly as he approached. Jon reached out to the dragon with his mind as well as his hands.

Viserion did not welcome the advance as Ghost always did or Drogon would have, had he not been exhausted. Even Rhaegal, being bonded to Daenerys, was generally biddable. He and Daenerys had ridden Rhaegal together many times and the green dragon seemed to tolerate him well enough. However, Viserion treated everyone and everything with detached distain. Much the same as its master did.

Still, Jon needed Viserion and he strove to find the connection he had never bothered to make afore. Never needed to make. But Viserion’s response to Jon’s approach was . . . insolent. Just like Aegon at his worst. The beast watched him with inscrutable eyes of molten gold, his long tail flicking slowly. Dangerously.

Arms outstretched, mind focused on calming and appeasing the dragon, Jon made the rider’s usual approach - from the front and side, so as to be clearly within the dragon’s field of vision. He waited for the Viserion to drop his shoulders – which would signal permission to mount. But as Jon edged towards the dragon, it slowly and very deliberately lumbered away, leaving the King in danger of being knocked from his feet by a gold spiked tail as thick as a man’s torso and with the strength of a dozen men.
Even a warg as skilled as Jon considered himself outclassed against a contrary dragon. Gritting his teeth with frustration and impatience, Jon edged past the twitching tail, only for Viserion to turn again - this time in the opposite direction, giving Jon a good view of the dragon’s scaly arse.

Enough! Jon strode towards the dragon’s shoulder, quickly and with more purpose this time, only for the dragon to repeat the evasive manoeuvre with surprising agility and speed. Cursing Aegon and his dragon under his breath, Jon thought the beast smirked at him, its black, dagger-like teeth glinting cruelly in the morning sun. Damn this dragon to the seven hells and back. Viserion was quick and evasive and just as contrary as its master. But Jon was determined. His Queen’s life depended upon it.

With a springing leap, Jon vaulted onto the dragon’s shoulder, gripping one of the gold tipped horns tightly with both hands, determined to ride this damn dragon. Viserion made his anger at being mounted against his will known by screeching and shooting random jets of orange and gold flame around the pit. Still Jon clung on as he was tossed this way and that, almost making it onto Viserion’s back when a thunderous roar rent the air. It reverberated inside Jon’s chest moments afore searing black fire engulfed Viserion. Jon sensed rather than saw the great white dragon’s eyes slide shut as the flames hit, protecting Viserion from his black brother’s wrath. Jon’s warging sense had given him the warning he needed to drop behind Viserion’s wing with only inches and a heartbeat to spare.

The only thing, living or inanimate that could withstand dragon fire was another dragon . . . or a Targaryen. A true Targaryen Jon thought, one with lilac eyes and silver hair, not a bastard from the North with dark hair and eyes who took the Black and made it his own. Small wonder he still felt more Stark than Targaryen. Not only had he believed all his life he was a son of Winterfell, albeit a bastard one, he neither looked like Daenerys or Aegon or had their resistance to fire. Instead, the Gods had given him the gift of the warg; another thing that bound him heart and soul to the North and he didn’t need that gift to know Drogon was furious.

He risked a look over Viserion’s wing. “Jealous?”

The taunting question was met by another ground shaking roar. Jon just had enough time to duck afore flames hot enough to melt the remaining towers of Harrenhal scorched the air. Even with the protection of Viserion’s wing, Jon felt as if he was standing in the heart of Tobho Mott’s furnace.

Drogon lunged and snatched at Viserion who hissed and spat jets of gold flame back. But Viserion’s retaliation was half hearted and the dragon shortly lumbered away, leaving Jon exposed before the immense and incensed reincarnation of Balerion the Black Dread.

Smouldering red eyes burned fiercely through the smoke left by dragon fire. Jon was reminded, not for the first time, of Ghost. The two of them stared at each other; man against dragon, both clad in black armour, both unflinching and determined. Jon felt the dragon’s exhaustion, anger and also jealousy. Slowly but surely all those vivid and violent emotions dissipated, aided by Jon’s calming thoughts, until eventually Drogon lowered his magnificent head as if in supplication and allowed Jon to mount.

“If you had listened to me the first time, we could have been on our way already.”

Drogon’s answering growl resonated through the chest of every man within a hundred feet, striking fear into their hearts. But Jon Snow laughed.

The first time he had experienced that, he had thought ‘twas the earth being ripped apart at the end of all things. ‘Twould still herald the end of Jon’s world if Drogon chose to make it so. They both knew he had no way of withstanding a direct assault by dragon fire. But so far the warg’s bond between man and dragon had held.
Jon did not have the same bone deep faith in Drogon that he had in Ghost. Mayhaps one day the
dragon would turn on him and he would die the way no true Targaryen should - in an inferno of
dragon fire. But not yet.

As he climbed up onto Drogon’s unyielding spiked back, Jon decided now was not the time to dwell
on his end. Daenerys needed him and to his wife he would go.

-o-

He had seen Bran’s camp on his way towards the Quiet Isle and ‘twas not far from King’s Landing –
least not by dragon. Drogon wanted to climb and soar, to feel the sun’s heat his wings and catch
the early morning thermals. But Jon had other plans. He wanted to fly low and direct, straight along
the king’s road in order to reach Daenerys in the shortest possible time. Drogon resisted at first,
fighting Jon’s commands, but not for long – Jon had already won that day’s battle of wills.

He let the huge black dragon circle only high enough to clear the city’s defences. The sun had only
recently risen and there were not many folk abroad at this time to witness the great beast heave its
mighty wings over walls and between towers. Still, everyone who saw them or heard them stopped
to stare, mouths agape. Dragons in flight might be a common sight to the residents of the Crownlands
these days, but not usually so close as to experience the stench of death and fire or to see sunlight
glint on claws that could snatch up a full grown man and carry him away. If Jon’s eyes had not been
fixed on the far horizon, he would have seen gold-cloaked guards run for cover and bakers drop the
day’s first batch of bread in terror as Drogon’s shadow passed overhead.

The same events were repeated beyond the city walls and along the king’s road. Soldiers in the camp
surrounding King’s Landing either threw themselves on the ground in fear or ran after the dragon
whooping and hollering; after all some of these men were veterans of battles where only the timely
intervention of a dragon or three had won the day. There was even a growing cult which revered
dragons as Gods, but Jon had no notion to ponder such stupidity today.

As he rode, he replayed the vision Arya had somehow shown him over and over in his mind;
Daenerys tearing desperately at the thing in her belly, Daenerys’ eyes rolling back and her falling,
seemingly lifeless, to the ground. Every time he closed his eyes he saw it; sometimes replayed slowly
– when every heartbreaking scream of Daenerys’ was like a dagger to his heart, and sometimes
quickly which made him feel as if he was already too late.

Urging Drogon on, determined to get to Daenerys, he could not help but remember another desperate
ride and the only other woman he had ever loved. Even after all these years, his memories of Ygritte
were overshadowed by guilt and regret. He had no intention of repeating those same mistakes again.
He had been but a boy then, unsure of what he wanted or of how to get it. He had loved Ygritte as a
boy would; with lust and wonder. For the first time in his life he believed he had found somewhere,
or rather someone, with whom he belonged. He had never really belonged anywhere else. Before
Ygritte he had always been the outsider; the bastard at Winterfell, mocked as Lord Snow by his
Black Brother’s and as Lord Crow by the Wildings. With Ygritte none of that mattered. She had
welcomed him with open arms and open legs and loved him despite, or mayhaps because of, his
burdens. For a short time he almost thought he belonged North of the Wall, with her. Until duty
pulled him away.

When he had to make his choice then, he had ridden away. This time he had left duty and
responsibility behind in the Red Keep and ridden away on the back of a dragon.
Mayhaps he could tell himself this was different - Westeros was in safe hands with Sam and Tyrion in the Red Keep and the fears Gendry had put into his head of Aegon loving Sansa had been proved to be groundless. After all, no man who loved Sansa Stark would have stooped to a tryst with Shireen Baratheon, kind and gentle though she was. Mayhaps this time was different because he was bone weary of putting the realm’s needs afore his own.

No matter the reason, he knew that whenever Daenerys needed him, he would go. To the ends of the earth if she wanted him to.

-o-

Bran’s party had long since broken camp, anxious to reach the Red Keep for many reasons. A great train of men, horses and carts and a huge, lumbering wheelhouse choked the King’s Road. Jon flew directly overhead once, to check that this procession was indeed the one he sought, afore he banked Drogon hard, causing the Black Dread to screech in blood curdling temper. The sound was like no other; a noise not heard for near on two hundred years but one that every living thing instinctively feared, for ‘twas the sound of fire and death.

Even from high above, Jon could see the horses below prance in fear or even bolt mindlessly in wild panic. All save one, its rider clad in black and white fur at the head of the caravan, keeping his mount calm and still while watching Jon’s arrival with intense interest. Bran. Only a warg could keep his mount so calm under the shadow of a Dragon.

Jon picked a flat grassy area, far enough away so that the caravan would be safe from Drogon’s fiery temper. Even as Drogon extended wings to act as brakes against the air and stretched his talons to dig into the earth, the calm man in furs was already on his way with another, on a not so calm horse, trailing behind. Had Jon any doubts this was his brother, Bran’s stiff posture would have given his identity away. Tyrion’s design for the special saddle did not allow for an easy, light seat. The second rider was taller, broader, bearded and as Jon slid from Drogon’s back, his breath caught in his chest as he gazed on the very image of a man he had not seen in years.

Had he not heard the horror story of the Red Wedding in Walder Frey’s halls, Jon would have believed ‘twas his brother Robb riding towards him again. Robb unchanged since their last meeting; smiling in welcome, young, handsome, vital . . . alive.

All but ignoring Bran and Drogon, Jon walked towards the rider who looked like Robb, but who could not be. The sight of him evoked so many memories of other times, other places, all but forgotten until now.

“King Jon.”

Hearing those words from a man who looked so like Robb shocked Jon more than he would have thought possible. As the man bounded enthusiastically from his horse and dropped to one knee, Jon stood transfixed. King Jon. Never had he thought to hear those words from anyone’s lips, much less Robb’s. The thick, red brown waves atop the bowed head had him reaching out to touch them once more and his dead brother’s name slipped unbidden from his lips. Bright blue eyes looked up, questioningly. The same, but not. Thicker brows frowned, a different voice asked, “Robb?”

Clearly uncomfortable, the man told him, “I’m Rickon. Rickon Stark. At your service Sire.”

Of course this wasn’t Robb. Couldn’t be Robb. Jon knew that. Robb was dead and had been for all these years. Still, the likeness was uncanny.

“Forgive me,” Jon smiled, while tugging his youngest brother up and back onto his feet. “I am
pleased to meet you once again Rickon Stark.” Jon extended his hand.

Rickon looked at it and then at Jon with a devilish grin spreading over his face. Ignoring the outstretched hand, Rickon pulled Jon into a bear hug of a brotherly embrace. Robb was always more open, quicker to laugh, to fight and also to forgive than Jon. Robb would never have settled for a hand shake from a brother either.

Jon closed his eyes as he held his brother once more, memories and regrets swirling inside his head. Rickon’s awkward stiffening in his arms, told Jon ‘twas time to let go. Stepping back he looked again at the oh-so-familiar features. Robb’s face had been as familiar to him as his own once, nae more so, for he had seen his own face seldom in those days while Robb had been beside him constantly as they played and fought and dreamed together, the way brothers do.

“Are you all right?”

Bran’s voice broke Jon’s revere. He smiled up at his other brother – the one who wasn’t Robb, the one who most resembled Caitlyn.

“I lost myself for a moment ‘tis all.”

Turning back to Rickon, Jon clasped his shoulder. “You remind me so much of …”

“…The Young Wolf,” Rickon finished for him. “I know. Everyone says it. Although I’m better looking.” The grin was cockier too.

“Aye, you are,” Jon agreed, grinning as he gave Rickon’s shoulder another brotherly squeeze.

“Arya says I can squire with you and King Aegon.”

Rickon’s enthusiasm for it was writ large over his familiar, handsome face and Jon did not have it in him to deny the boy anything. But Jon’s generosity was not shared by Bran.

“Gods Rickon!” Bran cursed from above. “You have not seen your brother, the King, since you were biting ankles and the first words out of your mouth ask for favours for yourself. You need to grow up and realise the whole of Westeros does not revolve around you.”

“Of course you shall squire with me.” Jon vowed solemnly, ignoring Bran and his disapproving frown. “And you shall have the greatest training I can provide. Not only in arms from Aegon, but you will learn strategy at the knee of Samwell Tarly, politics from Tyrion Lannister, compassion I hope from our sister Sansa and water dancing and no doubt other, more . . . dangerous skills from Arya.”

Rickon grinned so widely Jon thought the sides of the lad’s mouth might tear at the seams. Seven hells, but his enthusiasm was infectious. Still, Jon’s pleasure at their reunion had to be brief. Reacquainting himself with his youngest brother was not the purpose of his being here today.

If he hadn’t already known from Arya something was very wrong, one look at Bran would have told him there was. Looking directly into those troubled blue eyes, Jon tentatively reached out to Bran with his mind, wondering if the hitherto unknown connection with Arya would work with his brother too. But there was nothing. Not even a wall to battle against. Whatever link he and Arya had shared in the Red Keep was entirely closed off with Bran. Was this deliberate on Bran part? Or did he share some connection that Arya and not with Bran? Jon had no time or inclination to ask Bran, besides, he suspected he would not like what he found inside his brother’s head.

So, instead Jon asked, “Will you take me to my wife?”
Bran nodded solemnly afore urging his horse around with a combination of tongue clicks and complicated tugs on the reins. Not for the first time, Jon admired his brother’s horsemanship. Sat in the saddle, Bran was no different to any other man. How different things might have been had Bran been whole.

“Take my horse,” Rickon urged, thrusting the reins towards him.

Jon was about to warn against staying so close to Drogon, ‘twas only then Jon realised Drogon had been unusually quiet. Following Rickon’s gaze, he saw Drogon was sound asleep, his great scaled back rising and falling rhythmically in time with his snores, each one a hiss that sounding like hair being singed from an animal’s carcass. The biting stench was not too dissimilar either.

“I want to take a thorough look while he cannot wake. I might never get the chance to get so close to such a magnificent beast again.”

“Cannot wake?” Jon repeated not understanding what Rickon meant. Dragons were notoriously light sleepers.

“He will sleep until I tell him to wake,” Bran said, as if such a thing was easy. To make a dragon do anything was near impossible. Even Jon struggled sometimes, as was evidenced by the debacle in the dragon pits that morning. Yet Bran could put Drogon to sleep indefinitely and without Jon even noticing. The King looked at his brother with renewed respect. Jon had learned tricks and ways to using his powers from the wildings, but he suspected ‘twas all mere child’s play compared to Bran’s tutelage under The Three Eyed Raven. Jon had to have faith that Bran and the ancient powers of the Children of the Forest could save his wife.

Jon mounted Rickon’s horse, leaving his younger brother staring in fascination at the unconscious dragon.

Jon and Bran rode fast, side by side; their horses matching each other stride for stride. Still, it would take a while to reach the main caravan.

“How much did Arya tell you?”

Jon thought not on what Arya had said, but what she had shown him – the pale skin of Daenerys’ belly stretched tight by some thing inside her. Everything Jon knew from Daenerys told him ‘twas blood magic at work.

Not long after they met she had told him, haltingly and reluctantly about her son and her husband and the blood magic that had ultimately stolen them from her. Jon had listened and made sympathetic noises and held her when she’d cried afterwards but there was part of him that he hid and that shamed him because that part of him was jealous and was mayhaps even glad it had happened. Had her husband and her son lived, she would never have been his. Mayhaps this was the God’s punishment for his greed.

Gritting his teeth, Jon said, “All I want to know is how to get rid of it.”

Bran’s slowed his horse to a walk, forcing Jon to do the same. Once they were again shoulder to shoulder, Bran’s eyes narrowed as he spoke, “Blood magic is strong and when the blood is that of kings it can be . . .” he paused, his gaze travelling to the newly reforged greatsword Ice, “. . . unbreakable.”

Jon suppressed the urge to grind his teeth. Bran’s disapproval was clear. No doubt Jon having Ice in
the first place was part of it, but the Valyrian steel being reforged using blood magic went against all of Bran’s noble beliefs. So be it. Bran didn’t have to like it as the sword was Jon’s now and he wasn’t above using anything or anyone to get what he needed. His mind flicked back guiltily to Ygritte and to Gilly’s son afore he pushed those dark thoughts back into the hole where he kept his demons and regrets.

‘Twas not the time or the place to discuss Ice. Instead Jon pinned Bran with a determined look and said, “Unbreakable to most. But you know how to break it.”

‘Twas not a question, but rather a demand. Jon did not want Bran under any illusions as to how far he would go to save his wife. No matter what he had to do in order to secure Bran’s help, he would do it.

To Jon’s dismay, Bran shook his head. “No.”

Jon did grind his teeth then. How could that be? No one alive knew more about greenseeing and skinchanging and Northern magic than Bran Stark. No one alive. Jon did not like the direction his train of thought was taking him.

“If you don’t know how to save her, then you know who does?”

This time Bran did not look at him as he answered with a weary sigh, “Mayhaps.”

“Who?” Jon demanded “And where can I find him?”

When Bran did not immediately answer, Jon kicked his heels to his horse’s flank, causing the animal to burst into a gallop, only for Jon to wheel the horse around and across Bran’s path, grabbing its bridle and forcing Bran’s horse to a stop.

“Tell me!”

Bran regarded him with eyes that looked as if they were as old and hard as Winterfell stone. “If you find him and if he will help you there will be a price to pay. A high price.”

Jon did not hesitate. “I’ll pay it. No matter how high.”

Bran’s brow furrowed, “Think well Jon. To be without children is not the worst thing that can happen.”

Jon made no answer. Mayhaps not to him and not to Bran, but ‘twas for Daenerys.

“One person’s wants and desires when weighed against the greater good for Westeros is a small price to pay . . .”

Bran never got to finish afore Jon thundered, “Everything I have done has been for the good of Westeros. Everything. Even wedding Daenerys was not my own choice.”

He fixed Bran with a glacial stare. “No more. ‘Tis time I let someone else carry the burden. ‘Tis time for what I want . . . and what Daenerys’ wants.”

Bran shook his head and his shoulders slumped as if in defeat. “Then think hard Jon. Think hard on what you want and how badly you want it, for as the blood of kings wove this magic and only the blood of kings can break it.”

Bran’s words came as no surprise. After hearing Daenerys tell of how she had been tricked into sacrificing her unborn son for her first husband, he knew there would be a heavy price to pay. But if
it bought Daenerys what she wanted, then Jon would pay it. Mayhaps not gladly, but he would pay all the same.

John gritted his teeth. “Where must I go and who must I find?”

When Bran replied, ‘Twas as I the words were being dragged out of him, such was his reluctance to see Jon follow this path. “There is only one to whom you can turn. Only one . . .”

“Who?” Jon demanded. But the bile that was rising in his throat was proof that he knew the answer afore Bran even spoke it.

Bran’s voice was soft and low and heavy with regret as he answered, “The Night’s King.”

Even though he had been expecting it, even though he had known who Bran meant, bile still hit the back of Jon’s throat.

To crawl to his enemy and beg for his wife’s life – ‘twas almost more than Jon could bear. Almost. But he would bear it. No matter the cost to himself he would do this if it would give Daenerys her heart’s desire. And if he should not return, then at least she would have his babe – a Prince, heir to the Iron Throne, fatherless mayhaps, but not a bastard.

His decision made, Jon let go of Bran’s reigns and neither of them spoke again until they reached the slowly moving column of men and horses.

“She is in the wheelhouse. She was distraught. That thing was . . . I had to make her sleep.”

“Like Drogon?”

Bran nodded.

“What will happen when she wakes?”

Bran shrugged helplessly. “I do not know. She must have had that blood magic beast inside of her since she . . . lost her babe.”

“Yet it only showed itself now.”

Bran ran long, pale fingers over his eyes. When he removed them his expression was even more sorrowful. “‘Twas my fault. After Arya shared news of her pregnancy Daenerys asked for my help and when I tried it . . . defended itself against me. Providing I stay away, I think it will remain as it was - sleeping . . . and feeding.”

Jon had to close his eyes for a moment then while he steeled himself to accept what he had just been told. Feeding. On his unborn children. His resolve to free Daenerys from whatever was inside her, no matter the cost to himself, raged stronger than ever.

“I cannot blame you for it,” Jon said when he had recovered his composure. “She would do anything if she thought ‘twould give her the babe she craves.”

Bran looked straight at Jon as he corrected him, “You would both do anything to have the child you crave.”

Jon did not bother to deny it. He would drain his deepest veins if it meant he could give Daenerys the babe she craved. He wanted a child too, but not for the reason everyone assumed. He cared nothing for continuing the Targaryen dynasty. ‘Twas a poisoned chalice and he would not stand in his son or his daughter’s way if they wanted naught to do with the Iron Throne. Let Aegon’s heirs claim it if
they wanted it.

Nae, Jon wanted a child so he could give them everything he never had. Most of all he wanted to give them a mother who loved them. Daenerys would sing lullabies and still kiss them and hug them when they were far too old for it and, above all, she would love them unconditionally. She would be the perfect mother he never had. It mattered naught to him whether his child received their mother’s love at the foot of the Iron Throne, or in Winterfell or a hut somewhere other than Westeros, as long as they knew their mother loved them.

Dragging his hopes for the future back into the harsh reality of the present, Jon asked Bran, “How long afore she wakes?”

“She will only wake when I let her. How long do you want?”

“Drogon needs to rest and so do I.” Jon looked up at the sky, considering the position of the sun and the time he and Drogon would need afore setting out on their quest. A few hours should do if they did not go far tonight. The Quiet Isle would be a safe place to stop for a King, a Queen and a dragon. Elder Brother would give them shelter tonight and there were still plenty of sheep on the island to satisfy Drogon’s appetite. After that, ‘twould only be many more days flying until they reached their goal. “To the ends of the earth” had been right enough. Jon’s stomach clenched at the thought of hunting the Night’s King in his lair only to beg for his help. But there was naught else for it.

“If you turn the wheelhouse around and head back towards Drogon we shall fly after noon.”

Bran nodded. “Is there anything I can do?”

Jon considered making a joke out of their situation and asking Bran if he had some king’s blood to pay the Night King’s price. But ‘twas in poor taste. They both knew the only blood the Ice King desired was Jon’s. So instead he replied, “If you can provide warm clothes for Daenerys and something to eat afore we leave we shall be in your debt. Everything else we can find on the way.”

Without waiting for Bran’s confirmation, Jon spurred his horse towards the lumbering wheelhouse and, with a grace Bran could only envy, vaulted from his horse onto the tail board. Afore Bran could say goodbye, Jon had disappeared inside.

-o-

Daenerys had been placed on a pile of furs on a makeshift bed, her silver hair and pale skin in stark contrast to the dark furs and the shadow of the wheelhouse. The woman tending to her looked up in surprise as Jon pushed through the curtains and stood there swaying with the movement. Meera Reed. Jon greeted her with a courteous nod, but his eyes were fixed upon his wife.

“Are you leaving now?” Meera asked softly. Unlike Bran, she seemed to have had no doubt the path Jon would chose.

Eventually Jon dragged his eyes away from Daenerys to look at his good-sister. Although he and Bran were not blood brothers, Meera Reed was as near to a good-sister as made no matter.

“After noon. I need to sleep first and so does Drogon.”

Meera immediately rose to leave.
“How is she?” Jon blurted out, grabbing at Meera’s sleeve, not caring how frantic he seemed.

“She is desperate for a child of her own,” Meera said, smiling sadly up at him.

Jon drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Had he not already known Bran and Meera were in the same position, Jon would have seen the proof of it in Meera’s sad, green eyes which were full of the same longing as his wife’s.

“When I see . . . him I shall ask about you too.” T’would probably be in vain, but at least Jon could do that for her.

Meera’s smile grew sadder still. “Do not waste your breath Jon. We both know ‘tis Bran who cannot . . .” she tailed off, unable to bring herself to speak the truth aloud – that Bran had no use of anything below his waist and could father no children.

Bran was clever and talented beyond knowing in the ways of the Children of the Forrest - the way he had put Drogon instantly to sleep was proof of that. But Bran could not walk or fight or provide an heir and that left Rickon, still young and untried, as Winterfell’s hope for the future. Jon’s free hand sought for Ice’s hilt and he rested it there, feeling momentarily guilty, wondering what would happen to the greatsword when he was dead and gone.

Meera and Jon regarded each other awkwardly for a moment. There was nothing more either of them could say. Then Meera rose, clasping both her small hands around Jon’s and squeezing them tight with a strength that belied her size. Standing on her tip toes, she stretched up as far as she could to kiss his cheek, both of them swaying unsteadily in the wheelhouse as it began to turn around. Meera took the opportunity to whisper in his ear, “Good luck and do not do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Her comment made Jon smile. He knew Meera would do anything for Bran, just as he would do anything for Daenerys.

As Meera left, Jon sat down carefully beside his wife. Daenerys never stirred. Although she had the appearance of sleep, a closer examination proved she was anything but relaxed; her mouth was set in a tight grimace and a frown line cut between her brows. Jon lifted her head onto his lap and ran his thumb gently down the line that marred her forehead, trying to soothe away her worries.

When her frown only deepened he murmured her name. That provoked no response at all. Bran was right – she would only wake when he let her. Jon bent his head and brushed his lips tentatively over his wife’s, but his only reward was a whimper as she turned her face away.

Seeing her like this, knowing how terrified she would have been when she saw the evil thing alive inside her womb where their babes ought to be, hurt worse than any other pain he had ever felt. He had died once afore but he would suffer every one of those stab wounds again if it meant Daenerys would be free from that thing inside her.

He tentatively lifted her dress, looking at the familiar smooth skin, now marred by the marks made by her own nails. He stared for a while afore hovering his hand over her belly, wondering if he dare touch her. So many times he had kissed her there as they prayed for a babe while making love. So many times they had waited together anxiously, hoping and praying that this time his seed would take root. So many times she had cried when her moon blood began to flow; crushing their hopes again and shattering her dreams. Every time he had reassured her how much he loved her, would always love her, babes or no and yet with every new moon he had felt the distance between them lengthen and grow as she felt she had failed him again.

He had to know. Holding his breath, he trailed the fingertips of his unburnt hand over her belly,
waiting for the thing he had seen through Arya’s eyes to reappear. But there was nothing. The only movement was the gentle rise and fall caused by Daenerys’ breathing. Bran was right again – whatever lurked inside her only reacted to his touch.

As Jon stroked soft, soothing circles on her belly and thought about sleeping, his mind wandered back to the first time he had seen his wife; the night he had scaled her tower to steal her away. Her hair had been spread out across her pillow like a moonlit sea that night too, but instead of his stealing her away, she had been the one who had stolen his heart.

When had he come to realise how much he loved her? Mayhaps he had know it from that first night, mayhaps afore from the tales he had heard of the Dragon Queen’s compassion, mayhaps ‘twas the wonder of her many victories or mayhaps ‘twas the way she loved him – completely and unconditionally.

Whatever he had to do to give her dream life he would do. So there would be a price to pay. It held no fear for him. He would give his own life for his unborn son or daughter if it would grant them their wish.

He eased himself down until he lay on his side, facing her. Her hands were curled into tight little fists and no amount of coaxing from him could unclench them. He made do with wrapping one of his bigger hands around hers and gently stroking his Queen’s hair with the other. Lying like that, he waited for sleep to claim him. Then they would wake together and he would find a way to make their dream come true.

Chapter End Notes

I’ll try and not make it so long until the next chapter - which will be Arya & Gendry’s wedding in the Godswood and Ty’s (hopefully) exciting re-appearance. Once again, thank you Brazilian Guy for your guidance and generally being a great friend and thank you readers for hanging on in there.
The return of the Hound

Chapter Notes

Sorry for another long delay. I’ve got a new job and there’s been other real life stuff going on. Thank you dear reader for still being out there. We are inching towards the end. Not too many more chapters to go. Hoorah.

I think I said this one was going to be about a wedding, but I had forgotten about Sansa and the Hound. Yikes! This chapter is shorter than I would have liked, but better something than nothing . . .

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With nothing better to do, Ty had reverted to hanging around the stables – back where he had started, except he no longer felt like he belonged. The place seemed smaller now and even worse - a dead end, whereas afore he had seen the Red Keep’s stables as the gateway to the world.

At least the other stable lads left him alone to wallow in his misery and there was no risk of bumping into Shireen and her many beaus. Queen Daenerys’ priority seemed to be finding a husband for Shireen and the number of Sers and Lords invited to dine with the Queen and her Ladies, or take afternoon tea with them or a turn around the gardens made Ty’s head spin and his stomach retch. He could not have been more miserable if the sky had fallen on his head.

At first he had tried to watch from the shadows as his love was presented to a long procession of men – each one older or uglier or richer than the last, but one morning of their lewd, openly assessing gazes and Shireen’s exciting blushing had been too much for him to bear. He had fled then, devastated, hopeless, his heart broken beyond repair.

How could she do this? To him and to herself. Shireen had felt the same about him as he felt for her and with the same intensity. He was sure of it and yet . . . and yet . . . she was prepared to sell herself to a man she did not love and who could never love her the way Ty loved her for a title and some gold.

Ty would have all that and more, he was sure of it. Someday. Someday he would be the greatest knight in all of Westeros and he had been so sure that Shireen would wait for him to achieve what he was convinced was his destiny. How could he have been so wrong?

The only thing that prevented him from dwelling on her betrayal and his own misery was sword practice. The long journey and enforced rest had healed his wound and the Red Keep’s Maester had pronounced him fit to return to his squirely duties. Only, with old Lem back in Storm’s End and Lord Baratheon chasing all over Westeros after Lady Arya, no one else had thought to give him any squirely duties to perform. Of course, the fact that Ty had not bothered to tell anyone he was healed might have had something to do with that.

The other stables lads gave him a wide berth, it being obvious to them all that he was no longer one of them. Not only did he receive double rations from the kitchens as per Gendry’s orders, he had a fine tunic in Baratheon colours, a Braavosi sword at his hip and a temper that flared as fiercely and as unpredictably as wildfire. For the first time in his life, all of his time was his own and with nothing else to do, he practiced water dancing and other, less elegant forms of swordsmanship from dawn
until well past dusk. Each night he fell into his bed in the hay exhausted, with every limb aching, yet still he could not sleep for thinking about Lady Shireen and of what might have been.

This day was no different from any of the others since his return to King’s Landing. While the sable boys mucked out the horses, Ty was in an empty stall, taking his frustrations out on a swinging sack of grain. He jabbed and rolled and spun around it until all of the grain had spilled on the floor and the sack hung as limp and empty as his heart.

Only when he stopped, panting for breath, did he hear unfamiliar, gruff voices barking orders to the stable lads, laughing with each other and they were getting closer. Trying to stifle his ragged breathing, Ty pressed himself against the timber wall and listened.

“How long are we supposed to wait ‘ere for then?”

A different man grunted and cursed, as if the question needed no answer. The first voice muttered something unintelligible, but his time made it clear he did not relish waiting.

“So we could be ‘ere for days?”

“We’ll be ‘ere as long as needs be,” an authoritative voice snapped back.

“Our Lady bids us wait,” a third voice said, “ . . . so we fucking wait.”

Ty’s ears pricked up at the mention of a Lady. Were they talking about Queen Daenerys? Lady Sansa? ‘Twould not be Arya as no one called her a Lady. Mayhaps t’was his Shireen?

Ty risked a stealthy peak around the edge of the stall. Three big men walked down the mid way, carrying sleeping furs, wine skins and more. They were clearly warriors and were prepared for a long wait.

Holding his breath, Ty prayed they chose another stall afore his. He had been around the fighting men of Bad Company long enough to know which ones to steer clear of and these men had the look of the most hardened sellswords about them. Broad and fierce and armed to the teeth, they wore no house colours and yet they walked through the Red Keep in broad daylight without challenge. Who were they, why were they here and what were they waiting for? Ty’s interest was well and truly piqued.

They chose the stall next to Ty’s to set down their bundles. Ty had rolled his head back behind the wooden partition and stood listening and barely breathing as they dropped their packs and grumbled to each other about the smell, the poor quality of the straw and who was to take first watch.

“Shall we have a drink first?” one of them asked as the scuffling and moving around quietened.

“Do Lannisters shit gold?”

“Not any more!” a third, more authoritative voice replied and they all laughed.

From the gurgling sounds coming from the other side of the wooden partition the wine skin was being passed around some more. Lips were smacked, the quality of the wine praised, someone burped and eventually the first man spoke again, “‘Ow long d’ you think we’ll ‘ave to wait then Rolly?”

The boss voice, who seemed to be known as ‘Rolly’ groaned. “Gods, you’re not going ‘t let this go are ye?” he grumbled.
“I’ve got things t’ do, t’is all.”

“Wehres t’ do more like! You’ll just have t’ keep yer cock in yer britches for a few days unless ye fancy a turn with me and sweet Malo ‘ere.”

“Fuck off!”

“Or mayhaps ye’d prefer t’ pass the time wi’ some o’ those pretty stable lads?”

Two men laughed – Ty assumed they were ‘Rolly’ and ‘Malo’ - while the third cursed them colourfully. Ty clenched his buttocks tightly as he listened, hoping they were joking. His right hand slipped down to grip the pommel of his sword and Ty swore to himself that he’d kill them all afore he’d let that happen to him.

“Let’s see . . .” the boss he now recognised as being ‘Rolly’ - mused. “Aegon told me ‘e arrived two days back, King Jon and the Smith yesterday and that she-wolf in the middle ‘o last night . . .”

Arya! They were talking about Arya and “the Smith” had to be Gendry. Having not left the stables in days, Ty had not yet heard of their return. He listened even more intently. To his surprise, this Rolly seemed to be on first name terms with King Aegon. Ty’s instincts had been right - these were no ordinary soldiers. He pressed himself closer to the wood, determined not to miss any part of this conversation.

“Aegon told our Lady he’d ordered Clegane ‘t bring his sand steed back, didn’t he?”

“Aye,” Rolly agreed, “So let’s think - if the sand steed and the dragon left the Quiet Isle at the same time, and Aegon arrived two days past, ‘ow much longer ‘til Clegane gets ‘ere?”

Ty did the calculation of the distance by sand steed from the Quiet Isle in his head. Three days, mayhaps four.

“I reckon the day after tomorrow . . . or mayhaps the day after that.”

Ty itched to interrupt and tell them they were wrong. He knew better than most how far and how fast a sand steed could go if the rider was desperate and determined. If this Clegane was determined, he could arrive anytime.

“Fuuuuuck. Two days stuck in this shit hole with the two of you?! I should have brought more wine.”

Ty listened while the wine skin was uncorked again the men drank deep. At this rate they’d be well into their cups when the man they were supposed to be waiting for arrived. Fools.

“There’s no help for it. Our Lady wants to see ‘im as soon as ‘e gets here and we’d best not be drunk either when ‘e does. We’ll need all our wits about us.”

There was a loud belch, followed by a grumbled, “There’s three ‘o us and only one ‘o ‘im. He’s the one should be wary.”

“And thinkin’ like that might just get you killed. ‘Aven’t you ‘eard tell ‘o the Hound? ‘Im and ‘is brother were the meanest motherfuckers in the whole of Westeros afore the war.”

“Aye well, that was years ago and ‘I ain’t afraid of an old dog.”

Rolly replied with a sneer, “Then you’re a bloody fool.”
The man whose name Ty didn’t know cursed Rolly roundly. Ty held his breath wondering if the men would come to blows, but Malo seemed to know how to calm the situation, distracting the other two by interrupting to ask, “Why is our Lady in such a hurry to see the old dog anyway?”

“Ahh, well . . .” Rolly began, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial rough whisper that Ty had to strain to hear, “She told me ‘erself that she owes ‘im a debt for saving ‘er life and that o’ ‘er sister.” “The she-wolf?”

“Aye, her. Now stop interrupting if you want me to tell it . . .”

Ty’s mind whirled. The she-wolf was Arya, so Lady Sansa had to be the one who had sent them to fetch the Hound. Ty had no time to think on why, for concentrating on the next part of Rolly’s story.

“So she tells me she owes ‘im this great debt then tells me she’s gong to repay ‘im with . . . a song!” Rolly paused for dramatic effect leaving the other two to repeat “A song?” incredulously.

“Aye! So I says to ‘er, ‘If I’d ‘ave saved your life and that o’ your sister I’d be expecting a damn sight more than a song!”

“I bet you would!” Malo sniggered lewdly and Ty bristled. Ladies should not be spoken about in such crude terms and as these men seemed to be carrying out Lady Sansa’s orders, ‘twas even worse that they spoke ill of her behind her back.

“So she looks at me like it ain’t never occurred to ‘er that a man might be expectin’ a proper thank you.”

“One that involves gettin’ down on ‘er knees!”

There was more coarse laughter from all three of them. Anger flared in Ty’s belly. These animals needed teaching a lesson. Ladies should be spoken of with awe and respect, not as if they were . . . whores.

After their laughter died down, Ty heard the wineskin being passed around yet again. After they’d drunk their fill, Malo asked, “So which o’ those three beauties in the library would you ‘ave chosen to warm your bed if you ‘ad your pick?”

Rolly snorted, “Aint one o’ them would touch you with a shitty stick.”

Only two laughed this time and Malo replied huffily, “Nor you neither Ser Duckfield!”

“I’ve bedded plenty o’ hightborn Ladies and I left ‘em with a bigger smile on their faces than their fancy Lords ever did!” Rolly, or rather Ser Duckfield snarled back.

Ty was even more outraged. The man was a Ser! Sworn to respect and honour women! And yet course filth like that spilled easily off his tongue.

“Let’s say they wanted a bit o’ rough then,” Malo pressed, “Which one would you ‘ave?”

“Depends,” Rolly mused. Ty could imagine his coarse grin as he said, “The she-wolf if I wanted it rough and her sister for sweet.”

“Why not just have both then?”
The stables filled with raucous laughter.

Ty’s hand gripped the pommel of his sword so hard his knuckles turned white. The nails of his other hand dug into his palm as his hand fisted in rage. He had to grit his teeth to prevent himself from calling these animals out. ‘Men’ was too good a word for them. How dare they speak about Arya and Lady Sansa like that!

After the laughter had died down, the man whose name Ty had not heard yet, sniggered, “Mark my words boys, the quiet ones are always the real goers. I’d wager that one with the greyscale would go like a . . .”

Ty never heard the rest for the blood pounding in his ears. They dared to speak that way about HIS Shireen?! His sword was drawn and he was around the side of the stall afore the man had finished his sentence. He certainly stopped talking the moment he saw Ty brandishing his blade.

The look of surprise on all three of those battle hardened faces would have pleased Ty immensely at any other time, as it was, he was too incensed to care.

“You disrespectful scum!” he spat. “You!” he pointed his sword at Ser Duckfield’s throat, “Are unfit to call yourself a ‘Ser’! And you all need a lesson in respect!”

Despite the blade aimed straight at him, Rolly was the first to recover. He slowly lifted his hands from the straw to show Ty he was unarmed, all the while murmuring in a soothing tone, “We meant no disrespect, ‘twas just the wine talking. Let’s discuss this like men . . .”

“Fuck that!” the ugliest one, who wasn’t Malo, spat. “There’s three ‘o us and he’s just a bo…”

Afore Ugly could finish the word, Ty’s blade was poised at his throat.

Seizing the opportunity like the seasoned warrior he was, Ser Duckfield had his long knife drawn and aimed at Ty’s groin afore Ty could spin back around.

Rolly Duckfield was triumphant as he drawled, “You’ve got some balls boy. I’ll give you that. But if you want to keep ‘em – drop the sword.”

“Fuck you!” Ty spat back at Duckfield, but his attention never wavered from Ugly’s suddenly sweating face. Ugly was the one who had insulted Shireen and, no matter the cost, Ty intended to make Ugly would pay for it.

As Duckfield was the leader, Ty addressed him, while extending his blade and forcing Ugly to stretch his neck back awkwardly, “I’ll gut your friend here like a fish and take at least one more of you with me afore you kill me.”

“Who says he’s my friend?” Duckfield smirked, casually waving his knife in the general direction of Ty’s groin.

“Rolly . . .” Ugly whined, “Don’t jape when he’s got a blade t’ my throat.”

“Who says I’m japing?”

It gave Ty some satisfaction to see genuine, heart stopping, britches pissing, fear in Ugly’s eyes. Ty wasn’t ‘just a boy’ now. He held Ugly’s life in his hands and the man knew it.

“Allright,” Duckfield drawled, “Here’s what we’ll do. Trial by combat. Let the Gods decide.”
A little of Ugly’s obvious panic receded. Rolly wasn’t going to desert him after all.

However, seeing Ugly’s arrogance flicker back to life only fanned the flames of Ty’s anger. This animal needed to be taught a lesson. They all did. For Shireen!

“ Honour and the Gods are on my side! I’ll fight him! I’ll fight you all! But the Gods demand a fair fight. One on one. Swear on whatever you hold dearest that you won’t interfere until ‘tis done.” Ty hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. If the three of them rushed him all at once, he would not have a chance and Ty already knew they were not honourable men.

Malo gave a snort of amused derision at Ty’s proposal, which only set Ty’s resolve colder and harder.

He was certain he could take Ugly. Ugly still thought of him a mere boy and underestimating him would cost the man his life. There was still a chance he could take the one called Malo, although he’d be prepared after seeing his friend die on the tip of Ty’s sword. That left Duckfield and Ty was not at all confident he could best the leader. The quiet, almost arrogant confidence that only came with countless victories rolled off Ser Duckfield in waves.

Ty thought again on his Shireen and decided if he was going to die, then defending her honour was not a bad way to go.

At least Duckfield was taking him seriously and not dismissing him as just a boy. Ty had no doubt the flame haired leader was smarter than that. He hadn’t got to be a Ser or a leader of men by being complacent or by judging men or boys by their looks alone.

“Agreed!” Duckfield stood up with surprising grace and agility for such a big man.

More proof that this Ser was as good a warrior as he had ever met afore solidified like a lead weight in Ty’s stomach.

Mayhaps he should not have been so quick to let his love and regard for Shireen rule his head. But ‘twas much too late for regrets now. He could not back down now and there was naught for it but to finish what he had started. Mayhaps if he died here, Shireen would learn ‘twas for her that he fell. He hoped she would grieve his loss for the rest of her days as deeply as he had grieved losing her.

“All out o’ this stall! We want a fair fight and no one tripping anyone else up.” Duckfield looked pointedly at Malo, making it clear to the other man that he intended to honour his word and let the Gods decide the outcome of the fight. Malo scowled and shrugged, but stepped back as his commander asked.

Ty’s mind raced. The three men towered over him as they all moved into the stable’s central passage. Up close, their experience was even more obvious in the confident way they moved, their many battle scars and by the way the grips of their weapons were worn smooth with use. The odds of Ty’s surviving this, much less winning, seemed to decreasing with every beat of his heart. He needed to think.

Ty knew he didn’t have the brawn to beat these men. Yet. There was no use in his being the finest swordsman in all of Westeros one day, if he never lived to see that day come. If he could not out-fight them, his only hope was to out-think them. Ty knew he needed to think like the cleverest man in Westeros if he was to get himself out of this alive. So he asked himself - what would Tyrion Lannister do? The answer came quickly - Tyrion wouldn’t have been so stupid as to get himself into this fight in the first place.
Rolly and Malo took up position at either side of the passage, while Ugly stood in the centre, his legs splayed, his feet planted in the straw and his confidence fully returned. Ty saw too late that ‘twas only the element of surprise which had given him the advantage. In a close quarters duel, the other man’s size, strength and longer reach were at least a match for Ty’s greater agility and the speed of his Braavosi blade. If only Arya had been willing to teach him more of those dark magic tricks she knew. He suspected even she would be daunted by facing these three men one after another – with the most formidable coming last, at the time when Ty would be tiring and quite possibly bleeding from the first two duels.

As Ugly drew his sword, an evil looking scimitar, he grinned and swaggered, slicing the curved blade through the air this way and that, putting on a show for his comrades.

Arrogant Fuck. Ty assumed his Water Dancer’s stance, turning side-on to present a narrower target to his opponent.

Ugly sneered and parodied Ty’s pose, bending his knees until he was almost squatting and grimacing as if taking a shit. He added to the insult by sticking his arse out and waving his free hand around his head like a fool.

Ty’s initial response to that was fury at not being taken seriously, but then Duckfield laughed; a big, full, genuine, belly shaking laugh and Ty had a sudden flash of inspiration that blinded him with its brilliance.

Seizing the moment, Ty lunged. Ugly was still showing off and Ty caught the older man off-guard. Ty could have, mayhaps should have, aimed for the kill and sliced the man’s throat from ear to ear. Instead Ty lunged for the britches. Ugly wore a very nice, thick sword belt, but his britches were held up by an old piece of rope. The razor sharp tip of the Braavosi blade sliced through the rope as if ‘twas only gossamer thread and Ugly’s britches instantly headed south to his ankles.

Ugly was already committed to a defensive block, but Ty’s blade was long gone by the time the heavy scimitar swung to protect the sellsword’s body. Having to grasp frantically at his britches, while simultaneously swinging the heavy sword, left Ugly momentarily off balance. Ty pivoted around gracefully, his balance and his aim perfectly synchronised to plant the same boot hard into Ugly’s arse. The outcome was inevitable. Ugly sprawling forwards, flat onto his ugly face.

Quick as a snake, Ty sliced his own blade through the air, carving a lightening ‘T’ in the bare flesh of Ugly’s even uglier arse.

“Take that!” Ty yelled triumphantly, “Something to remember me by!”

Duckfield kicked the scimitar away from Ugly’s scrabbling hands, all the while laughing so hard that Ty thought the big man might split his own britches.

“Don’t!” Malo hissed to Ugly. “Stay down you fool.”

Despite spearing Ty with a hate filled look, Ugly heeded his comrade’s advice and dropped his head into the straw, his shoulders sagging in defeat.

“Who’s next?!” Ty demanded, dropping down into the Water Dancer’s stance again, ready for the next duel he hoped would no longer be necessary.

“Put your sword away boy,” Duckfield gasped, fistng his hands on his hips, his chest still heaving
with laughter. “By Azor Ahai, the Gods are on your side and I ain’t seen nuthin’ that funny in years.”

Inhaling a deep, steadying breath, Ty relaxed the tension in his stance slightly. As he had suspected, Ser Duckfield was smart enough not to want to lose one, or mayhaps two of his men and he also liked to laugh. Ugly’s attention seeking showing off had not been for Ty’s benefit, but for his leader’s and Ty had bet his life that Ser Duckfield would also appreciate Ty’s little show. Fortunately he had been right.

“What’s your name boy?”

Ty narrowed his eyes at Ser Duckfield. “Stop calling me ‘boy’ and I might tell you.”

That set Rolly off on another round of laughter so uproarious that the big man had to wipe tears from his eyes.

“Gods, but you’re an arrogant little shit. Now tell me your name before I’m tempted to carve mine on your arse and it’s got seven hells of a lot more letters than that!” Duckfield jabbed a thick finger towards Ugly’s arse, where the ‘T’ that Ty had carved there glistened crimson in stark contrast to the hairy white flesh.

“Ty.”

“Ty what?”

“Just Ty.”

Ser Duckfield cocked his head to the side and regarded Ty with clever eyes. “Them’s smart Baratheon colour you’re wearin’. Now why would that be? You are far too . . . golden t’ be one o’ them.”

‘Twas Ty’s turn to laugh. Mayhaps Ser Duckfield wasn’t as smart as Ty had thought. Did he really think Ty could be kin to one of the great Houses of Westeros? Only Flea Bottom brown ran in his veins. Despite that, Ty somehow knew he was destined for greater things.

Setting his chin defiantly, Ty told Ser Duckfield proudly, “I’m a bastard same as my Lord Baratheon. I might be his squire now, but one day I aim to rise as high.”

Malo guffawed loudly, but to Ty’s surprise, Ser Duckfield did not seem to find that declaration funny at all. Instead he said cryptically, “No reason why not. I’ve seen more than one bastard boy rise higher.”

Higher than Lord Baratheon? There was none higher, save a King and King Jon was the only bastard boy to ever become a King, at least as far as Ty knew. So how could Ser Duckfield know “more than one?” Ty considered Ser Duckfield carefully. He was already on such easy terms with King Aegon as to call him by his first name and it seemed he knew King Jon too. Yet none of these men had the look of Northmen or Crows. ‘Twas a mystery waiting to be solved. Ty decided there and then that he could learn plenty from this sellsword or whatever he was.

Straightening up, he sheathed his sword, grinned and extended his hand.

“Pleased to meet you Ser Rolly Duckfield.”

“Likewise ‘Just Ty’.”
Malo coughed and muttered, “Might want to save that shit for another time. Looks like we’ve got company.”

Malo nodded towards the stable doors and the others turned around to see a hulking black figure silhouetted against the light.

A deep voice rasped through the expectant silence, “What’s going on here? Some kind of buggery party?”

Ty looked down at Ugly scrabbling to his knees in the straw, trying to pull his britches up over his bare arse. He could see why the stranger might jump to that conclusion.

The man at the door made a sound that might have been considered a laugh, but it set Ty’s teeth on edge.

“Glad to see some things haven’t changed since the last time I was in this shit hole.” The stranger laughed at his own joke; or at least gave that same rasping excuse for a laugh again.

Ser Duckfield’s hand slipped to the pommel of his sword and a sideways glance to Ty warned him to do the same. However, when Ser Duckfield greeted the visitor his tone was jovial and welcoming, betraying none of the wariness Ty had observed a moment afore.

“Sandor Clegane! We’ve been expecting you. Someone is very keen to see you again.”

Chapter End Notes

Will try and not leave it so long until the next one, which has to be Sansa and the Hound...
“It’s Lord Clegane to you lot,” the big man replied with an arrogant sneer.

‘Twas obvious to Ty the other three men were surprised by this announcement. Even Ty had to admit that Clegane looked unlike any other Lord he had seen, but then he had not seen many. Still, from Gendry’s magnificent armour to the fancy clothes Lords Tyrell and Lannister wore; it seemed that part of being a Lord was at least looking like one. This Sandor Clegane seemed to be wearing a holy brother’s habit under too-small clothes that had seen better days. His face seemed un-Lordly too. Although Ty was still too far away to see it clearly, it appeared misshaped and damaged.

Ser Duckfield was clearly sceptical about Clegane’s claim, for he challenged, “Last I heard you weren’t even a Ser, yet now you claim t’ be a Lord? Lord o’ what?”

Clegane marched forwards leading the exhausted sand steed behind him. His hand was on his sword, anger and the threat of violence writ large in every one of his long strides.

“Lord over you cunts!”

Ty and all three sellswords drew their blades.

Clegane stopped just out of reach. The whisper of steel drawn out of leather seemed to fill the stables as Clegane’s sword slid half out of its sheath. Ty fought the urge to take a step backwards. His heart hammering in his chest but he stood his ground, knowing that to show fear afore any of these men would be a grave mistake.

Standing closer now, Ty could see one side of Clegane’s face was puckered and twisted. The scarring was not red, but rather drawn tight and shining, indicating that the injury had occurred a long time ago. One side of his face was entirely devoid of hair - chin, eyebrow or scalp. As Ty looked closer he saw the ear was entirely gone, leaving only a hole and worse, the skin around the neck and jaw was so far gone as to reveal bone. The man’s hook nose and ferocious glare all combined to give Ty the impression of man with no mercy or pity, a man who had killed and would kill again with no conscience.

The stables were silent, save for the quickening breath of the men. The threat of imminent violence and death hung in the hair and every one of Ty’s nerves thrummed, drawn tight as bow strings. His arm began to shake with the tension of holding his sword, poised and aloft. Cursing his weakness he made himself recite Arya’s prayer – Calm as still water. Fear cuts deeper than swords.

Just when Ty thought someone must surely start the fight, Clegane suddenly slid his sword home and muttered something under his breath that sounded like, “Elder Brother wouldn’t like it.”

With what appeared to be a great reluctance, Clegane let his hand drop from the hilt of his sword to hang, twitching, by his side. When he spoke there was no mistaking the barely restrained menace in his voice, “I’ll not mark my return to the Red Keep by spilling blood, but you’d best not test my resolve. King Aegon named me Lord and that’s all you bastards need to know.”

Ty flinched as he always did when the word “bastards” was mentioned. None of the other three seemed affected by the insult as they sheathed their own swords. Ty assumed they either weren’t cursed as he was or they had learned to hide it seven hells of a lot better. However Ty’s reaction had
not gone unnoticed. He felt Clegane’s flat, black eyes on him, assessing every weakness while conveying the threat of a lifetime’s lethal skill and experience. Ty had to force himself to meet the killer’s gaze, but he did it without flinching, only to have Clegane sneer, “Looked your fill boy?”

Much as Ty hated being called ‘boy’, he was no fool. Instead of challenging this man, or Lord, he looked away swiftly.

“What’s wrong little bastard?” Ty heard the devilish glee in Clegane’s voice as he drew out that last, hated word. “Can’t bear to look at me ‘cos I’m prettier than you?”

Clegane gave another one of his hollow, rasping laughs that chilled Ty to the marrow.

Help came from an unlikely place as Ser Duckfield hissed, “Leave the lad alone, he’s no part o’ this.”

Although his face was averted, Ty could imagine the two men sizing each other up as only two warriors would; eye to shrewd eye, assessing each other’s strengths and weaknesses, preparing for a clash of swords that, if it came, would surely leave one of them dead.

“What’s he to you then?” Clegane asked, his tone at once both sneering and challenging.

“T’ me?” Duck repeated, shrugging his shoulders, “Nothing. But ‘e’s Baratheon’s squire and you’d better watch your filthy mouth round ‘im as ‘e fancies himself a chivalrous Knight already and champion o’ the ladies.”

They all laughed then while Ty glowered. But he was learning and this time he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“So he’s a bastard’s bastard squire.” Clegane said, “But who the fuck are you? And who wants to see me so bad that they’d send two sellswords and whatever-the-fuck-he-is to fetch me?” Sandor nodded to Ugly with disgust. Ugly was standing awkwardly, having to clutch at his britches to keep them up.

“I’m one ‘o the Winter Guards!” Ugly squared his shoulders in a failed attempt to appear intimidating. Few men could stand in either Clegane’s or Ser Duckfield’s presence and look anything but shrunken and Ugly, with his sagging britches, was certainly not one of them.

“Who the fuck are ‘the Winter Guards’?”

Ser Duckfield cut in afore Ugly could reply. “Lady Sansa’s personal guard and ‘tis our Lady who is so anxious t’ meet you.”

Clegane’s face broke into a gut churning, twisted grimace upon hearing that news. ‘Twas beyond Ty’s comprehension how a beautiful Lady like Sansa Stark could bear to be in this monster’s company much less seek him out.

“Aye? She sent you? Truly?” Clegane sounded sceptical but also surprisingly awed that Lady Sansa wanted to see him so badly that she had sent her own Guard to fetch him. Ty looked at Clegane with fresh eyes. His expression looked less bleakly fierce after hearing Lady Sansa’s name. ‘Twas an expression Ty was familiar with. Was that not the same way Lord Baratheon softened at the mention of Arya’s name? Or the look King Jon had when he caught sight of his Queen and indeed was it not the expression Ty had seen in his own reflection when he was beside Shireen?

What fools we all are for women Ty thought.
As fleetingly as it had appeared, ‘twas gone and Clegane looked steely eyed again as he barked at Ty, “If you’re a squire, help me with this horse.”

Duck nodded to Ty, expecting him to obey Lord Clegane’s command without question. Ty picked up the horse brushes, albeit rather reluctantly. He would much rather be escorting the Hound to Lady Sansa than grooming a filthy horse.

“Come Lord Clegane. Lady Sansa awaits.”

Clegane gave a snort, turned towards the horse and started loosening the girth himself, making no move to follow Ser Duckfield or comply with his request. Ty began to brush the sand steed with long, thorough strokes, all the while keeping one wary eye on Clegane and the other on Ser Duckfield to see how he would deal with an uncooperative Lord.

“‘Tis not right t’ keep a Lady waiting,” Duck said impatiently.

Clegane snorted again, “She’s waited all these years, another day or so will make no mind.”

Duck could hardly contain his disbelief. “Lady Sansa wants t’ thank you for saving ‘er life and that o’ ‘er sister and you . . . you . . . delay?!”

Clegane lifted the saddle off the stand steed’s back and stalked over to the rack with it, displaying no sense of urgency whatsoever. Only when the saddle was properly stored did he reply, “Would you have me - a Lord - greet a Lady smelling of horse shit and sweat?”

Without waiting for a reply, Clegane answered his own question, “No doubt you would, but I won’t. I’ll meet her when I’m good and ready.” He scowled at Ser Duckworth, the burned corner of his mouth twitching, “She’s waited this long. She can wait a bit longer.”

Ser Duckfield’s eyes narrowed and Ty could tell he was itching to make Clegane obey Lady Sansa’s command. After all there were three of them – four if you counted Ty and only one Hound. Still, was it worth spilling blood over the matter of a few hours delay?

Apparently Duck thought not, exhibiting a good deal more self control than Ty had earlier, otherwise there would have been carnage in the stall. Duck’s shrug and his measured response impressed Ty more than if he had drawn his sword and started the fight. “Suit yourself Clegane. ‘Tis your loss.”

The Hound loftily reminded him, “‘Tis Lord Clegane to you.”

Ser Duckfield’s face remained the picture of control. Aye, Ty decided he could learn much from this Duck.

“So what’s been happening in this shit hole since I left?”

“Well . . .” Malo drawled, leaning his shoulder against the wood partition, “. . . there was a war.”

Clegane gave a growl from the back of his throat that made the hairs on the back of Ty’s neck stand up. For a moment Ty thought there was going to be a fight after all. But Clegane fought back with words, rather than steel, rasping, “Where were you the night the Blackwater burned? Playing with your toy sword behind your mother’s skirts?”

Malo pushed off the wood where he had been leaning, his hand about to draw his sword, only for Ser Duckfield to stop him with a warning look.

“Mayhaps you had best tell us what you what exactly you want to know,” Duck said evenly,
stepping between Malo and Clegane for good measure.

“Who’s really in charge here? And don’t tell me two Kings and one Queen. Fuck that! I want to
know who really wields the power around here and it better not be that buggering dwarf again.”

Duck ignored the insult to Tyrion. “King Aegon sits on the Iron Throne as King Jon and Queen
Daenerys are . . . away.”

Ty had heard that King Jon and his Queen were gone on a dragon and he had wondered where to.
He thought Duck’s answer was deliberately vague, although Clegane seemed not to notice.

“Good. What can you tell me about King Aegon?”

Duck laughed heartily, afore saying, “Everything. Stuff ‘e don’t even know ‘imself. What exactly d’
you want t’ know?” Ty had no idea why Ser Duckfield found the Hound’s question quite so
amusing or why Duck appeared to know so much about the King.

As Clegane began to unstrap his belongings from King Aegon’s saddle, he asked, “Allies? Enemies?
And if you can’t tell me that, at least tell me who he’s fucking.”

If Ser Duckworth was shocked by the last question he did not show it.

“Seeing as we’re at peace ‘e has no enemies.”

The Hound snorted at that. Duck ignored him, chucking, “As to which ladies ‘e is entertaining –
twould be simpler to say who e’s not.”

“Lady Sansa?” Clegane demanded, fixing Duck with a fierce stare.

“Nae, nae. Not her.”

“What does she look like now?” Clegane asked, as if he was only mildly interested. However Ty did
d not miss the way his hands had started shaking as he removed the sand steed’s bridle.

“If you’ve ever seen ‘er – you’ll know. Most beautiful woman in the whole of Westeros. Beyond
even.”

Given the wistful way it was said, Ty wondered if Ser Duckworth himself could be added to the
apparently long list of Lady Sansa’s admirers.

“What would she look like now?” Clegane asked, as if he was only mildly interested. However Ty did
d not miss the way his hands had started shaking as he removed the sand steed’s bridle.

“If you’ve ever seen ‘er – you’ll know. Most beautiful woman in the whole of Westeros. Beyond
even.”

Given the wistful way it was said, Ty wondered if Ser Duckworth himself could be added to the
apparently long list of Lady Sansa’s admirers.

“Wed?” Clegane pressed, leaving Ty in no doubt the Hound had been enchanted by Lady Sansa’s
beauty at some time in the past.

“Nae.”

Ty noted Willas Tyrell was not mentioned. Everyone knew Lord Tyrell and Lady Sansa had some
kind of ‘arrangement’. However he supposed ‘twas hardly any of Clegane’s business who Lady
Sansa shared her bed with and Ser Duckfield did not seem one for sharing idle gossip – a rare trait in
the Red Keep.

Seemingly satisfied with this appraisal of Lady Sansa’s love life, Clegane asked, “Anything else I
should know?"

“You allied yourself wi’ the Lannisters didn’t you? Afore the war.”

For the first time Clegane looked uncomfortable. He growled, “When it suited me.” Now the war was won, no one wanted to be reminded that they’d fought on the losing side.

“Tommen Baratheon is still ‘ere though no longer a King ‘o course. Queen Daenerys refused to ‘ave him executed – him being only a child an’ all.”

“Is he still wed to Renly’s widow?”

“That Margaery Tyrell?” Malo interrupted. When the Hound confirmed ‘twas her, Malo continued slyly, “Aye, but it don’t stop ‘er fucking King Aegon – an arrangement that seems to suit both.”

Duck frowned, clearly displeased with Malo. It seemed that Ser Duckfield’s reluctance to spread gossip did not extend to his comrades.

Then Ugly chimed in, “But that don’t stop Aegon from dipping ‘is wick elsewhere either. Why just two nights ago we caught ‘im in the library wi’ . . .”

Ser Duckfield’s frown turned into a grimace, but it didn’t stop Ugly triumphantly revealing the name of Aegon’s latest conquest, “. . . Lady Shireen Baratheon!”

Ty’s world disappeared from under him just as surely as if he had fallen over the edge of the shivering sea.

“Liar!” The challenge was out of his mouth, the horse brushes dropped and his sword in his hand afore Ugly could reply. However, Ugly’s sword hand was quicker than his mouth. The man’s weapon was rising even as Ty came at him. But Ty’s reflexes were much quicker. Quick as a snake. And a red mist seemed to have descended, obscuring everything form Ty’s vision save this shit who had slandered Shireen. Again.

Ugly’s mouth fell open in astonishment a moment afore blood soaked through his shirt. His sword was still not fully raised yet Ty had carved an “S” into his chest. Ugly’s eyes bulged as he looked down to see red appear, spread and darken upon his chest. And then the pain registered. He bellowed, lunging at Ty who danced out of his way, allowing Ugly’s own momentum to carry him forwards, staggering, slipping on the straw afore sprawling face down, his own sword underneath him.

The wet, gurgling death rattle that all those present knew too well filled the stall.

Ty could not think. He could only react. Duck was mercifully on the opposite side of the horse and Malo’s outstretched hand grasped only empty air. Ty was away, past Clegane and out of the stall afore any of the men could stop him. He vaulted over hay bales, up onto the wood separating one stall from the next, balanced along it with arms outstretched as Arya had taught him and was somersaulting out of a high window afore any of the men below had a hope of catching him.

“Let him go.” Lord Clegane’s hand was like a vice around Ser Duckfield’s arm, preventing him from following.

“He killed my man!” Duck spat, forcefully removing the Hound’s hand.

Clegane grabbed the front of Duck’s tunic pulling him so they were eye to eye. “Your man fell on his own sword.”
Ser Duckfield prised Clegane’s fist off his tunic with one hand and shoved Clegane away with the other. His immediate shock and anger subsiding, Duck took a steadying breath. Looking up at the window, he realised none of them could hope to fit through it. All he could do was curse Ty, himself and everyone else.

Malo was crouched on the floor, having rolled his friend over onto his back. Lifeless eyes stared skyward, the hilt of a sword angling upwards, protruded from the centre of an unmov ing chest. Everything was soaked in blood. Ty’s mark was no longer even visible.

Clegane stepped over the corpse in order to calm the spooked sand steed, whose nostrils were flaring at the stench of blood. Patting the horse he looked down at the mess of blood. “See - straight though his heart. Stupid cunt fell on his own sword. But that boy was fast.”

Duck spat bile on the straw but made no reply.

“’Es right,” Malo said reluctantly. “Ty didn’t kill ‘im.”

All three of them stared up at the open window.

’Twas Clegane who spoke first. “Ty you say? Which House sent that lad to squire for the Baratheons?”

Duck shrugged, “None. So far as I know. They say Lord Baratheon took a likin’ to ‘im as ‘e was a Flea Bottom bastard – same as ‘imself.” He gave Clegane a sideways look. “Why?”

“Reminds me of someone, that’s all.”

“I suppose someone ‘ad to father the bastard.”

“Aye, but the man he reminds me of fucked no one but his sister.”

The other two men looked at Clegane in disbelief.

“Never mind.” Clegane said, taking the other two by surprise by slapping them on the back. “You’ll get a good price for that body in the Flea Bottom pot shops.”

“Gods, it’s good to be back!”

-o-

Chapter End Notes

Ok, ok, I’m sorry and I feel like a prick tease. No Sansa and the Hound. AGAIN. But the last chapter should have been longer and I needed this one to bring us to the brink of the conclusion of Ty’s story.

I can’t believe it was only 3,000 words as it took me a long enough to write. I think my expectations for sentence construction etc are higher now and I can’t just bash ‘em out like I used too. Also Brazilian Guy had me change the end. Quite right too. What would I do without him?
I have written a couple of thousand words of Sansa and the Hound, but BG hasn’t seen it yet and I need his input on the next one as it’s a biggie and has GOT to be right. Should be up next weekend - BG allowing of course. Let’s hope he doesn’t have any more “face melting” Brazilian weather or any more of those nasty 24 hour rotational shift things.

Until next time Fan Fic friends . . .
Let battle commence

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa paced her sitting room, pausing only to look down at the opaque blue bottle afore pacing again. ‘Twas almost time. Too much bitter experience had taught her how long afore her lovers arrived she must to drink from the bottle in order to ready herself. To numb herself against everything.

This time, quiet and alone, riddled with apprehension and guilt, was always the worst time – even worse than waking dazed and used. Not much longer now and she would be able to sink into that familiar languid torpor. Sometimes she tried to distract herself with needle work but not today – not when the man who had been such a large part of her first imprisonment in the Red Keep was on his way to claim the debt due to him. And a debt was due for saving her life and that of her sister.

Sandor Clegane was not a lover, yet her feelings were the same; her stomach knotted, her hands shook, she shivered and felt suffocating hot all at the same time.

Ever since Brienne of Tarth had brought news back from the Quiet Isle, Sansa had known she would see the Hound again. Mayhaps she had always known it. Whatever was between them, whatever had started here, in the Red Keep, all those years ago, would be resolved today. One way or another.

Thinking of her naive, younger self, she almost laughed aloud. How many times while being humiliated by Cersei Lannister or while facing Joffrey’s wrath had she thought things could get no worse? How very innocent and ignorant she had been. And hopeful. Always hopeful. Oh how she had prayed to the Seven for a handsome knight with a kind heart to sweep her off her feet and carry her far away to the safety of his castle. Why had she not realised such things were the stuff of fantasy? That they only ever happened in sentimental songs and in a young girl’s foolish dreams?

The night the Blackwater burned, the Gods had sent her a knight, only he was not good or handsome. He had no castle to which they would flee and any kindness he had shown her was not born of any chivalrous oath, but rather of something dark and brutal. That night, cowering on her bed, a maiden, her head still full of foolish dreams of handsome knights, the Hound had been her worst nightmare come to life. Although he had promised to keep her safe, promised that he would kill anyone who hurt her ‘twas only because he wanted her for himself - to possess her in every way a man could possess a woman. But she had only been a girl and had not the experience to use what he offered for her own ends. She was no Cersei Lannister; not manipulative, not cunning nor worldly. She had not learned to wield her sex as a weapon then.

How different she was now - no longer a maid, or innocent, her girlish hopes and dreams long since beaten out of her. But she was still here. She might not be a fighter like Arya, or as clever as Daenerys or as scheming as Margery, but she had learned how to survive by using every one of the gifts the Gods had given her. Not only had she survived, but she had helped hundreds, mayhaps thousands, to survive also. What was the sacrifice of one compared to so many? If opening her legs for Willas Tyrell saved one child from starvation – how could she not? One more man meant nothing to her and yet . . . and yet . . . after everything every man had ever done to her, she was still a fool for a handsome man with a sword at his hip and a twinkle in his eye. Aegon Targaryen was proof enough of that.

One day of whispered confessions, of searing glances and false promises was all it took to turn her into that silly little girl again, her head and her heart giddy with hope. What a fool she was.
He had come to her dressed as a holy brother, pious and passionate to offer her his heart, only to betray her a few hours later with Shireen. Shireen! Shy, meek Shireen, who had seemed to be so honest and so trustworthy until that wretched night in the library. More proof if ‘twere needed that Sansa Stark was still as silly, gullible and naive as she ever was.

Shireen’s wide-eyed, flushed face and the guilt in the Targaryen’s traitorous eyes had told her everything she needed to know. She would not be taken in by his lies or swayed by his pathetic excuses again. No matter how many times he fell to his knees or had Ser Duckfield plead on his behalf, she refused to hear him. The mere mention of the King’s name made her feel sick and as utterly foolish as when Joffrey’s true nature had been revealed to her. How could she have been so blind? Again. Had she learned nothing? Men used and abused and were not to be trusted. Not a single one of them.

Ser Duckfield had told her Sandor was made Lord Clegane by Aegon’s hand. She would have asked why, except the mere mention of the Targaryen King left her feeling as if all the air had been sucked out of her lungs. No doubt ‘twas part of another Targaryen scheme and why should she care anything for that? Men would always play their games and women and children would always be the ones to suffer for them. That would never change, but she could and she had. Lord Clegane would not find her to be the same little bird he had toyed with all those years ago. Nae. Things would be settled between them tonight, her debt repaid but on her terms.

Maids had laid one of her favourite gowns – a simple design which would come undone with one tug of a ribbon, bejewelled and spun from the rarest Dornish silk. Soon it would cling to her oiled and perfumed body in a way that left men breathless with wanting. Her bath was ready; the heady perfume of exotic flower petals her maids had scattered on the water filled the air. All she had to do was slip into the warm water and drink from her beloved blue bottle.

Ever since the kind old woman had first given her Milk of the Poppy, the bitter taste had carried Sansa far away from the pain of the present. While her body was trapped and used, her mind was set free – free to roam back to those golden summer days in Winterfell. She would sit by her mother’s side, cocooned in the warm, soft haze of long ago, when her father and Winterfell’s walls kept her safe.

Shrugging out of her court gown, Sansa climbed into the tub. Her hair was already elaborately styled and piled atop her head, cleverly held in place by one large pin. Were a man to remove it, her hair would be sent tumbling down her back. Men liked that. Sansa knew everything about what men liked.

Easing back amongst the floating petals, she rested her head on the edge of the copper tub. The steam rising from the water made everything look hazy and dreamlike. As she had done countless times afore, she reached for the little bottle set on the table beside the tub. ‘Twas only a matter of time afore everything would feel the same as it looked; soft and out of focus. When her senses were dulled, she would be able to do all the things Sansa Stark never could.

In the past few days, the thought of Sandor Clegane arriving once more in her bedchamber had stirred long buried memories and not of those sweet Winterfell days, but of harsh bitter times; of her father’s death, the loss of her family, of innocence, of being thrown to the Lannister lions, of the mob tearing at her clothes and of betrayal.

Without Milk of the Poppy to numb that pain, she might do something she would regret – like cry. She would not let that happen. The Hound would find his little bird had grown talons. She was the one who wielded power in the Red Keep now. Joffrey was gone, Cersei too and all of her Kingsguard, the most hated Littlefinger, Aunt Lysa, Harrold, the Bolton and all the rest who had
tormented her and stolen her dreams, piece by bloody piece. By saving her life, the Hound had earned his right to live, but he would never see her cry again. She would show him how strong she had become.

Sansa raised her little blue bottle to her lips and drank.

-o-

A loud, persistent knocking roused Sansa from her bath. The candles were burned half way down and the water was lukewarm. It took her some time to remember where she was. For one blissful moment she had been in the snow in Winterfell, playing with Lady, laughing as the Direwolf cub jumped for every fat snowflake that floated down from the white sky. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes and that would not do. That would not do at all.

The knocking persisted and she turned her head to look across the room at the sumptuous, low cut gown her maids had laid out for her. Jewels glittered in the flickering candle light. She was far from ready and she should tell him to wait. Falling asleep had not been part of her plan. By now she should be dressed and ready to play the part of the perfect hostess, not still lounging in her bath. She should get up and hurry, but her limbs resisted. Everything felt so soft and deliciously languid. The Hound had made her wait these past two days. Now ‘twas her turn. Why should she hurry when he did not?

Instead of rousing herself from her bath, she closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of floating, not just in the water, but outside of herself. She felt so relaxed, freed from all her burdens and responsibilities. Under the influence of Milk of the Poppy the rules of courtesy and etiquette she had rigidly followed all of her life, no longer troubled her. Nothing did. Nothing matter either. But the damn knocking continued, even louder and more demanding than afore and this time a gruff voice called her name. Ser Duckfield. He would be worried, but she was too relaxed to care much about that either. Why should she get out of the bath? She was so comfortable here. Let then come to her.

It took a deal of effort even to move, but she did, positioning herself in the bath so that only the swell of her breast showed above the water and her teats were modestly covered by floating petals. After taking a deep, slow breath, she called for the men at her door to enter.

Ser Duckfield appeared first with the Hound at his shoulder. Seeing her still in the tub, Ser Duckfield halted. Sandor Clegane did not, pushing past the Captain of her Guard and stopping only when he stood towering above her. From his great height, he would be able to see all of her. She looked up at him and smiled.

Thank the Gods for Milk of the Poppy. Without it she might have cried out in horror and dismay. The years had not been kind, or mayhaps her mind had played tricks on her. In her memories he was gruff and rude, often drunk and although he refused the title ‘Ser’, he was somehow more than all the rest of them; bigger, stronger, more terrifying. Knights were for killing after all. She had not remembered how awful the scaring was, the missing ear, the hair now streaked with grey that he used to hide the worst of it.

Milk of the Poppy made such horrors easier to bear and she was able to look up at him through her lashes and smile as she greeted him.

“My Lord Clegane.”
With luck he would think her gasped welcome was breathless with wanting. Truly she was breathless with fright. His eyes, black as pitch, roamed all over her, devouring her as if he was a starving beast.

She gripped the side of the tub to steady herself. If she had imagined herself playing a game with the Hound, ‘twas only now she realised how dangerous the game and how high the stakes. He wanted all of her, the same as he had that night. Instead of flames flickering in the distance, ‘twas candles now lit his face, but the expression was the same. She had not recognised it then, but knew it now — lust, animal and urgent in its need.

Mayhaps he had not changed, but she had. She would not cower afore him this time as she had afore. She shifted, sitting up while carefully folding her knees under her. Her body rose slowly from the petal strewn surface, her skin glistening with droplets of oiled water.

“I regret I am not ready for you my Lord. Will you hand me the drying cloth?” She extended her arm towards the cloth, all the better to display the gifts the Gods had given her.

If the Hound had heard her, he did not show it, for his eyes remained fixed on her teats which were rapidly stiffening, the areola tightened in the cool air. Despite the numbing effect of Milk of the Poppy, she felt a blush rising up her neck.

‘Twas Ser Duckfield who eventually handed her the cloth. When she looked up to thank him, she recognised the intense expression on his face and the hope in his eyes. With a sigh, she realised he was half-way besotted with her already. If she stood now, naked and dripping in front of him, he would imagine himself in love. Men were such fools for a shapely piece of flesh. She liked Ser Duckfield, so she would send him away afore finishing her bath. He deserved better than to moon over her.

She took the cloth from him, although he seemed reluctant to let it go. “Thank you Ser Duckfield. You can leave us now.”

The flash of anger and jealously that crossed his face afore he schooled his expression confirmed her fears.

“Mayhaps I should stay,” he said through gritted teeth. The muscles in his jaw twitched as he glared at the Hound. Ser Duckfield planted his legs wider, probably unconsciously, yet clearly signalling his intention to stay as long as his rival did. Mayhaps he thought to protect her, Sansa thought with another deeper sigh, but he was also staking his claim.

Closing her eyes, so she could not see either of them, Sansa let herself ease back into the tub again, sinking below the water until it reached her chin. She knew both men would be watching. Milk of the Poppy made it harder to mind. Sansa wiggled her toes against the end of the tub, enjoying the sensation of making ripples through the water and petals.

Would it really matter if Ser Duckfield stayed? If he had shown no interest in her, ‘twould make no matter, but his desire for her was unfortunately now obvious. She knew to her cost that men were more likely to draw their swords over a woman than over the most fundamental disagreements about politics or even over gold. Reluctantly she decided Ser Duckfield had to leave or else she may have more blood on her hands.

Keeping her eyes closed she said in what she hoped was a firmer tone, “I shall be fine. Lord Clegane saved my life. He is hardly likely to harm me now is he Ser Duckfield?”

An irritated snort told her Ser Duckfield did not agree with her assessment of the situation.
“You may wait outside the door and rest assured that I shall scream if I need you.”

The Hound laughed then. ‘Twas the first sound he had made and it made her shiver although the water was not yet cold. The sound that came out of his twisted mouth was not one of genuine mirth but rather one of triumph. “Oh I could make you scream Lady but it wouldn’t be Ser Duckfield you’d be screaming for.”

Ser Duckfield cursed the Hound under his breath which only made Lord Clegane laughed harder.

“You heard the Lady. Now fuck off.”

Ser Duckfield made a sound like a growl from deep in his throat. The tension between the two men was palpable. Gods, they were like dogs fighting over a bone.

“Please Ser Duckfield.” Sansa opened her eyes and looked up at him, giving him a smile that she hoped hinted he might be rewarded if he agreed to do as she asked.

The fierce expression in his eyes told her how unhappy he was about leaving, but when she nodded to the door he had little choice but to obey. Still, he followed her order with an ill temper. “I don’t like it and I shall leave the door open.”

“Close it.” Sansa and the Hound said together.

That only made Ser Duckfield angrier and he fair stomped towards the door, slamming it so hard behind him that a painting of Winterfell fell off the wall and crashed to the floor.

Sansa should not have found it funny, but she did, Milk of the Poppy making her giggle like a silly girl until water sloshed over the sides of the tub.

The Hound took a step back in order to avoid getting his boots soaked and as he did, he scooped up the drying cloth she had dropped over the side. He held it out to her with one huge, scarred hand but said nothing. As her fit of giggling subsided, Sansa looked up at him again. He towered over her, waiting, looking so dark and formidable she could hardly breathe.

The old Sansa would have sunk under the water to hide, but she was not that girl anymore. Rising from the water as gracefully as a water goddess, she stood brazenly afore him, naked and proud, with oiled water running in rivulets over her skin. She knew candle light flattered her creamy skin and made the red in her hair shine. No man had ever looked at her and found her wanting afore and the Hound would not be the first. His gaze dropped from her face, lower and lower still. Even in the shadows cast by the flickering candles, there was no disguising the effect she had on him; the rapid rise and fall of his chest, the fingers that twitched at his side as if ‘twas all he could do to restrain himself from touching her and, most revealing of all, the dangerous longing in his black eyes.

“Help me,” she commanded.

He took the hand she offered. His arm was rock solid as she swayed getting out of the tub. His hand was rough against hers, his skin hot and dry. She met his gaze with glittering blue eyes and her lips curved into a wicked smile.

“Dry me.”

He was keen to obey and his touch was surprising gentle, as if he feared he might break her. She willed herself to hold still, to fix a smile of pleasure upon her face as he started at her neck, methodically sweeping the cloth over her skin in small circles. His expression was a study of intense concentration, his breathing the only sound in the room. While he was focused on his task, Sansa
took the opportunity to study him. His head was bowed and in shadow, his hair mercifully hiding most of his face. ‘Twas a relief. She did not want to look upon his scarring any more than she had to. How could her memory have possibly deceived her so? ‘Twas not as if his scars were new, they were clearly aged and yet she had no recollection of there being so many or of their being so awful, or of the hole where his ear should be or the bare bone at his jaw or the scalp burned so badly no hair would grow. Her stomach threatened to disgorge its contents and she had to force herself to think on something less unpleasant afore the bile burning the back of her throat filled her mouth.

His clothing . . . at least his clothing was new and expensive and he smelled . . . clean. It occurred to her ‘twas the first time she had seen him in anything other than mail and a white cloak and smelling of something other than sour wine. Mayhaps she was not the only one who had changed. She would be a fool to underestimate him.

As he swept the cloth over one shoulder, she lifted her arms and arched her back, presenting her breasts to him as if they were a gift. The burned side of his mouth twitched and his breath became more rapid and ragged as he stared. The Milk of the Poppy left no room for shame and, as he continued to stare, she revelled in the power she wielded over him.

Tentatively, as if he feared she might flee, he took one of her breasts in his hand, his palm rough against her smooth, pliant flesh. He squeezed gently, as if testing its ripeness. Sansa made sure to let out the sort of breathless little moan men liked to hear. Eyes, black and shining with lust lifted to meet hers. She parted her lips and pressed her breast into his hand. His thumb, the pad callused and rough, traced a tight circle around her teat. Unbidden, it crinkled and grew under his touch. The Hound bent his head lower, his tongue licking dry lips, his intention clearly to taste.

“Not yet,” she chided, pushing his head away.

Under the curtain of hair, the puckered side of his mouth twitched and she thought he might be smiling.

“I’m still wet.”

Suddenly, shockingly, his hand was between her legs, searching, seeking, parting . . .

“Aye, Lady you are.” The rumble of his voice was so deep she could feel it through the soles of her feet.

Even under the influence of Milk of the Poppy, his boldness shocked her and she took an involuntary step away from him. Her heel hit against the side of the tub. There was nowhere else to go. She had to wrest control of this night back from him or she would forever be thrall to him - his submissive little bird. They both knew she was no match for him physically. Her sex must be her weapon and her shield.

She laid her hands on his shoulders and dug her nails into the fine cloth, just enough to make their presence felt, just enough to hurt.

“On your knees.” She said, pushing on his shoulders. He immediately fell to his knees. Of course she could not have made him kneel, had he not been so eager to do it.

She needed to put more distance between them and took the opportunity to slip away, around the side of the tub. He caught her by wrapping an arm as thick and strong as a ship’s rope around her waist, chuckling to himself as he pulled her back around so she was facing him once more.

With a growing sense of unease, Sansa realised he was enjoying this, his breath came in ragged pants
and his eyes shone with excitement in the flickering light.

She looked down at him, knowing she had but one last chance to exert control. Desperation made her bold. “I ordered you to dry me . . . dog. Do it or you won’t get your song.”

His mouth twisted into a slow, grotesque grin. “The little bird knows how much I want my song.”

“So do it.”

He picked up the cloth with his free hand, without taking his eyes off hers. Unable to stand the intensity of his gaze, she had to close her eyes as he began to dry her again, starting with her toes. ‘Twas all too much, too raw and too real. Her heart was hammering in her chest and had he not been engrossed in drying her legs, slowly working his way up to her thighs, she feared he would hear it. She needed more Milk of the Poppy to calm her rapidly fraying nerves.

As he reached the top of her thighs, rubbing the cloth in slow, deliberate circles, his breath fanned hot on the damp curls between her legs. Her eyes were still closed, so she felt, rather than saw him shift closer. If she did not do something to prevent it, his mouth would be on her in moments. She had always hated men kissing her and being kissed there was worst of all. She seized her chance and spun around, denying him his Lord’s kiss.

The Hound growled from deep in his throat. She stiffened, fearing his reaction. Before she had time to think, her hips were pulled backwards by thick fingers digging into the soft flesh of her hips. While his fingers held her in place, strong thumbs pushed the globes of her buttocks apart. She gasped with shock as hot breath feathered her secret place and froze as she felt his face press against her. She was too stunned to move as he inhaled deeply, murmuring her name while his tongue . . . his tongue . . . Gods be good, ‘twas too much. Far too much.

Squirming out of his grasp she stumbled away, her legs shaking so badly she only managed a few steps. Bracing her palms on a table she waited. Should she admit defeat now? Accept that she was still a frightened little bird and no match for the Hound? Should she call for Ser Duckfield?

Behind her all was quiet. Was Sandor coming after her? Would she have time to scream? She risked a look over her shoulder. He was still on still on his knees, grinning as he licked his lips. She had been granted a reprieve. For now.

Where were her talons? She did not want to be his little bird again. She needed to be smarter, stronger, bolder. Releasing the breath she had been holding, she angled her body towards him and gave him a shy smile over her shoulder. Pulling the pin from her hair, she leaned back and shook her head slowly, feeling her hair tumble down her back until it brushed over her bottom.

Another deep growl from behind her let her know he approved. She was not done with him yet.

“We should celebrate your success, my Lord. Wine?”

Without waiting for a reply, she reached for the wine jug with shaking hands. Pouring two cups, she added a generous amount of Milk of the Poppy to her own afore turning around and offering him the other cup.

He loomed over her. Ready and waiting.

As he took the cup, she raised hers in a toast.

“To you Lord Clegane.”
He raised his cup to her, his black eyes glittering as he rasped, “And to you little bird.”

Sansa drained her cup. Let battle commence.

Chapter End Notes

I’m leaving you hanging yet again. Still, I hope you found a short chapter to be better than nothing.

I will be back ASAP.
So much has happened since I last posted.

I have to apologise for yet another unacceptably long delay. I was raring to go after the last chapter, however real life intervened again in the most awful way with two funerals towards the end of last year. Thank you for all your support and for still being interested enough to read this. I can only hope there are no more such delays.

So, at last we get to Sansa’s “UnKiss”. You no doubt remember that Sansa’s POV for the night of the Battle of the Blackwater never mentioned a kiss, although she later recalls one. When questioned about this GRRM suggested Sansa was an “unreliable narrator” and that we should “feel free to ponder its meaning”. So that’s what I did.

Here is my version of the Sansa/Sandor reunion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He had always scared her. Even after all this time and all that she had been through, he scared her. She had never been able to look at his terrible, dangerous face and that had not changed.

Unable to maintain eye contact with a black gaze that was both lustful and ferocious, Sansa turned her back and set her cup upon the table. At once his height and heat enveloped her, the soft material of his tunic stretched over hard muscle brushed against her as he set his own cup beside hers. Closing her eyes, she braced her hands on the table trying to still her skittering pulse. The front of his thighs pressed against the back of hers, his fingers seeking purchase on her hip, pulling her tight back against him and the hard evidence of his arousal. He bent her further over the table as he groaned, deep and slow behind her.

She had expected tonight to be just like all the rest - just another man to manipulate, just another man to fuck. How could she have been so wrong? Her reaction to the Hound and the memories he provoked were anchored in another time and place – when she was innocent and life was far simpler. How bitterly she would have laughed if someone had told her then that things would only get worse. That naive girl could imagine no worse than Joffrey and Cersi. What a fool she had been.

Still, something puzzled her about the night the Blackwater burned, the night he had waited for her in her bedchamber. As the years passed and she learned more about men and their urges, the more she wondered why the Hound had settled for only a kiss and a song. According to Arya, the Hound’s final words had been about that night and his regret at not taking Sansa Stark when he had the chance. While she believed Arya, that only compounded Sansa’s confusion. He could have taken her easily. Yet he had not.

Steeling herself, for she did not know how he might react to her question, she asked hesitantly, “That night, when you were in my room, you did not take advantage of me. Why?”
The big hand moving low across her belly stilled. His whole body stiffened behind her.

When he made no answer, she pressed, “I know you wanted me . . . like that. You told Arya you wished you had fucked me bloody. You could have done. There was nothing I could have done to stop you.”

With a harsh curse his hand fell away from her and he stepped away. Perversely, as soon as she was no longer surrounded by him, she missed his heat and his ominous strength at her back.

She turned around. His back was to her, the massive shoulders hunched, the hand that had so recently caressed her hip gripping the pommel of his sword so fiercely his knuckles were white.

Closing the distance between them, it was she who now reached for him, her bare breasts pressed against his arm and back, her hand reaching and finding his. His jaw flexed, tendons pulling against scar tissue and bare bone as he turned his head away. She entwined her much smaller, softer fingers with his, aware that he could crush her just as easily as he had saved her from the mob.

Rubbing her cheek against his taut bicep she murmured, “You did want me then. As much as you want me now.”

Although it was not so much a question as a statement, he slowly growled, “Aye,” in response. She had known it, but hearing him say it gave her a thrilling feeling of power, even through the soft haze of the poppy. Squeezing his thick fingers between her own, she encourage him on.

“So why did you not take me?”

Again he made no answer, although she felt his hand and his bicep flex as he fist and uncurled his fingers against hers.

Pressed against his hardness, listening to his ragged breathing and feeling the tension coiled within him, they stood – together and yet so very far apart. He could have raped her, could have killed her or stolen her away that night and no one would have known. He could have left her to the mob or to Joffrey’s torment. But he had not. She wanted . . . needed . . . to know why.

Mayhaps afore, when she had remembered their kiss, she had imagined he had saved her because he loved her. That was a girl’s silly fantasy. She was no longer subject to such romantic illusions.

The man who stood with her now was the same cold, ruthless killer he had always been, but dressed up in fancy new clothes. Whatever had stayed his hand that night ‘twas not love. Men like the Hound did not love girls like her. All she had been to him was a silly little bird to be teased and pitied. Still, he had never shown her anything but kindness . . . and the truth. Now ‘twas time he told her the truth about that night.

“So why Sandor?” she whispered, “You came back for me and yet left with nothing.”

She felt, rather than heard him take a deep, steadying breath. Turning slowly back around to face her, he kept the fingers of their one hand entwined and slid the other down her back, pulling her towards him again but with none of the desperate urgency of afore. As they stood pressed against each other, Sansa brought their joined hands up until they rested over his rapidly beating heart. His breathing was choppy and ragged and for once she wished she could see the expression on the scarred face currently resting against the soft waves of her hair.

“The little bird asks so many questions now.”
She could hear surprise and mayhaps admiration in his voice. The Sansa of old would never have dared question him like this, much less greet him naked. She might look soft and yielding but underneath that weak exterior was steel, forged in the fires of loss and pain. The pounding of his heart and the almost imperceptible shake of his hand in hers gave her hope that mayhaps there was more to him than an ice cold killer. Everything about him was fierce, hard and brittle. Everything about him scared her, except the way he held her. She needed to be braver than that. She had power now, a voice that men listened to and although she still lived in a cage, ‘twas at least a cage of her own design.

Steadying her voice, she declared boldly, “I am not a little bird anymore. I do not sing the songs of others. I am not the same little maid you used to know either. I am a woman of experience and influence.”

Sansa thought he might have pressed his lips to the top of her head then in order to stifle a groan. Standing like this, unable to see his face and numbed by Milk of the Poppy, mayhaps she could pretend he was the Sandor of her memory, her dark knight, her protector, the man she had imagined kissing again and again in her dreams. The Sandor who never was.

When he finally spoke, his voice was so deep and broken that she almost missed his question, “Were they good to you . . . your men?”

Sansa squeezed her eyes shut. She could not answer that without revisiting the nightmares she had tried for so long to suppress. She could lie. She could laugh and tell him of Willas Tyrell and his ceaseless gifts, show him her indoor garden and her jewels, but the Hound had never lied to her. She owed him the same courtesy.

Her fingers clutched at his tunic as she admitted softly, “Nae, they were not.”

He cursed vehemently and gripped her hand so tightly she had to bite her lip to stop from crying out. “Give me their names and I’ll kill every one of them.”

When she did not answer he cursed again, taking hold of her upper arms and shaking her, demanding, “Their names Sansa. Give me their names!”

She could not look at him, could not face his wrath. Why did he have to ask now? ‘Twas too late and giving him names would make no difference. Most of them were dead anyway.

“Names!” Sandor roared, shaking her so hard her teeth rattled in her head. His fingers dug into her flesh so tightly she would have bruises on the morrow. Bruises she would have to hide from Jon and Willas, lest they sought their revenge. Why did men think violence was the answer to everything?

“Give. Me. Their. Names.”

Another shake from him and a sob burst from Sansa’s lips. How could she have thought the Hound gentle in any way? He wanted names? Well, she would give him the truth instead.

“If only you had taken me away that night, none of them could have touched me!”

She hurled her accusation at him, full of years of pain and hurt. Let him know the truth of it, ‘twas his fault, his doing.

He said nothing. How could he stand there and say nothing?! She beat her fists on his chest until he caught both of her hands in one of his and hauled them above her head, forcing her to look up at
him. Had she not been so angry she would have cried out at the sight of him. A muscle in his face twitched madly, black eyes burned with fury and something else . . . guilt. Her barb had hit its mark.

“Lady Sansa! Lady Sansa!”

Pounding on the door broke the tension between them. Sandor loosened his grip on her so suddenly she stumbled back against the table.

“Are you alright? Shall I enter?” ‘Twas Rolly at the door, eager for any excuse to interrupt.

“Fuck off,” the Hound barked back.

“Lady Sansa?”

Sandor glared at her, daring her to answer.

“We are only having a discussion,” she called out, her voice high and shrill.

‘Twould be too easy to shout for Rolly, to end it now, to leave everything about that night unresolved and unspoken.

“Have no fear Ser Duckfield, I shall call for you if I need you.” Her voice was shakier than she would have liked.

They heard Rolly’s muffled grumbles, but the door remained mercifully closed.

Clegane strode quickly to the table. With shaking hands he poured himself a cup of wine and proceeded to drink it down in one long swallow. He refilled his cup, turned and offered it to her. A droplet of wine, red as blood, slid from the twitching, puckered side of his mouth. Shaking her head, Sansa cast her eyes downwards again, unable to look at his ruined face or meet his eyes, which now seemed flat and hollow.

He made a noise that was half grunt, half groan and set the wine cup down. Sansa felt his eyes rake over her as the two of them stood there in silence. Their argument and the simmering threat of violence had made her mind and her tongue sharp, but now, as her hammering pulse and her rapid breathing slowed, she felt the poppy’s influence again, heavier than ever.

She must have shivered, for he took his tunic off and hung it around her shoulders. His gentleness was completely at odds with the revenge crazed killer he had been mere moments afore.

Sansa hugged the soft material around her and inhaled his scent – so different from the sweat, smoke and blood she remembered.

He reached out and took a stand of her hair.

“I thought you could not be any more beautiful that you were,” he said suddenly, surprising her.

He watched her hair intently as it slid through his big, rough fingers, marveling at it as if ‘twas the finest silk. As the last strand slipped away he said simply, “I was wrong.”

That, from him, meant more than the thousands of empty compliments she had received in all the years since they last met.

“You never told me I was beautiful before. You never said anything to me except how scared and frightened I was.” And that there were no true knights, that they were for killing, that sharp steel and strong arms ruled the world. How right he had been and what a silly fool she had been not to believe
him.

He sounded bitter when he snarled, “You had plenty of pretty boys with silver tongues to tell you how beautiful you were. You didn’t want a man like me.”

He glared down at her, challenging her to deny it. She could not. Her mind spun between then and now and back again.

“But where were those pretty knights when the mob was baying for your blood?”

Sansa shuddered at the memory and his arm was suddenly around her waist crushing her breasts tight to him, his voice a harsh rasp against her ear demanding, “Where were they little bird? Where were your true knights then?”

A heady mix of aggression and lust radiated off him. Sansa’s head swam with it and she sagged against him. Without Sandor’s strong arms around her she might have sunk to the floor. She realised too late that a second doze of Milk of the Poppy had been a poor idea.

Behind her closed eyes a vision of a true knight appeared. He wore gleaming armour and galloped a great white horse towards her. He was coming to save her after all. He was everything she had ever wanted; handsome, strong and brave. As the true knight drew closer, he raised his visor to reveal the laughing, lying, lilac eyes of Aegon Targaryen. Her true knight’s ready smile turned into a triumphant sneer as he rode past her, leaving her alone, bereft in an empty field.

Opening her eyes, Sansa stared up into the ruined face of the man who had saved her life. Her voice caught, quavering with unshed tears and broken dreams as she told him the truth, “There are no true knights.”

“You’re learning little bird,” he growled, a slow, sly smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“I’m learning,” she repeated.

When a calloused thumb rubbed over her teat, ’twas as if she was watching it happen to someone else. His big hand cupped her breast as if testing its weight. His breathing grew more ragged and his stiffening cock pressed into her belly.

“My little bird promised me a song.”

She had, but she could not remember what song she had intended to sing him. The words of the Mother hymn drifted into her mind. “I already sang you a song. Do you not remember?”

He grunted, “You did not sing me the one you promised. I didn’t want a damn godly song.”

She was about to say, “Because it made you cry?” but thought better of it. She remembered now he had wanted, “Florian and Jonquil.”

He dipped his head to rest against hers and breathed into her hair, “Aye, that was the one.”

How could she have forgotten? “A fool and his cunt, you said.”

He laughed then, but ’twas not the harsh rasp that usually passed for his laugh, but rather a deep chuckle and a shaking of his shoulders. When he spoke again, his words seemed softer, but mayhaps they were only muffled by her hair. “Aren’t all men fools for cunt?”

Aye, they were. The Hound had given her another truth. Her mind drifted to her most recent
disappointment. Aegon Targaryen had promised her everything, but as she turned her back, he kissed the duplicitous, scar-faced Shireen Baratheon with his filthy, lying mouth. He was no different than all the rest of them. Aegon was a fool for cunt too. Just not her cunt.

Sandor had never lied to her. Mayhaps he was also the only man who had ever told her the truth. For that alone he deserved to be rewarded and his cock throbbing against her belly told her exactly what he wanted - the same thing every man wanted from her. With the help of her little blue bottle, she could give him exactly what he wanted.

Reaching up, she tried to cradle the scarred side of his face. He turned his head away. That would not do. Sliding her hand between them, she traced the rigid outline of his cock as it strained against his britches. He groaned with need. This time when she caressed his face he did not turn away, although he flinched as her fingers traced the smooth ridges of scar tissue. Milk of the Poppy made her brave or mayhaps reckless.

“You once told me you would die for me, but never lie to me. Is it still true?”

His breath was ragged with wanting as he rasped, “Aye.”

Enjoying the power she had over this huge, hard man, this killing knight, she grasped the hair at the nape of his neck and pulled his face down towards hers. His strength bowed to her touch. He had fallen to his knees at her command afore and she knew she could make him do so again. But not yet. Even through her languid, drugged haze, she knew he had still not given her the answer she craved.

She drew her mouth away afore his seeking lips could touch hers. While he growled in frustration, she trailed her tongue lightly over his throat and whispered, “Why did you not take me that night?”

“Don’t cock tease me Sansa,” he growled as his fingers dug into the soft flesh of her hips making her gasp with pain – a warning she was playing a dangerous game.

“If you want your song . . . if you want me, you must answer my question.” She murmured seductively, angling her face so her lips brushed slowly over his. He tried to follow her mouth with his, but she lifted her head away, denying him again.

His frustrated growl was low and deep and feral.

She was beginning to think she would never get her answer when he whirled her around so his cock was against her back. Pressing his mouth against her ear he said gruffly, “You were so pure, so innocent. I could not ruin that.”

’Twas ironic she had been ruined by someone much worse than him. But she had her answer and expected no more, so his next admission shocked her.

“You make me do things . . . feel things . . . I never have afore.”

“Like admitting to me ‘twas your brother who burned you?” Sansa asked softly. Mayhaps he had never told anyone else. He had threatened to kill her if she did.

“Aye,” he moaned, his breath hot and desperate against her cheek.

“What else Sandor? What else did I make you feel?” she asked, reaching behind and stroking her fingers over the knotted muscles at the back of his neck.
He gave no answer although she felt him tremble against her, as if he was holding back a terrible force.


Those names . . . even with Milk of the Poppy to numb her, Sansa could still remember the pain of Boros’ fist slamming into her belly. The humiliation.

"Shhh," she soothed the man behind her by turning her head and pulling his down so her lips could brush over his. "You did what you could."

Sandor groaned and held her tighter. "I should have done more. I should have killed him. Them. Boros and Joffrey both. I should have . . ." He growled and she felt him shake his head as if trying to rid himself of the memory.

As they clung to each other, she whispered, "You were so kind. You gave me your cloak."

"Kind?" he spat, pulling away from her, as far as her fingers entwined in his hair would allow. His eyes burned with black fire again, holding hers for only a moment afore dropping to her breasts. His mouth curved into a sneer,

"I looked at your teats. I wished Boros had ripped your dress clean off you - same as every other cunt there. I should have done more. I would have only . . . only . . . I had never felt pity afore, never felt ashamed of myself for doing nothing afore. Never felt anything for anyone afore."

His admission was like a knife in Sansa’s heart. How could he feel nothing for another living soul? She knew he hated his brother, but what about his father? His mother?

Sansa tried to draw him back to her, only to have him shake free of her grasp and stride away.

So much pain. Unsteady and unable to touch him, she tried to reach him another way.

Her voice was choked, her words halting and uncertain as she began to sing,

"He was as great a fool as ever lived, as great a knight as well. Sweet Jonquil was his maiden fair and to him she did say How can you be both fool and knight and all the world to me? Bold Florian took the maiden’s hand and kissed her in the dell, All men are fools and all men are knights to ladies don’t you see?"

She barely had time to draw breath afore Sandor was upon her, silencing her with an aggressive, demanding kiss that made her gasp and allowed his tongue to enter, where it plunged and plundered with desperate need.

"Twas not supposed to be like this. How many times had she remembered their one kiss and imagined how it would be again? In her dreams it had been slow and sensuous, not harsh and rushed.

Through her drugged fog, disappointment rolled in and reality smothered her girlish dreams. Tears of pity stung her eyes as she let him grab at her teats and press himself against her belly. All the while his tongue thrust and claimed her mouth.

When he lifted her effortlessly off her feet, she had no doubt where he was taking her. Her eyes, glassy and heavy lidded focused briefly on the door as Sandor carried her past. Rolly was there, waiting, but the Hound’s long strides carried her beyond the door in a moment and to cry out seemed
too much effort.

The alcove with the bed was dark and the silk sheets were cool against her back. He laid her down, his tongue and his teeth trailing over her neck, shoulders and teats as he hurriedly explored his prize.

How many times had she lain beneath another man and wished he had been the one with her now. Only it had never been like this in her dreams.

The hands on her breasts were not soft and respectful the way Willas’ were or as skilful as she had imagined Aegon’s would be. Instead they kneaded and squeezed and pinched at her teats. The mouth that descended and sucked was not as tentative as Willas nor did it flick and tease in a way she had thought she might like. Nae, this mouth at her breast was as desperate and demanding as a starving babe.

“Tell me you want me.”

Even if her eyelids would open, she had no wish to look at those scars again or into those fevered black eyes. Her head rolled to the side, her eyes still shut.

“Say it.”

Her mouth would hardly work, but to end this, she had to tell him what he wanted to hear.

“I . . . I want you.”

He gave a satisfied grunt and then he was gone.

Sansa lay still on the bed, grateful for the respite. Her drug soaked mind began to drift away, alas not to Winterfell, but to a king with silver hair, twinkling eyes and a clever tongue.

It could only have been moments afore she was jerked awake by the rasp of flint and the sudden flare of light. Shadows from the lamp’s flame danced around the alcove, casting the man undressing above her in flickering shadows. The half light could not disguise the bulk of his shoulders and breadth of his chest. Every movement revealed muscles, sinew and bone gliding under tanned skin and coarse hair. He loomed over her, huge and potently male - so very different than Willas, Baelish and Bolton. She would be sore in the morning and she would pay for this. Nothing came for free. There was always a price to be paid.

Strong hands on her thighs, pawed at her, pushing her legs up and apart, spreading her open. Rough fingers fumbled between her legs, finding her dry.

A harsh voice cursed in the darkness and thick fingers pressed against her lips.

“Make them wet.”

She almost gagged as she sucked. She would get through this. She always did.

Eager fingers probed and scissored, stretching her. Then hard thighs pushed between hers, the blunt tip of a cock there, impatiently seeking passage.

His voice came raspy and broken, “Say you want my Clegane cock in your Stark cunt.”

‘Twas only a dream she thought. No one could be that crude.

When she did not speak, rough fingers grasped her chin, turning it. This time his demand was even more urgent, “Look at me.”
Her eyes would not open. All she could manage was a half smile. ‘Twould be over soon.

“Look. At. Me.”

The fingers on her chin pinched. Hard. Pain forced her eyes open, Milk of the Poppy made her focus loose. The Hound swam into view afore retreating. The iron fingers grasping her chin did not move but the light shone in her eyes, blinding her.

He swore again. Foul curse words directed at her. “What have you taken Sansa? What?!”

As he repeated and repeated, she tried to tell him, if only to make him stop. Stop demanding, stop shaking her.

Heavy foottfalls retreated and she drifted into welcome oblivion, only to be jerked upwards by her hair, awake, pain tearing through every strand.

Her precious little blue bottle swayed afore her eyes.

“Is this what you took? Milk of the fucking poppy?”

She tried to grab for it, but her hand was not doing what she wanted. He held her prize beyond her reach afore she could grasp it.

His fist twisted and tightened in her hair, causing her to cry out in pain. Spit spattered her face and rage contorted his already hideous scars.

“You let me think you wanted me. You took this so you could lie there and pretend one of your pretty Sers was fucking you rather than me!”

His hand was on her throat, pushing her down.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice that you’ve drugged yourself senseless?”

She tried to speak, she opened her mouth, but no sound came out. He shook her and cursed and when still she made no answer, his hand tightened around her throat, iron fingers drawing together. Her nails clawed uselessly at his hand. Milk of the Poppy had robbed her of her strength.

“Do you think I wouldn’t notice you lying there like a cheap whore?”

She could not answered him, could barely breathe.

She tried to plead, to beg for mercy, but could only gasp for air.

With a final, guttural snarl, he released his hold, leaving her fighting for breath.

“I thought you wanted me.” He hissed, afore turned his attention back to the bottle in his hand. He looked at it, then at her and his eyes narrowed.

“No!” she yelled as he threw the bottle against the wall above her head. Blue glass shattered and liquid splattered the bed.

“Nooooooooo!” she wailed, scrabbling onto her hands and knees, searching for any remains that might still hold some of the precious liquid.

“Leave it!” he snarled, grabbing her ankle and dragging her backwards across the bed.
“My bottle!” Sansa wailed, flailing around, trying to claw her way back up the bed. It was useless. His hand around her ankle was like as a vice.

His other hand on the back of her neck pinned her down. Leaning over her, his hot breath was in her face, his lips curled back in a snarl, as he hissed, “I thought you were different. I thought you were better than those bitches Cersi and Margaery but you’re just . . . another . . . highborn . . . whore.”

No amount of Milk of the Poppy could numb the pain of his likening her to Cersi Lannister. Hopeless sobs began to wrack her body. Sandor had never lied to her. Never. Was she really no better than Cersi or Margaery?

Sansa had convinced herself that the result justified the means. It had never crossed her mind that Cersi might have thought that too. Cersi had whored herself to save her House. Sansa had aimed higher – to save the starving of Westeros. Were there degrees by which whores could be judged? Or was anything earned on your back equally tainted?

With a final hard shove, Sandor pushed off her. From high above her his voice rang bitter and caustic, “Find some other Lord to fuck your lying cunt. I’ll stick to whores. At least they don’t pretend to want me.”

His words tore into her as surely as if he had flogged her with a whip. She had only pretended to want him, hadn’t she? Why had she tried to deceive him? He, of all men, deserved her honesty.

She tried to call out to him, but could make no sound other than sobs. Neither her voice nor her body would obey. She tried to raise herself from the bed, but ‘twas no use. She collapsed face down and lay there. He was leaving her again. ‘Twas her fault this time and there was nothing she could do to stop him.

A slammed door and raised voices echoed across the room. She tried to roll over, to shout, to call for them to stop, but all she seemed to be able to do was clutch uselessly at the bedcovers as tears soaked the silk beneath her. She lay there naked and distraught while raised voices became accusations and threats traded back and forth. She drew herself up into a tight ball when she heard the clang of steel. They were going to kill him and ‘twas all her fault.

She lay there, shivering and burning all at once, mute, as nightmare visions of Cersi, raging fires and flaming steel raged behind her closed eyes.

Eventually, some indeterminate time later, when all was silent, she felt a gentler hand on her shoulder and a softer voice urge, “Lady Stark, you must cover yourself.”

Fur grazed her flank. The man was insistent and would not yield until she took the robe her offered. With dull eyes she watched, detached, as Ser Duckfield’s gaze darted to her teats, afore he turned his back to let her dress.

He was bloodied. His sword arm was sticky with it and it dripped, slow and thick from the tips of his curled fingers.

It took several attempts afore Sansa had the robe on and could mumble, “What of the Hound?”

-o-

Chapter End Notes
Dun, dun, dun!

I won’t tease you for more than a week as I have the next chapter almost finished. I hope you enjoyed that and have the patience to bear with me while I finish this story.

Thanks to my Brazilian Guy for his unwavering support. Also thanks to one of my heroes for the music. RIP David Bowie. The only man to look good with a mullet. Ever.
Gentle Mother, font of mercy, save our sons from war, we pray, stay the swords and stay the arrows, let them know a better day.

In the long pause afore Ser Duckfield answered, those words filled Sansa’s drugged mind, her heart hammering with the fear that Sandor was dead.

She had almost given up hope when Ser Duckfield bit out, “He lives, but only because the King stayed our hand.”

Thank the Gods.

Sansa collapsed back on the bed with relief. Only then did Ser Duckfield’s words truly sink in. The King had intervened?

“Jon?” she croaked, hoping her brother had returned.

Ser Duckfield grunted and turned around to look at her, his expression unreadable in the flickering candlelight, but his voice was flat, his tone bitter.

“I could ‘ave taken him on my own, but with six o’ us even The Hound had no chance. We ‘eard your screaming. We would ‘ave killed him, only ‘e swore ‘e hadn’t touched you and Aegon ordered us to let ‘im go.”

“Thank the Gods,” Sansa managed to slur the words aloud. Her mouth was not working but her mind raced. Aegon?

“‘E’s waiting outside. Wants to make sure you’re all right.”

Really? Aegon dared to come near her, after what he had done? Sansa stared at Ser Duckfield, trying to think through the fog of Milk of the Poppy. Instead she was distracted by Rolly’s appearance; his usually ruddy face was pale and strained, his familiar jovial expression replaced by a grimace as he swayed on his feet. He sat down heavily on her bed. ‘Twas clear even that pained him.

“I’ve not forgotten you made me swear not to let ‘im near you. But ‘e wants to see you.”

Sansa clutched the fur robe tighter around herself. She never wanted to see Aegon Targaryen again and certainly not like this.

“I am . . .” She had intended to say ‘fine’. Instead Sandor’s contemptuous taunt filled her head.

Whore.

I am a whore.

“What did he do to you?” In the half light she could see Rolly’s shoulders tense, his bloodied hand grip the hilt of his sword. Why did men always think everything could be resolved with swords?
“You want to know if he raped me or if I fucked him willingly?” Sansa slurred, bitter bile threatening to choke her.

There was a long pause afore Rolly answered, “Aye.”

She told him the truth, “Neither.”

Relief slackened Ser Duckfield’s battered face. He reached out to her then, mayhaps to comfort her, but with unmistakable expectation that she would welcome his hand upon her thigh. Sansa shrank back. A look of annoyance flashed across his face as she drew her leg away.

She was sick of all this; sick of men fighting, sick of men who thought their skill with a sword somehow gave them a right to her, sick of men leaving her. Sick of the Hound, sick of Aegon, sick of the man on her bed. Sick of the Red Keep and sick of putting everyone’s needs before her own.

“What about me?!?” she wanted to scream. “What about what I want?!?” Instead she said nothing. She never did.

The roomed seemed to sway. She had to fight the urge to close her eyes, to sleep. If she did that, nothing would change. She needed to escape from him, from them, from their expectations, from here. Most of all, she needed to escape from herself - the whore. Her fevered mind seized on the only solution that presented itself, Highgarden. ‘Twas beautiful they said. Healing Willas said and at least he was not like the rest of them. He would leave her alone when she asked. Wed to him, no one could call her whore.

“I need you to do something for me Ser Duckfield.”

He immediately promised her, “Anything.” His face was battered, his lip cut. His nose, though never straight, looked broken again. But the hopeful expression amidst the blood was unmistakable.

Steeling herself, lest she changed her mind, she said, “Keep King Aegon away and fetch me Lord Tyrell.”

Rolly grimaced. “Why ‘im?”

When Sansa did not answer, Ser Duckfield placed one big, blooded hand on the bed beside her foot and leaned over her. “I just fought a madman fer you. Tell me what you want from me and you shall ‘ave it. Anything.”

Ser Duckfield’s expectations and sense of entitlement somehow made this easier. No more men. No more Red Keep. No more whoring.

Steeling herself, she swallowed, took a deep breath and said, “Thank you. But I need . . .”

She trailed off, wondering if she could really do this, really give herself wholly and forever to a man she did not love. The hopeful expression on Rolly’s face hardened her resolve to finish this once and for all. Once she was wed ‘twould be only Willas’ demands she would have to accommodate.

“I need Willas.”

The man on her bed shook his big shaggy head, as if his refusal might convince her to change her mind. “Mayhaps a Maester would be better. You are overwrought. Some Milk o’ the Poppy might calm you.”

“Nae!” She yelled. No more of that tonight! She knew what she wanted and she needed to do this
afore she lost her nerve. “I want to go to Highgarden. Now.”

Rolly’s eyes narrowed and his expression hardened. “If you go t’ Highgarden the Tyrells will never let you leave. They’ll ‘ave you shackled t’ them as surely as if they’d clapped irons round your ankles.”

Ser Duckfield’s warning was not anything she didn’t already know. That was the reason she had resisted Willas’ pleas for so long. But what were her options? She was sick of scorched earth and hungry children and Winterfell held too many memories. She doubted she could bear to see it in ruins. The North had suffered more than anywhere else in the war while Highgarden was untouched. Everyone said ‘twas the most beautiful place. If this little bird was destined to spend the rest of her life in a cage, it might as well be a gilded one.

Setting her chin defiantly, she repeated, “I want Willas.”

Rolly stood up abruptly and swayed, his sword arm soaked with blood. However, there was no sign of weakness in his voice as he snarled, “So ‘tis a Lord’s lands and titles you crave.”

Just like a man Sansa thought bitterly. Rolly could not comprehend that his smell, his wild orange hair and his perpetually spoiling for a fight might be what prevented any sensible woman from falling at his feet. Nae, he thought ‘twas only because he was not a highborn Lord.

It took a lot of effort, but she managed to say, “I want away. Willas has always wanted to take me to Highgarden.”

“I’ll bet he has,” Ser Duckfield growled, spiting blood from his burst lip onto the floor as if the mention of Willas Tyrell and Highgarden left a bad taste in his mouth. Sansa screwed her nose up in disgust and stuck her chin out further, the way she had watched Arya do all her life.

Rolly glared at her. She only glared back harder.

“I don’t trust Willas Tyrell or any ‘o that Highgarden lot,” he eventually grumbled and she knew she had won.

“But if you’re dead set on leaving, ask Aegon. ‘E and that dragon will take you anywhere you want and unlike the Tyrells, bring you back.”

Sansa sneered, “Never.” Why would she ask that hateful man for anything? Once a liar, always a liar. At least Willas had never lied and he only sought her bed occasionally. Mayhaps he would leave her alone entirely once she gave him an heir. Not only was Aegon Targaryen a liar, he was the kind of man who would never be satisfied. He had proved that in the library with Shireen.

Rolly was angry at her continued insistence on Willas. “Lady, you’re a fool. Aegon Targaryen has everything bloody Tyrell has and more. And he’ll not bore you to death.”

‘Twas clear Rolly’s loyalties lay with the Targaryens. The sooner she got away from him too, the better.

Sansa rose unsteadily up onto her knees, not caring if she exposed herself to Ser Duckfield again and spat, “Aegon is a two faced, lying . . . whore!”

As soon as the word was out of her mouth Sansa regretted it. Not because she was blackening Aegon’s character any more than he deserved. He had earned that title himself. She regretted it because ‘twas the same insult Sandor had hurled at her. A little voice inside her head whispered that,
just as Sandor had judged her unfairly, mayhaps she judged Aegon the same way. She shoved that unwelcome thought to the back of her mind. She was going nowhere with Aegon Targaryen and if Rolly would not help her, she would do it herself.

Determined to find Willas, she tried to get up from the bed, but the drug had made her clumsy.

“Fine!” Rolly hissed abruptly, shoving her back down with one, big bloodied hand on her shoulder. “When you’re trapped in Highgarden and realise what a fucking mistake you’ve made, remember Rolly Duckfield warned you!”

Leaving that ominous threat ringing in her ears, he limped off to find Willas Tyrell.

Sansa huddled down under the fur cloak. She was doing the right thing. She was.

-o-

A shadow fell over Tyrion’s desk. He sighed, thinking that old age did not come alone. He really must see to obtaining some sort of magnification device for his papers, in anything other than bright sunlight ‘twas becoming rather hard to read these days.

He looked up into Aegon Targaryen’s scowling lilac eyes. Tyrion did a quick mental inventory of recent events, checking for anything he might have done to provoke this visit or the Targaryen King’s temper. Alas, he came up with nothing. That meant ‘twas likely to do with some worrying chirping he had heard from his little birds about Lady Sansa going to Highgarden. Tyrion hoped on this occasion his little birds were wrong.

Ignoring Aegon for the moment, Tyrion got up and poured himself a drink. Experience told him he was going to need it.

Once his cup was good and full, Tyrion asked deferentially, “To what do I owe the pleasure Your Grace?”

Aegon snarled, “Cut the fake arse licking. You know why I’m here. Just tell me how we fix it.”

Tyrion sat down and took a long pull of wine while considering how best to answer that question, or rather demand. Aegon was still wearing the Brother’s robe he had acquired on the Quite Isle. That alone was cause for concern. Anything that could stop a peacock strutting and preening had to be worrying and Aegon had asked how ‘we’ fixed it. Tyrion was not sure if he was willing to become involved in the young King’s scheme, whatever it was and Tyrion resented Aegon’s automatic assumption that he would. ‘Twas time to poke this dragon a little, “You could start by apologising to Lord Baratheon for compromising his cousin’s . . .”

Aegon’s fist thumped onto the desk, making everything jump into the air. Tyrion silently thanked the Gods he held his wine cup in his hands.

“Not that!” Aegon’s frustrated bellow shook everything in the room.

Tyrion tried not to smile. Had he ever seen Aegon quite as agitated afore? Targaryens were, by their
very nature, composed, self-possessed and quite unflappable - except the mad ones of course. Tyrion had certainly never seen Aegon in such a state and over a woman. But then, Sansa Stark seemed to have that effect on men.

“If ’tis not that debacle in the library, then you must explain what ails you Your Grace.”

Aegon braced his hands flat on the table, loomed over Tyrion and growled, “She’s going to Highgarden with that fucking cripple.”

“Oh . . . you mean Lady Sansa?” Tyrion had to lift his cup to his mouth to hide his quite inappropriate amusement.

“Damn right I do. So back to my original question – how do we stop her?”

“Well . . .” Tyrion mused from behind his cup, trying to buy time to contain his mirth. The boy had it bad. ’Twas about time Aegon got a taste of his own medicine and found out how the hundreds of women he left in his wake felt.

Aegon leaned even further forwards and narrowed his eyes, “You’d better not find this amusing old man.”

Tyrion schooled his features. ’Twas not wise to poke a Targaryen dragon too hard, even if they owed you for saving their lives. “Nae, nae, I am just . . . surprised, ’tis all.”

“Why? She deserves much better than fucking Willas fucking Tyrell.”

“Quite. I suppose she deserves someone more like . . . you?”

Aegon scowled, seemingly unable to tell if Tyrion was japing with him or not. With a huff, he pushed off the desk and strode over to help himself to wine.

Tyrion watched him go. He had suspected this day might come. It had been building for moons – the way the King had acquired a sudden interest in how Sansa Stark filled her days, the lingering glances when he though no one was looking and his increasing intolerance for Willas. There was a certain, strange inevitability about it too – another Targaryen King with his heart set on another Stark Lady. Was Westeros’ fate forever to be at the mercy of its King’s loins? It seemed so. Tyrion took another gulp of wine. It seemed Aegon would leave soon to pursue Sansa. ’Twas strange too how they should all leave at once – Jon, Daenerys and now Aegon.

Tyrion could not deny that the thought of holding the reins of power one more time filled him with restless anticipation. He was born for it. Nothing came close to the thrill of running of the realm. Nothing. Sex was not even close. He could not help but smile when he thought of it.

Aegon was at the window now, looking out across a Westeros bathed in spring sunshine. Tyrion wondered how any man could not be filled with hope on such a fine spring day. However Aegon’s mood today was so black, ’twas reminiscent of those old Stark words, ‘Winter is Coming.’

“I do not know if she deserves me, as you suggest old man, but I did come to believe she wanted me as much as I wanted her.” Aegon kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, as if he was telling his tale to Westeros rather than to Tyrion. “We spent all of one day and half a night together in the Sept of Baelor. I do not expect you to believe this, but something happened to me there, something I cannot describe other than to say she saw me – not the fancy clothes, not the Dragon King, not the boy whose only purpose for living was to reclaim the Iron Throne. Nae, she saw the man underneath it all and the most wondrous thing was that she wanted that man. ’Twas as if nothing else mattered; not the Iron Throne, not my House, not anyone else. Only her. Only us.”
Tyrion did smile then. The boy was in love at last. “And does Lady Sansa feel the same way?”

Aegon’s broad shoulders sagged. “I thought she did. She swore she did.”

That news stretched Tyrion’s smile to a grin. Sansa Stark might at one time have thought herself in love with every handsome knight who crossed her path, no matter how unsuitable. Loras Tyrell was one such who sprang to mind. But Sansa was not the silly girl to whom he had once been wed. Surely all the terrible things she had endured had improved her choice of men. The Gods knew that Sansa had never wanted a clever dwarf, who did? But mayhaps a handsome dragon was just what she needed to bring light back to those sad blue eyes. If she had truly been able to see beyond the arrogant, frankly annoying, façade that Aegon Targaryen presented to the world, then Sansa would know she was getting a good man. One of the best.

Both men were lost in their thoughts until Aegon admitted quietly, “I caught a glimpse of another kind of life that night, the kind I could have with her and now, now . . . I feel lost without her.” He did not turn around, as if unable to face Tyrion after such a frank declaration.

Aegon’s shoulders were slumped. With one hand high on the window frame and an empty wine cup dangling from his other, he looked unlike the bold young King Tyrion knew and loved. Loved? His eyebrows shot up as that thought took him by surprise. But aye, ‘twas true, he loved Aegon and Jon too. They were the sons he never had and Daenerys the daughter. Had he not taught them as fathers should? Helped them to the best of his ability and moulded them into the Kings and Queen they now were? And in doing so he had gained as much as they had? Mayhaps even more.

‘Twas to Tyrion Lannister the Iron Throne turned in its time of need and ‘twas his hand that would stead the realm until his children returned to sit upon the Iron Throne again.

“So she is the one?”

Aegon nodded.

“Are you sure son?”

Aegon signed and murmured, “Aye,” accepting Tyrion’s calling him ‘son’ as if it had always been the way between them. Tyrion’s chest puffed up with pride. He was becoming a sentimental old fool, but Gods it felt good.

When Aegon finally turned around he was rolling the empty cup between his hands, staring at it as if he expected to find answers there. “All I know is fighting - fighting for my birthright and fighting a war. I won the war and I claimed the Throne.” His shoulders heaved, as if in defeat, afore he asked, “What am I to do without her?”

Tyrion had to clear his throat, finding it thick with an emotion he never expected to feel.

Aegon seemed to take that as Tyrion’s answer, for the King continued bitterly, “Fucking. I have been filling my life with meaningless fucking. Too much fighting and too much fucking. I’m done with it all.”

“Oh, I think you’re being too harsh on yourself,” Tyrion chuckled, relieved to find an opportunity to lighten the conversation. “The only men done with fucking are the ones in the ground. You’ve just been doing it wrong.”

Aegon finally looked up from his cup, annoyance flashing in his eyes. “You might think you’re the expert on fucking Tyrion, but I’ll wager I’ve fucked just as many women as you and that I’ve paid a lot fewer for the pleasure and I can assure you, I haven’t been doing it wrong.”
With a mischievous twinkle in his eyes Tyrion teased, “You might think you’ve done it all, but I’ll wager you’ve never made love to a woman who loves you back.”

Aegon snorted, “And you have?”

“Aye and ‘twas glorious.” Tyrion shook his head. ‘Twas another example of his entering his dotage. These days when he thought on Tysha ‘twas their perfect two weeks he remembered and not what had come after. Mayhaps that had been too much for him to continue to bear as, somewhere in the muck and death of the war, he had laid that burden down. Now he thought of Tysha only as she had been – so young and so sweet and so miraculously in love with him. Somewhere, somehow, in the midst of a war he had discovered that he could think on Tysha with love.

“In all our years together, in all our conversations, you have never mentioned that. Not even once.” Aegon was looking at him strangely, as if seeing him anew.

“Enough about me.” Tyrion cleared his throat and waved his hands as if dismissing the subject. “I presume you have tried simply talking to Lady Sansa?”

“She will not even hear me. And Rolly will not let me near her. She has him trained like a fucking lapdog.”

Tyrion thought ‘twas hardly surprising Sansa had Rolly Duckfield in the palm of her hand. That man was always a fool for a pretty face and Sansa Stark had the prettiest of them all.

’Twas also hardly any wonder Sansa would not speak to Aegon after what had occurred in the library. “I presume you have a good excuse for all . . . that.”

Aegon bristled. “Shireen wanted to conduct an experiment.”

Tyrion cocked a sceptical eyebrow, indicating Aegon should go on and explain. With a weary sigh the King did, “She wanted to find out if kissing a great kisser…”

“Which would be you?”

“Obviously. Do you want to hear this story or not?”

Tyrion nodded and took another drink. He needed one if he was to listen to this tale of Aegon’s foolishness.

“Shireen wanted to find out if the pleasure in kissing came from the technique or from the man.”

Tyrion guffawed, spitting wine across his precious papers. Aegon scowled and demanded, “Why is that funny?”

“She could have just asked an old man like me for the answer instead of experimenting on a young man like you. But carry on.”

Aegon near snarled. “So what is the answer old man?”

“Make love to a woman who loves you back and you won’t need me to tell you the answer son.” Gods, how Tyrion enjoyed using that little word. Son, he rolled it around his mouth and grinned.

With a growl of frustration, Aegon began pacing the room. “You know the rest. That stupid aurochs Gendry walked in, jumped to conclusions and Sansa was at his back. Not only did she see me getting the shit beaten out of me by that Baratheon bastard, but she saw me with Shireen and jumped
to the same stupid conclusion. Sansa has refused to even look at me since.”

“And by gifting her with Rolly and the Winter Guard you gave her the means to keep you away.”

The only answer Aegon had to that was a grunt.

Tyrion had to shake his head. What a mess and the worst of it was, this clusterfuck had the potential to rip the realm apart. Again. With a heartfelt sigh, he asked, “So your plan now is - what?”

“You could talk to her. Tell her how goddamn mean and boring Willas is, what a fucking backwater the Reach is and what a miserable fucking life she will have with him, his limp and his fucking grasping family.”

The unspoken implication was that Tyrion should also tell Sansa how wonderful Aegon was. Alas, ’twas not that simple. “Sansa Stark stopped listening to me a long time ago. If she ever did. Nae, I am afraid I cannot help you there. Besides, I quite like Willas and the Reach.”

Aegon drew him an icy look.

“But I agree, Willas is not right for Sansa. He had his chance to make her happy and he failed.”

Tyrion gazed into his wine cup. If Sansa went to Highgarden she would never see Winterfell or her family again. The Tyrells would see to that, subtly of course, but they would. ‘Twas her womb they wanted. With Bran apparently unable to sire heirs, Sansa Stark was one death away from being heir to Winterfell. It occurred to Tyrion that he should make sure Rickon Stark was guarded day and night. Subtly of course, and just in case.

Tyrion took another swig of wine. He was about to do a very bad thing, but for a very good reason. Did that justify meddling in other people’s affairs? He snorted. Since when had that bothered him? He had been an interfering wretch since the day he’d been born.

If only Sansa Stark was a bit more suspicious, scheming, manipulative . . . a bit more like him. He sighed. Even after all she had endured, Sansa Stark was still too damn selfless and trusting for her own good. He would do what he could. He would try to save his former wife from herself. He owed her that much. And Aegon was not prone to fanciful imaginings. If half of what he said took place in the Sept had truly happened, then Sansa and Aegon needed time to explore that – whatever it was. Tyrion knew from his own experience that those moments happened only once in a lifetime, if even then. If you were lucky enough to experience what Aegon described, you clung on and you did not let go.

Sansa and Aegon deserved a chance at happiness, what they did with it was up to them, but Tyrion would give them that chance. On his own terms.

Pointing a stubby finger at Aegon he said tersely, “I am only considering this as I think Sansa is about to make another grave mistake.”

“At least we agree on something.” Aegon’s mouth quirked up at the sides. He had secured Tyrion as an ally and, with the Imp on his side, surely the battle was already halfway won?

“You must swear to me you will not hold her against her will. By all means, rescue her from the Tyrells, but if she does not want to stay with you, swear you will return her to her family.”

“I swear it. But she will want to stay.” Aegon’s familiar cocky smirk was back.

Tyrion wagged his finger. “Do not be so sure. You have not covered yourself in glory so far with your thoughtless ‘experiments’.”
Aegon merely grinned.

“So what is your plan? To kidnap her the way your father kidnapped Lyanna?”

“Obviously not as that didn’t work out too well for anyone, did it?”

“Hmmm. Jon might disagree. It resulted in his birth after all.”

Aegon snorted. “Speaking of Jon, how do you think he will take the news of my rescuing Sansa?”

Tyrion needed more wine. “Let us instead consider it another way - I think he would rather see his sister with you than with Willas.”

Aegon’s eyes lit up. “Truly?”

“Jon will not forget the bargain Sansa had to strike so that House Tyrell would feed us. I will plead your case with Jon if necessary. Unlike Robert Baratheon, Jon is a reasonable man and his sister’s happiness will come first. Just make sure you make her happy.”

Aegon chuckled and waggled his eyebrows arrogantly, as if that was a given. Tyrion groaned. If only that were enough.

There was something else that he felt obliged to point out, something Aegon would do well to remember, “If I were you, I’d worry more about Arya coming after me than Jon.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

Tyrion detected more than a hint of sarcasm in Aegon’s tone. Tyrion took another gulp of wine. Was he really going to help Aegon succeed where Rhaegar had failed? Was that not what any father would do for his son? Tyrion looked up into Aegon’s expectant, hopeful face. Damn the consequences. He was an old romantic fool and he was going to help.

“The mistake your father made was being too damn noble about the whole affair. Having had Robert as a good brother I have no doubt Lyanna chose the right man. However your father and Lyanna should have taken the time to break her betrothal to House Baratheon.”

“Easy to say. Harder to do.”

“But not impossible. There are ways to achieve such things.”

Seeing Aegon’s sceptical look Tyrion pressed on, “Of course there are ways; other lovers, indiscretions, behaviour by the bride that makes the betrothal untenable. New alliances forged while old ones are broken. If all else fails there is always blackmail. Your father should have thought with his head and not his cock.”

Aegon frowned and Tyrion was pleased to see he was at least considering the consequences of his actions. The son would hopefully think and act more carefully than his father had. “At the very least, your father could have sneaked Lyanna away and hidden her until he was ready to present the realm with another wife and heir. He could have taken the time to convince Eddard Stark a love match was what Lyanna wanted. But no, Rhaegar would not wait, acted in haste and then kept his prize in full view in a tower on the main road between the Reach and Dorne! Along with half the bloody Kingsguard!”

Tyrion could not help but shake his head and despair at the ill-conceived stupidity of it all. Brave men tended not to be the most cunning.
“If you are prepared to learn from your father’s mistakes, mayhaps it can be done. With a lot of planning and if you really believe that is what Sansa wants…”

Aegon’s delighted expression was proof enough he thought so.

“Mayhaps the Tyrells can be bought off, Jon can be talked around and Arya can be . . . managed.”

“Arya Stark managed?” Aegon repeated incredulously.

“There is one man . . .”

Aegon groaned and scrubbed a hand over his face. “You want me to ask that fucking Baratheon for help?”

“How badly do you want Sansa Stark?”

Aegon grimaced, but conceded, “Alright. You’ve made your point. I’ll do it.”

Tyrion motioned to the chair in front of his desk. “Sit and I’ll tell you how we do it . . .”

-o-

Ty flexed his knees. Sitting crouched up here, hidden behind a pillar was a pain in the arse – in more ways than one. But what choice did he have? He had killed a man, one of Lady Sansa’s Winter Guards no less and that big ginger fucker who claimed to be their leader would be out for revenge. No doubt about that.

The look of awed disbelief on Ugly’s face when Ty’s Braavosi blade had cut an “S” in the guard’s tunic would live with Ty forever. But then everything had gone wrong. Although Ty had not intended to kill him, the fucker deserved it for the lies he had told about Shireen. As if she would allow herself to be sullied by that Targaryen! If men could be whores, the King apparently was one and besides, he was far too old for Shireen. He had apparently lain with every woman who would have him – from the highest Ladies to the lowest scullery maids. Ty knew Shireen would never consider dallying with such a man. She was too smart to be interested in a man with such low standards – even if he was a King. Titles and rank had never impressed Shireen. She treated everyone she met with the same courtesy and kindness. That was one of the many things Ty loved about her.

’Twas almost worth spending the rest of his life as an outlaw knowing he had defended his Lady’s honour. If Shireen would agree to run away with him, if she was happy to live a simple life with him somewhere far away, where his crime would never be discovered, they could still be together.

He would have to forget his plans for being the great knight in all of Westeros of course - that dream had died with that ugly Winter Guard. But Ty thought that mayhaps he could still be a true knight, like the Knights of the Hollow Hill. He had loved listening to Old Lem’s stories of the days when Dondarrion’s men had fought with Gendry’s cave forged steel, in second hand armour, rode only rough ponies and still been the noblest band of Knights in all of Westeros.

Aye, mayhaps Ty could somehow start his own band of outlaw knights. But first he had to convince Shireen to leave with him.

Ty had watched her for four days now, following her every move, his hopes rising with each passing day as she grew ever more miserable in the Red Keep. The only time he saw her smile was first thing
in the morning when she sneaked off with Arya to practice her sword skills.

Gendry would not tolerate it if he found out – Shireen seemed to have gone from being merely shy around him, to being downright meek. ‘Twas not like her and Ty had yet to work out why. Mayhaps ‘twas because Lord Baratheon had apparently ordered Arya to stop all sword play for the sake of their unborn babe and concentrate instead on the preparations for their impending wedding. Of course Arya ignored him.

Ty smiled as he imagined Arya’s reaction to Gendry’s issuing that ridiculous command. ‘Twas a wonder he still had his balls. Arya Stark was a Water Dancer and always would be. Ty understood the desire to train, train and train harder still and the addiction to perfection. Gendry might as well have told Arya to stop breathing.

As there was no way to see into the store room where the Ladies trained, Ty had to content himself with listening to Shireen’s huffs and grunts and imagine she was exerting herself in a different way. With him, under him, over him. He sighed and shifted his position to ease the pressure against the laces of his britches. He should distract himself by thinking about something other than the wonderful sounds Shireen Baratheon could make.

Today. He would ask her today. He had to ask her soon, as his luck was bound to run out sometime. He could not steal food and hide in the Red Keep indefinitely. Sooner or later he would be found and caught. Mayhaps there was a price on his head already for murder. He wondered if Gendry was ashamed of him or livid or most likely both. Mayhaps that was why Shireen was so miserable. He liked to think so. Mayhaps she was pining for him, the way he pined for her. ‘Twas strange thought that no one seemed to be talking about the murder or hunting for him. Still, he should count himself lucky for every day he stayed free.

Ty checked the position of the sun. ‘Twould not be long now. The Ladies had stuck to the same routine every day. When they finished their training, the door to the store would open and Arya would make sure the coast was clear, afore the Ladies left to go their separate ways. That first day, Ty had been sure Arya had seen him, but he must have been mistaken, for she had said nothing and had never so much as looked up at his hiding place since. Again his luck had held.

He practiced again in his head the speech he had prepared for Shireen; he would start by pointing out how miserable she was here and end with his declaration of love. After four days alone and following her every move, Ty had convinced himself Shireen would fall into his arms with relief and beg him to take her away from this bloody awful place.

In Storm’s End she had been busy from dawn to dusk with an array of important tasks that all demanded her attention. Here she was forced to spend all day doing absolutely nothing. The Ladies of the Red Keep had to endure endless rounds of tea parties, lunches and formal dinners with Sers and Lords. ‘Twas no wonder that, with nothing else to do, their entire conversation revolved around the same tea parties, lunches, dinners, Sers and Lords. Ty was bored rigid and he only had to watch. ‘Twas hardly surprising the highlight of Shireen’s day was her morning training with Arya.

Just as Ty was certain the store room door was about to open, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Angling his head to see further up the corridor, he was surprised to see King Aegon strolling along and shocked when he realised that the King appeared to be doing exactly the same as Ty himself – checking the position of the sun while keeping one eye on the store room door.

At the first sound of the handle turning, the King ducked into a darkened alcove considerably further up the corridor from where Ty crouched. He was torn between watching Arya and Shireen take their customary leave with a sisterly hug and a promise to meet again and watching the dark space where he knew a King lurked. Ty tried to do both, his heart hammering as it always did when he caught
sight of his Shireen.

Arya stalked off in another direction, with all the grace and stealth of a cat, while Shireen hurried down the very corridor where Aegon hid. Ty had intended to drop down from his hiding place and surprise Shireen, but that would have to wait. He had no idea what King Aegon was up to, if indeed he was up to anything. Ty resolved to be ready for everything. With his hand on the hilt of his sword, he crept along the high ledge, darting silently from pillar to pillar, following Shireen’s progress, all the while also keeping watch on the darkened alcove.

When Shireen was almost upon it, the King appeared and, quick as a snake, pressed one hand over Shireen’s shocked, gaping mouth and held the other up to the King’s own lips, indicating she should stay silent. Ty’s immediate reaction was to drop down now and rescue Shireen only, despite being startled, she did not seem in any way concerned by the King’s sudden appearance.

Ty watched from high above as Shireen nodded and King Aegon slowly removed his hand from her mouth. Ty felt a surge of jealousy. Someone other than him had touched those precious, ruby lips, even if ‘twas only with the palm of a hand.

The King nodded towards the darkened alcove, indicating they should move into the shadows. When Shireen seemed to hesitate, he whispered, “I need your help.” Ty thought he sounded almost desperate, but why would a King need Shireen’s help?

With a swift nod, Shireen stepped into the darkness. Aegon glanced quickly this way and that along the corridor without looking up. Ty was confident he would not be discovered, but when the King also disappeared into the shadows, it took all of Ty’s self control not to jump down and shove himself and his sword between his love and the Targaryen King.

By the Gods, what was going on? Surely there was no truth to what Ugly had said in the stables? Ty had killed that man for daring to suggest Shireen could have been King Aegon’s latest conquest. Was it true? Ty’s stomach roiled. Nae, not his Shireen. It could not be. Never. ‘Twas some other explanation for what Ty was seeing - there had to be. He crouched down, poised to pounce if she needed him and listened.

The King’s voice was a deep, soft rumble, but Ty’s hearing was sharp. Even so, he doubted himself. Had the King really said, “I need you to go to Highgarden”?

-o-

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we will have a much anticipated wedding. It’s only been two and half years coming! Won’t be next Sunday though. I think I’ll need more than one week to get that right. I hope you will bear with me as the end truly is in sight.
Chapter Notes

Chapter 50
(Bloody hell! How’d we get so many?)

This one is for all the guys out there, especially Eder, Leon and George who have inspired and encouraged me along this long and winding road.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wake up.”

“Hmmm . . . why?”

“Because we’re getting married today and I have a wedding present for you.”

If it had been anyone other than her lover trying to rouse her, Arya would have told them where to go and dragged the covers back over her head. However, Gendry’s insistent, enticing slow grind against her arse was too tempting to refuse. She wiggled as she arched her back and was rewarded with a gruff, needy groan.

Arya could not help but smile. He might be bigger and stronger than she was, he might have an army at his command, but she could bring this huge warrior to his knees every single time. Happiness bloomed within her, like a flower turning towards the sun. She wiggled some more.

“Awww, I like presents. Is it a big one?”

“What do you think?” With a growl, he gripped her hips, replacing the rolling grind with thrusting. Her present certainly was very big . . . and very hard.

Slipping out of his grasp made him huff with frustration, but she wanted to roll over and see his face. “You’re spoiling me. I already have this . . .” she wrapped her hand around his rock hard cock and stroked smoothly upwards and back down, “. . . and I’m getting a wedding present too.”

He closed his eyes and swore gruffly under his breath. Arya wasn’t sure if ‘twas because of her hand on him or because of her teasing him about receiving two presents. Mayhaps she should admit to him that he had already given her everything she could ever need, but where would be the fun in that?

Shifting so she could stretch one lean leg over his, she kept her hand on his cock, circling her thumb over the big, blunt tip spreading the slick evidence of his desire. Her body responded to his readily, mirroring his arousal with a similar, aching wetness between her thighs.

Rising up, Arya knelt over him, her knees sinking into the feather bed on either side of him, only looking up when the tip of his cock was nestled snugly between her swollen lips, seeking entry, desperate to drive home.

Gendry’s mouth was a tight line, his brow furrowed in concentration as he focused on where they
were almost joined. His hands roamed over the smooth skin of her thighs to rest on her hips as he fought his urge to impale her, to buck up as he pulled her down. Instead he waited impatiently, keeping his need leashed tight, only to have her pause. She was teasing him deliberately, trying to make him move, knowing what he wanted, what they both needed and yet savouring this moment afore they both plunged over the threshold and surrendered to their desire.

“Arya…” He gritted her name out through clenched teeth as a plea for her to move, to let him in. He was solid and warm beneath her, hard and ready. Leaning over him, Arya’s swollen breasts swayed, causing her sensitive teats to brush against the hair on his chest. Thrills of pleasure sparked outwards and she gasped at the new sensation. How could such innocent, accidental contact send streaks of lightning to converge at a single point between her legs?

Her breathy little cry broke Gendry’s self control and he arched up, desperately seeking their joining. Arya had no intention of ending this sweet torture so soon. Still, she barely managed to lift her hips up and away from his heat seeking cock before he could slide home.

Gendry moaned with frustration, making her smile as her mouth hovered close to his ear. “This is my wedding present, not yours.” His breathing was ragged and rapid as his fingers impatiently kneaded the firm muscles of her arse. Her name, whispered through a low, shuddering groan, sounded like a heartfelt prayer.

Only then did she move, but not in the way he wanted. Instead of sliding down, she reached behind, grabbing her ankles and arching her back. Arya shook her hair free, relishing the unfamiliar feeling of it brushing against her shoulders. Having never had hair long enough afore, she enjoyed its sensual sway.

Her pose was designed for maximum visual effect while still maintaining her command of their lovemaking. She had planned this, wanting to expose herself fully to him, with thighs parted, pelvis titled up, to afford him the best possible view of their joining. In this position her breasts were thrust forward and, oh my! what magnificent breasts they had become. Since she had acknowledged her pregnancy, Arya had been aware of their increased sensitivity. Now they ached with a fullness that demanded attention. With her shoulders pulled back her breasts took centre stage, big and round with teats standing proudly to attention in the cool morning air.

Her newly impressive breasts had not gone unnoticed. The ribbed muscles of Gendry’s torso flexed he lifted his shoulders off the bed, his hands sweeping purposefully upwards, skimming her waist and ribcage. Arya shivered as his cock was dragged through her wet folds when he sat up and when he caressed the soft, tender underside of her breasts. She had to bite her lip to keep from crying out as his thumbs drew wide circles around her aching, rosy teats. Arousal flared when he gently, but firmly, pinched those nubs. Another needy, desperate groan filled the still air of the room. Arya was not surprised it had come from her this time.

Gendry wrenched his gaze away from her teats and his eyes glittered in the half-light as they locked with hers. She knew that expression, for she was certain ‘twas the same one she wore – one of wanting with a primal need as old as the First Men. But there was something else there too, something deeper, a connection that once found could never be broken as long as they lived - love.

Still hovering over him, Arya released her hold on one ankle and took his rigid shaft in her fist. She pulled it back towards herself, rolling her hips and moving her hand, combining his slick wetness with her own.

Gendry lay back and waited, watching her intently, his breath coming in heavy gasps. She was tormenting him deliberately, damn her, but he knew the waiting would only increase the intensity of
their release when it eventually came. Gods, she was pushing him to the very limits of his self-control.

Finally taking pity on him, Arya eased down slowly but, to Gendry’s fierce disappointment, she stopped long afore he was fully seated within her. She stilled, savouring the slow, delicious feeling of being stretched by his big, hard cock. Below her, Gendry’s eyes were half closed, lips parted, teeth clenched as she leaned back on her heels and pulled him as far as he could go. The corded muscles of his neck stained and a sheen of sweat slicked his dark brow. His thighs trembled beneath her with the effort of holding himself in check. When his fingers tightened painfully on her hips she knew he was almost at the end of his patience. Sinking down abruptly, she took him all, gasping as he filled her completely. Not only did he fill her physically, but emotionally too. That big, empty hole inside her that had grown with every loss and every gift of death she had given was no longer there. It had been filled – by him.

Gendry’s unconditional love, while accepting her as she was, also challenged her to be a better person. His love had mended the cracks and fissures in her heart that had begun when she left Winterfell and only grown deeper and longer with every passing year. Without Gendry she would still be hollow, broken and alone. Without him by her side she would not have confronted her flaws and failings, instead she would have run. She would still be living by her wits and her sword and in the process would have lost her family again and also the opportunity of starting her own. Her life was so much better than she had expected or even dared hope because of him.

Love swelled inside her, filling her so full it threatening to overflow and spill out of her eyes. What was wrong with her? She blinked back tears as his so handsome, so beloved face swam below her in a watery haze.

“Arya?”

She gave him what she hoped was a sensual and reassuring smile and shut her eyes so he would not see how close she was to crying. Gendry would think he had done something wrong when the opposite was true. He had done everything right. Everything. She wanted all of him, more of him, as much of him as she could take. Slowly and with a sinuous grace, she began to move.

Pushing up on her thigh muscles, Arya rose until he was nearly out, still keeping him pulled back. Sinking down she did it again and again, squeezing her internal muscles as she rode him achingly slowly, rising and falling, rolling and rocking. Every movement was accompanied by Gendry’s grunting through gritted teeth. The fingers of one of his hands dug painfully into her hip while the other hand slid down to where their bodies joined, delving between her thighs. Finding its goal, his thumb circled her clit, drawing appreciative moans from the back of her throat. Every expert caress and plunge of his thick cock drove her further towards what she hoped would be a magnificent climax.

Gendry felt stretched beyond belief. He groaned and grunted, needing Arya to come, to release the tension on his cock so he could come too.

“Gods Arya, I can’t . . . I can’t. I need you to move forwards.”

Arya ignored his request and kept her grip on her ankles, arching her back even further, torturing him as she slid slowly up and down his straining cock.

“Come here.” He tried to pull her forwards by his one hand on her hip.

She resisted, panting, “This is my wedding present. Not yours.”
Gendry cursed and drove his hips up, desperately seeking relief, but Arya was still not ready to relinquish control and she pulled away even as he arched up, keeping him stretched, keeping him from coming. She watched him buck and strain, carefully measuring his desperation against her impending climax. She was almost there and if she could keep him on edge for just a little longer, she knew this would be a wedding present neither of them would ever forget.

Her aching teats demanded attention and, as she was arched so far back, they were beyond Gendry’s reach. Letting go of her ankles, Arya reached for her breasts, releasing the tension on Gendry’s cock just a little, but still not enough to let him come. She rolled her engorged teats between her fingers, sending sparks radiating to her clit, her toes and all the way back, sparks that could ignite a fire inside her that promised to burn with the intensity of the sun. Her rhythm became urgent, frenzied as she strove higher and faster towards release.

Gendry’s eyes were narrowed to feral slits, his teeth bared as sweat streamed down his forehead. His voice was a harsh rasp as he growled, “Fuck Arya. You’re killing me. Let me go. Let me come.”

“Beg me,” she panted.


With a wicked grin, Arya gasped, “In that case . . . come with me.” She flexed her thighs, pushing forwards, releasing him so he could buck up. He pumped wildly as she impaling herself on his cock, crashing down as he thrust up, meeting him stoke for frantic stroke.

Her fingers tried to find purchase on shoulders that felt like sweat soaked rocks, his arms clamped around her like a vice, trapping her against him as he pounded up into her, tightening, arching, ramming and finally spurting deep, deep inside.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” he yelled. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” she screamed as they came together.

Pleasure erupted within her, shooting lightening bolts of fire that left her shuddering with their force. Her womb clenched around him, convulsing, stroking, squeezing his cock for every last drop of seed.

Joined and spent, Arya collapsed on top of him and they lay together, gasping, slowly spiralling down from their high, their hearts hammering in time. She buried her face against his sweat soaked neck, while his hands gently stroked her equally damp back.

Gendry had intended to make love to his wife at least once more but she had worn him out and his poor cock needed some time to recover from the pounding she had given him.

“You are wicked,” he grumbled through a smile.

Arya grinned smugly and wriggled on top of him. “I know and you love it.”

“Hmm, I love you. I am not so sure my cock appreciates your riding technique.”

Arya levered herself up so she could glare down at him, pretending to be offended, “I’ll have you know I am an excellent horse rider!”

“No doubt,” he grinned roguishly, “But your bull riding needs some practice.”

Gasping with amused indignation, she playfully punched at his chest until he pulled her back down on top of him. She lay there, giggling, half on top of him, their legs entwined, her hands rested on his chest, cradling her chin. He absentmindedly stroked over the slick, silky curve of her arse, enjoying
the afterglow of their lovemaking and the calm before the whirlwind their wedding day was bound to be.

“Hmmm,” Arya purred contentedly, “That was the best wedding present anyone could have asked for.”

He waggled his eyebrows. “I know.”

She screwed up her nose at his arrogance, then teased him by muttering, “Cocky bastard.”

He threw his head back and laughed, “Right on both counts Milady!”

His laughter was infectious. When their laughter had died to mere chuckles, he planted a kiss on the top of her head, murmuring into her hair, “I have got you a proper wedding present too.”

Arya’s eyes flew open in surprise. Seven buggering hells. He had really got her a wedding present? She hadn’t got him one. Damn. But she wouldn’t let herself be outdone. If he had got her a proper present and she hadn’t made any effort, he was bound to cast it up to her for the rest of their wedded life.

Glad his face was pressed against her hair so he couldn’t see her lie, Arya tried to sound nonchalant as she drawled, “Of course I’ve got you one too.” Even as the words left her lips she regretted them. Why couldn’t she just let him win for once? Why did she always have to match him step for step, blow for blow and now, gift for gift? She sighed. That was just the way ’twas between them. Wasn’t she the one who had demanded they be equal in all things? If that meant getting him a bloody wedding present, then so be it.

He must have felt her tense as he eased back onto the pillow so he could see her face again. “Are you all right?” There was a worried frown on his.

“Of course,” she said dismissively, pushing off him and sitting up. Then something new and strange and truly terrifying happened.

“Oh!”

“What?” Gendry was immediately upright, tensed and ready for anything.

Arya’s hands instinctively dropped to her belly where she felt it again – a flutter inside, as if there really were butterflies in her stomach. Big ones.

“Oh my.”

“What?!” When she never answered, Gendry demanded, “Gods Arya, what’s wrong?”

What was wrong? Something she ate? Wedding day nerves? Even as she asked herself those questions, a maternal instinct she never thought she possessed told her the truth of it.

“The babe . . . the babe . . .”

“Are you alright? Is the babe?!” Gendry’s voice rose two octaves in near panic, his hands were spread wide, as if he was ready to catch anything the Gods might throw at him.

“I think . . . I think I just felt the babe move.”

Gendry tentatively reached out to the slight curve of her belly. Arya moved hers to allow him to place his big hand low on the expanse of smooth skin between her curls and her navel.
Right on cue, it happened again.

“Did you feel it?” Arya gasped.

“What . . . ?”

“That. Just there.”

Gendry looked from his hand to her face which was suffused with joyous wonder. Should he lie? He didn’t want to disappoint her. Mayhaps his big, hammer wielding hand wasn’t sensitive enough to feel babes in bellies.

“You didn’t feel it, did you?” Arya frowned, more disappointed than anything else.

He shrugged helplessly, “Nae, but I’d wager my boy will be kicking me out of my bed afore long.”

“Your boy? What if he’s a girl?!”

Gendry grinned, “If she’s anything like her mother, we both know I’ll be getting my arse kicked every day anyway.”

Arya pretended to be offended, but wasn’t really. The thought of Gendry cradling a tiny girl babe that looked just like her suffused Arya with another torrent of love. Shocking him, she grabbed the back of his neck and tugged, crashing his mouth into hers.

When she finally allowed him to come up for air, he looked surprised and happy.

“Wow. If that is what is going to happen every time our babe kicks you, I hope he, or she, is a champion kicker, even if ‘tis my arse getting kicked.”

Arya laughed and kissed him again. She could not remember ever being so happy. “I love you Gendry Baratheon.”

“And I love you too Arya . . .” he hesitated then, debating which name he should use afore deciding on, “Stark.” Even though they were already wed and were about to be wed again, she would always be Arya Stark to him.

He tried to pull her back down onto the bed, but she gracefully slipped through his hands.

“‘Tis a good job, you love me,” she teased, leaning over the side of the bed to pick Needle up from its usual night-time place beside their bed, “Otherwise . . .” she grinned as she made a swift slicing movement through the air too close to his balls for comfort.

He pretended to flinch. ‘Twas not too difficult under the circumstances.

“So they’re of no use to you now they’ve planted a seed in your belly?” he asked, trying to look insulted.

“Hmmm,” she pouted and pretended to consider her answer.

With a growl he lunged, intent upon making her scream with pleasure. Again. He felt the need to remind his damn wife exactly how useful his balls were. But Arya easily evaded his grasp, sliding off the bed and gathering her clothes from the floor in one fluid motion.

“Where are you going?”
“I have things to do.”

“But ‘tis our wedding day.” He didn’t have to fake his annoyance this time.

“Exactly,” Arya said airily, pulling on her britches. “I have things to do.”

“What things?”

“Women’s things.” She knew that was the response most likely to shut him up. Gendry, like most men, liked to keep himself as far removed from “women’s things” as he could. If she were being honest, so did Arya. Most of the time. But not today.

“They can’t be more important than laying abed with your husband on your wedding day,” he grumbled, but he made no further move to grab her and she knew she had won.

“We have the honeymoon for that.”

“Fuck the honeymoon,” He glared at her, making his intention clear. “We’re leaving for Storm’s End on the morrow.”

“Mayhaps the day after . . . or even the day after that.”

“Tomorrow.” He folded his arms across his chest and continued to scowl, even when she planted a chaste kiss on his forehead.

“Everyone’s heads will be too sore to travel on the morrow,” she said reasonably, pulling on her shirt, “And besides, I want to spend all of our first wedded day in bed.”

His face lit up at that and Arya had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop from giggling. ‘Twas really too easy to tease him.

“All right,” he grumbled, “But you had better made good on that promise - wife.”

“Of course, husband,” Arya said sweetly, looking lovingly up at him through her lashes as she pulled on her boots.

“You had better not be teasing me.”

“Would I do that?” she asked in all innocence as she slid Needle into her boot.

He grunted noncommittally as he watched her buckle on her sword belt. Gods, ‘twould surely be easier loving a sweet, simple, normal Lady he thought as she left him without so much as a backwards glance. Then he smiled to himself. ‘Twould no doubt be easier, but not half as exciting.

-0-

As Arya strode from their bedchamber, her mind was already racing ahead. How was she going to find Gendry the perfect present with only a few hours notice? Where could she get any present?

Aegon had declared their wedding to be a feast day. He claimed they should take advantage of every excuse to celebrate after so many years of misery and war. ‘Twas therefore unlikely she could even find an open store to buy anything. ‘Twas even less likely she could find something Gendry wanted. The shelves in Tobho Mott’s shop had been bare the last time Arya had visited and that was the only place she might find a suitable gift for Gendry. Bloody buggering hell.

Then she had a flash of inspiration. Sansa would help her! Sansa was always prepared when it came
to gifts and other such things that proper Ladies paid attention to.

Much as Arya loved lying with Gendry, she wished she had not dallied so long. ‘Twas mayhaps foolish to have agreed to meet Shireen for their usual sword practice today but, she reasoned, ‘twas only a wedding and they were already married after all, having sworn their vows on the Quite Isle. The public ceremony in the Godswood was merely the icing on the cake they had already started eating. But she had to meet Shireen soon and Sansa after that. ‘Twas going to be a very busy day.

-0-

“Yes!”

Shireen’s delight at landing her first ever strike was short lived as Arya yelped and clutched her side where Shireen’s training blade had finally found its target.

“I’m sorry! So sorry!” Shireen gasped, dropping her sword in panic afore covering her mouth with her hands.

“How many times have I told you never to drop your sword!” Arya snapped. “No matter what! I am hurt, not dead! If ‘twas a real dual, you would be defenceless and I would have killed you already.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Shireen squeaked, bending to pick up her sword only to drop it again in haste. She was so flustered her foot caught on one of her petticoats and sent her tumbling to her knees. She scrabbled around the dusty floor of the store room until she retrieved her blade.

Arya shook her head in dismay. “Tis me who should be sorry.”

Extending her hand, she pulled her friend back onto her feet and tried to smile. “You did well. Your first hit.”

Avoiding Arya’s gaze, Shireen proceeded to fuss around with her dusty skirts. Gods be good! She had managed to best the mighty Arya Stark! No doubt ‘twas merely a lucky strike, but still, Shireen felt fit to burst with pride. She had to tell someone! With a sudden sense of dismay she realised the only person she could tell was Ty for they kept their training secret from everyone else. Ty was also the only person she wanted to tell. Her delight turned to sadness. She had not seen hide nor hair of Ty since their arrival in the Red Keep and had no idea if she would ever see him again, for she was due to leave for Highgarden in a matter of days.

“But worry. I was surprised more than hurt,” Arya said, slapping Shireen rather too heartily on the back. Shireen stumbled forwards, trying to suppress the pained huff of air that flew out of her lungs. But she only ended up doubled over and coughing.

It seemed now ‘twas Arya’s turn to apologise. “Now I am sorry. I forget ‘tis you I am duelling with and not Gendry or . . .” Arya trailed off, looking embarrassed. ‘Tis not they both knew she was about to say “Ty” but they had agreed not to speak of him again after their argument over events in the library.

Arya had been appalled that her friend, nay anyone, could stoop so low as to kiss Aegon Targaryen, particularly when that friend had professed to be in love with Ty. Shireen, on the other hand, felt unable to defend herself without betraying Aegon’s confidence. Added to that was the fact that the kiss had been her stupid idea in the first place. She certainly did not want to admit that to Arya, so Shireen simply refused to discuss it – which of course made Arya even angrier. So they had agreed
to disagree and now all conversations about Ty, Aegon or libraries were forbidden.

Shireen plopped down onto a sack of grain and blew her sweaty hair out of her eyes. “You are distracted today. ‘Tis the only reason I managed a lucky hit.”

Arya knew ‘twas true. Shireen was improving – but she was never going to be good. She was too damn . . . nice to be anything beyond competent, unlike Ty who had the potential to be the best Arya had ever seen. Arya had to practice consistently even now, whereas Ty seemed to be born to it.

‘Twas a pity that Shireen would not to speak of him, for Arya was wondering why he waited outside of their store room every day. He lurked high up behind the pillars, no doubt thinking he was well hidden, but Arya knew he was there. She just didn’t know why. Mayhaps Shireen knew, but as they couldn’t talk about him, Arya had no way of finding out – unless she confronted Ty herself and that would defeat the purpose of his hiding – whatever in the seven hells that was. Nae, she had more important things to worry about, like Gendry’s present. Ty would just have to wait.

With a frustrated huff, Arya plonked herself down onto another sack of grain beside Shireen and admitted, “You are right. I am distracted.”

When Arya did not elaborate and instead kept poking a bag of grain with her blade until barley was running out of holes everywhere, Shireen asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Arya huffed again and jabbed the poor, defenceless sack harder. Shireen gave her friend a wary sideways look, “Does it involve Ty or libraries or Aegon?”

With a disgusted snort, Arya said “Nae,” though it worried her that Shireen thought she was on first name terms with that slimy Targaryen. Another problem that would just have to wait.

Blowing out a heavy sign, Arya admitted, “’Tis Gendry.”

Shireen’s heart seemed to get stuck in her throat. Gendry? Was something wrong between Arya and Gendry? Shireen loved them both equally and would be torn apart if she had to choose between them.

“He has a wedding present for me and I have none for him.”

Shireen breathed a huge sigh of relief. “Oh, is that all.”

Arya frowned. “’Tis a big problem Shireen. If he has a present for me and I none for him, I will never hear the end of it. On his deathbed Gendry will still be telling everyone, ‘my wife never even got me a wedding present’.”

Shireen rolled her eyes. “I doubt that. I have never seen a man as devoted to a woman as he is to you. He loves you so much he will probably have himself stuffed like a prize aurochs so he can pretend he is not dead. He will have himself wheeled around so he can save you the pain of his passing.”

Arya scoffed, “I think I might notice the difference.”

“Really?” Shireen cocked an eyebrow.

“Mayhaps not,” Arya admitted with a shrug and a smirk and they both started giggling.

When they recovered themselves, Arya asked, “Seriously, do you have any idea what I can get him?”
“Hmmm,” Shireen considered the question carefully, afore the prefect idea for the perfect gift came to her. “A painting of you - preferably you naked. He would love that.”

Arya made a gagging sound and pretended to choke on her own vomit. “Yuk. Never. Besides, I need it today. Anyway, I could not sit still long enough for any painting and ‘twill be a few more moons afore I am back to normal.” Arya rubbed her growing belly.

“‘Twill be more than a few moons,” Shireen muttered, obviously knowing more about what carrying, delivering and nursing a babe would do to a woman’s body than her friend.

Arya merely scowled. “Any other ideas?”

“He has everything he wants,” Shireen said with a shrug, “You, the babe, Storm’s End, you, a name and a Lordship, and let me think, what else . . . hmmm, oh, that’s right . . . you.”

“You’re not helping.” Arya huffed, although she was flattered and ‘twas a struggle not to smile.

“He has everything he wants,” Shireen said simply as if ‘twas the end of the discussion.

Arya blew out a sigh. She hoped Sansa had better ideas. Thinking of her sister reminded Arya that she needed to leave. Afore she did, she should encourage her pupil, even if ‘twas a lucky strike.

“You are definitely improving Shireen. With another half dozen moons of practice you will be ready for a real dual.”

Shireen gave a ladylike sniff. “The babe in your belly will get in the way of your practice long afore then. Besides, it won’t be so easy to hide from Gendry when you’re back in Storm’s End and you’re the size of a barn door.”

Arya gave a most unladylike snort. “We managed to keep our practice secret in Storm’s End afore and I remember my mother carrying Rickon. She was nowhere near the size of a barn door. I doubt I will be either.”

“But Rickon’s father wasn’t the size of an Aurochs, was he?”

Arya groaned. Now Shireen put it like that . . . Gods help her, if this babe was like his father (and Arya hoped so) he would be huge, which meant she would be too. Arya groaned again and her hand dropped to caress her barely-there bump, imagining a Gendry sized baby in there and worse – trying to squeeze it out.

Shireen watched Arya’s discomfort with something akin to regret. When would she get to meet her niece or nephew? It could be years. Highgarden was in the opposite direction to Storm’s End and Aegon had not said how long he expected her to stay with the Tyrells. ‘Twas not as if she could just leave Highgarden when she wanted either. Ladies did not travel unaccompanied. She would have to wait until Gendry sent a wheelhouse for her and who knew when that would be? Mayhaps he wouldn’t want her back at all after he found out what Aegon had planned . . .

She was about to give up hope of seeing Arya’s babe at all, when an idea occurred. Mayhaps she could persuade Aegon to come and fetch her from Highgarden by dragon? That seemed very daring. There were few alive who had travelled by dragon and wouldn’t that be a story to tell her niece or nephew some day? Besides, Aegon would owe her a lot, after this. Feeling quite pleased with herself, Shireen resolved to obtain Aegon’s agreement, no matter how she had to get it. But first, she had to get Gendry to agree to allow her go to Highgarden in the first place and there was only one person who could get her bull-headed cousin to agree to anything. She turned to Arya.
“I was thinking of not going back to Storm’s End with you.”

“What?!” Arya sat bolt upright, a look of shocked horror on her face. “Why? You don’t like it here. . . do you?”

“Nae, ‘tis not that. I want a husband,” Shireen crossed her fingers behind her back, hoping that the Gods, Arya and Ty would all forgive her for lying, “and we both know I will not find one in Storm’s End.”

Arya chewed her lip as if she was weighing up whether to say something or not. Then she blurted out, “But what about Ty?!”

Shireen held up her hand, with the palm facing towards Arya. “We agreed not to speak of him.”

“But . . .”

“Nae.”

“But . . .”

“Nae Arya. I am decided. I want to go to Highgarden with Sansa.”

“What?!” Arya could not believe what she was hearing. Shireen wanted to go to Highgarden? Why? And with Sansa?! Since when had Sansa wanted to go to Highgarden? With Willas? That could only mean one thing and Arya did not believe her sister wanted to shackle herself to Willas bloody Tyrell.

“Close your mouth Arya. You look like you are trying to catch files.”

“But . . .” Arya spluttered.

Shireen held up that damn hand again. “I am decided. You will not persuade me otherwise. I only need you to get Gendry to agree.”

“What?!”

“Stop saying that Arya. You know perfectly well what I am asking.”

“But . . .”

“And stop saying that too. There is no ‘but’. I am decided. I am going to Highgarden with Sansa and that’s the end of it.”

Arya closed her mouth and scowled at her friend. Seven buggering hells, but Shireen could be just as bloody bull-headed as Gendry when she wanted to be. Arya also suspected that, behind her meek exterior, those Baratheon House words – Ours is the Fury - might very well hold true with Shireen too. Arya did not want to find out.

“Gendry won’t like it,” she muttered, “He doesn’t trust the Tyrells.”

“I know,” Shireen said smugly, “That’s why I need you to persuade him to let me go with Sansa.”

“But I want you to come back to Storm’s End.” Arya sounded whiney, even to her own ears.

Shireen heaved a sigh and looked at Arya as if she was about to have to explain something very simple to a particularly dim-witted child.
“There is nothing for me in Storm’s End. I will have to watch you and Gendry live in blissfully happiness while I have no-one.” Shireen tried to look lonely and miserable. She allowed her shoulders to slump for extra effect. “I have lived there all my life and I am sick of Storm’s End,” she crossed the fingers of her other hand behind her back too. ‘Twas such a terrible lie. She only hoped the Gods and Ser Davos would forgive her for it. “I want to go to Highgarden.”

Arya looked appalled, but swallowed hard and said softly, “If you are sure . . .”

“I am.” Shireen nodded vigorously. “Sansa will be glad of the company and we can chaperone each other.”

“Chaperone each other . . .” Arya repeated slowly.

“Remember and tell Gendry that.”

Arya shook her head as if bewildered, then reluctantly said, “I suppose.”

Shireen squealed and threw her arms around Arya’s neck. Hopefully Arya thought she was squealing with excitement, but ‘twas really with relief. The first piece of Aegon’s plan to save the woman he loved had fallen into place. Shireen was determined to help Aegon succeed with Sansa where his father had failed. What could be more important, or more romantic, than helping smooth the path of true love? Shireen could not help the triumphant grin that spread across her face as she hugged Arya tighter.

-o-

Chapter End Notes

Not as much ground covered this chapter as I had hoped, but I wanted to post what I had and not keep you hanging any longer. I also wanted to get a final sex scene in there. Hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

;)

In the next chapter, Arya will have similarly awkward encounters with Ty and Sansa, meanwhile Gendry is having is own problems with a certain lilac eyed, not-quite-as-arrogant-as-he-was King. THEN it’s the Godswood and the final climax to the story.

Please bear with me and I shall get back to you asap.

Finally, thanks to Brazilian Guy for his wise input to this and for his devotion to duty and the humanitarian cause. Kudos Ser.
What's love got to do with it?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the unacceptable delay since the last chapter. The reason is - I got a puppy. My (foolish) expectation was of sitting typing with a warm, sleepy puppy at my feet. The reality has been sleepless nights, endless poo bags full of toxic waste, utter exhaustion and not even a spare minute to spend writing. And I’m committed to 14 years of this?! What have I done . . . ?

So, heartfelt apologies. Blame the hound.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya mulled over the sudden change in Shireen after they parted. It wasn’t Shireen’s landing a lucky strike that irked her, nae that was the least of it. ‘Twas Shireen’s determination to go off on her own, to leave the Stormlands and Arya behind.

There were not many people Arya could call “friend” and few of them were women. She tried to count them off on her fingers and could not get beyond three. ‘Twas a miserable state of affairs and now two of them wanted to bugger off to Highgarden. A green eyed serpent stirred in Arya, woken by Shireen’s wanting to leave King’s Landing with Sansa. ‘Twas hardly fair. Arya was the one who needed Shireen most – with the babe coming. Surely Shireen could put off finding a husband until the summer? But even as Arya had that thought, she was ashamed. If she was any kind of friend at all, she would be happy to see Shireen off on her adventure to find a husband. A good friend would offer encouragement instead of feeling lonely and put-upon to grant favours.

Arya chewed her cheek as she pondered Shireen’s plea for help. Gendry wouldn’t like this Highgarden plan, ‘twas no doubt about that and ‘twas no wonder Shireen had begged for Arya’s assistance.

As he was head of her House, Shireen needed Gendry’s agreement. ‘Twas vital. If he would not give it, Shireen could not go. ‘Twas as black and white as that. The Tyrell’s would not accept Shireen if her visit did not have the blessing of her own House and if she ran away, what of the dowry Gendry had promised her? He might pay lip service to wanting a love match for Shireen, but what Gendry really wanted was strong Ser or Lord to hold Dragonstone for him. He certainly would not want Shireen running off to Highgarden to wed some fancy knight from the Reach and, selfishly, Arya felt the same. Why couldn’t Shireen just come to some understanding with Ty and they could all go home to Storm’s End?

With a sigh, Arya stuffed her hands in her pockets. A friend had asked for help so Arya felt obliged to use her influence to persuade Gendry - whether Arya herself liked Shireen’s plan or not. Arya aimed a resentful kick at the wall.

Mayhaps the stinging pain in her foot was the reason she failed to notice Ty until he sprang out in front of her.

“Seven Buggering Hells!” she yelped as Ty appeared as if by a mummer’s trick. Being caught unawares twice in the one morning had Arya thinking this wedding had addled her brain already. Or mayhaps ‘twas the babe.
“I’m with child you fool. You can’t give pregnant women shocks like that!”

Arya said it intending to make Ty feel suitably guilty for surprising her. Instead of an apology, all she got was a scowl.

“You should be more vigilant given you are carrying the heir to Storm’s End in your belly – not less.”

Arya huffed bad temperedly, annoyed because Ty was right. She looked him up and down. He had changed. He had lain in that bloody wheelhouse all the way from Storm’s End to King’s Landing and Arya had not stood toe to toe with him in all that time. She was surprised to find he was taller than she was. Not only that, he had filled out. The double rations Gendry had insisted Ty receive had obviously had the desired effect; he was no longer a scrawny, half starved stable lad. Ty was now long and lean and fighting fit. The sword on his hip was worn with a confident swagger that only came with the ability to use it well.

Sharp green eyes watched her watch him, sparkling with amusement that only irritated Arya more.

“What have you been up to?” she demanded, deciding a change of subject was best. “Skulking around following people for days - thinking they don’t see you.”

Ty folded his arms across his chest and smirked, “Well you never noticed me just now, did you?”

Arya harrumphed, “I saw you every other day. Today I am . . . distracted.”

When Ty showed no inclination to ask why she was distracted, Arya snapped, “Are you going to tell me what you’ve been up to or not?” She had too much to do today to play Ty’s silly games.

“I’ve been hiding of course, what else would I be doing?” Ty said, looking at her as if she had two heads.

Did Arya not know he had killed a man? Of course she knew! That big, orange haired Captain of Lady Sansa’s guard would have told his mistress, if he hadn’t gone running straight to Lord Baratheon first. Either way, Arya would know.

With a start, Ty realised Arya did not care. After all, how many men had she killed during her time in Bravos? He would bet his sword she couldn’t even count the number, much less remember the faces.

Relieved his being a murderer didn’t seem to bother Arya, Ty ignored the question she had asked him and blurted out his own - the question he had been desperate to ask since he overheard Shireen’s whispered conversation with the Targaryen King.

“Why does Aegon want Shireen to go to Highgarden?”

Arya fisted her hands on her hips and frowned at him. “What?”

Had the babe addled Arya’s brain? Ty took a calming breath and repeated his question, only more slowly this time, “Why . . . does . . . Aegon . . . want . . . Shireen . . . to . . . go . . . to . . .”

“Alright, I heard you.”

Arya ran a hand thorough her messier-than-usual hair, having no idea what to make of Ty’s news. First Shireen kissed that arrogant Targaryen arse and now she was going to Highgarden at his request?
“Well?” Ty demanded, his desperate need to know making him rude and impatient.

“I know she wants to go to Highgarden, but I had no idea it had anything to do with that horse’s arse.” Arya shook her head in disbelief and despair at Shireen’s gullibility.

The two of them stared at each other, equally perplexed, afore the realisation hit Ty, “Shireen has already told you she wants to go to Highgarden?”

“Yes.”

“What reason did she give?”

Arya shifted her gaze from Ty to beyond the pillars. Shireen had claimed she wanted a husband. Arya did not want to admit that to Ty, particularly now she wasn’t even sure ‘twas true. Hearing that would break his foolish, gallant heart.

So Arya took the coward’s route and lied, “I don’t know.”

As lies went, it wasn’t much of one – Arya certainly didn’t know why Shireen was doing Aegon’s bidding. Kissing him was bad enough. Arya’s stomach roiled at the very thought of it, but traipsing off to the other side of Westeros at his command was even worse. Surely, surely, Shireen could not think herself in love with that odious snake in the grass? Arya did not want to believe it.

Even if Shireen did imagine herself in love, why would she want to leave King’s Landing? With Jon and Daenerys gone, Aegon could not go to Highgarden – he needed to stay and sit on the Iron Throne. It all made no sense. ‘Twas bad enough Sansa wanted to go to Highgarden, never mind Shireen. Arya’s head began to ache with thinking about it and from lying to Ty.

When Arya finally turned back to Ty, she realised he was watching her with cold, accusing green eyes. “You know more than you’re saying.”

Unable to lie whilst meeting his gaze, All Arya could do was shrug.

Uncrossing his arms, Ty took a step forwards, his jaw and his fists clenching and unclenching with barely controlled frustration.

“Tell me what you know.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Gods be good!” Ty ground out from behind clenched teeth, “I thought I could trust a Stark! I thought I could trust you of all people!”

A feeling of wretchedness engulfed Arya. Turning away from Ty, she braced her arms on the stone window ledge and gazed blindly out across the courtyard. He was right of course. He deserved to hear the truth, ‘twas only a pity it had to come from her.

Arya felt, rather than saw him move, heard the familiar creak of metal in leather as Ty’s hand gripped the pommel of his sword. There was no avoiding telling him now.

“Have you heard what happened in the library a few nights past?”

“Nae. I have spoken to no one.”

Arya took a deep breath. She had to close her eyes as she told it, unable to see the pain she knew would be etched on his face.
“Gendry and I . . . we walked in on Aegon and Shireen. They were . . .”

“Fuck!” Ty swore, crashing his fist into the stone sill.

“They were kissing Ty, only kissing!”

She heard his sharp intake of breath, but when he spoke, instead of the angry ranting she expected, his voice was icily cold and calm – scarily so. In that moment, Arya knew Ty was a boy no longer. No mere boy could have marshalled his emotions so quickly, nor sounded as deadly. “How do you know they did not do . . . more afore you discovered them?”

“I am sure they had not . . .” Arya struggled to explain what she had witnessed. They had not been fully clothed, as Shireen was only in her night shift and Aegon wore only a Brother’s robe. Still, Shireen did not have the look of a woman freshly fucked. Arya had seen that look reflected in her mirror often enough to recognise it when she saw it. Shireen had not looked like that.

“I am sure they only kissed,” Arya said finally.

“He has ruined her reputation!” Ty crashed his fist into the stone again and Arya winced for him. That had to hurt, but Ty gave no indication of feeling the impact at all.

“Her chances of securing an advantageous marriage are in tatters! And all because of that fucking Targaryen cunt.”

Arya winced. Trust Ty to take such an honourable, chivalrous and ultimately naive view of it all. In other circumstances, Arya might have suggested knowing the King wanted Shireen might actually have made her more desirable, but Ty was not likely to appreciate that line of reasoning, given that he had already declared his intention to wed Shireen as soon as he had the means.

“He must wed her! ‘Tis the only way to salvage her reputation.”

Aegon wed Shireen? Arya could scare believe what she was hearing. “But I thought you were in love with her?”

Ty’s face was an expressionless mask when he replied, “What has love got to do with it? We speak of duty and honour here.”

Arya groaned again. “Aegon will never wed Shireen. He . . .”

Ty never let her finish, crying out, “He must wed her!” with all the passion and conviction of a battle cry. “Aegon Targaryen may be a King, but he is a despoiler of innocence and reputation. He shall not dishonour Lady Shireen and her House by refusing to wed her. So he is a King, but she is a Lady of one of the greatest Houses of Westeros and worth ten o’ him! We must do all that we can to save her from his lechery!”

“We?! You are too hasty . . .” but before Arya had the chance to reason with Ty, or stop him, he was off and running, ignoring her pleas to stop, to come back, to listen.

Arya groaned and rubbed her hands over her face. Could this day get any worse? ‘Twas supposed to be the happiest day of her life. Her wedding day.

She had already agreed to help Shireen, which now seemed to mean lying to Gendry and now Ty was ready to commit some kind of foolish treason in the name of chivalry. And she still had to find a present for Gendry.
Arya could chase after Ty, but she had neither the time nor the inclination to try to puzzle out what in the seven hells was going on with Shireen and Aegon. The only thing she was certain of was that there was more to this than Ty thought.

As she set off again, Arya could only hope that, as oft times afore, Sansa would have the solution to her problems . . .

-o-

The door to Sansa’s chambers was open. Maids with armfuls of dresses and men from Sansa’s Winter guard carrying travelling trunks formed two lines – in and out. It seemed Shireen was right – Sansa was leaving for Highgarden.

Servants and soldiers all made way for Lady Arya Stark. She should have been used to their deference by now, but Arya doubted she would ever get used to such bowing and scraping.

The removal seemed to be progressing at some speed and Sansa stood in the midst of it all. She was surrounded by clothes that covered every available surface and by half filled chests. Arya noticed her sister’s sewing basket on the table, but the gilded wooden box that usually sat there – the one with Sansa’s moon tea and milk of the poppy was gone. With dismay Arya realised her sister had probably packed her most treasured possessions first.

Arya sat down on the nearest chair and rested her heels on the table.

“So ’tis true? You are off to Highgarden?”

Only then did Sansa notice her younger sister and immediately frowned. Flouncing over, she shoved Arya sideways with one hand and with the other, dragged a piece of embroidered cloth from underneath Arya.

“You sat on my embroidery. And get your filthy boots off my table.”

“They’re hardly filthy,” Arya grumbled, as she let her legs drop. Sansa ignored her, folding the embroidered cloth carefully afore slipping it into the pocket of her dress. ’Twas obviously an important piece and Arya wished she had paid more attention afore sitting upon it.

Sansa continued packing while Arya watched a procession of guards carry away the potted garden that had filled the front of the window.

“So Willas has finally persuaded you to visit Highgarden?”

“Something like that,” Sansa muttered afore turning to Arya and asking briskly, “What are you doing here anyway? Shouldn’t you be getting ready?”

“I’m all organised,” Arya lied. “But I need your help with one thing.”

Sansa looked her sister up and down, carefully considering Arya’s messy hair, dusty britches and boots. ’Twas obvious Sansa thought her sister needed plenty of help afore she made her appearance in the Godswood.

Crossing her arms and tapping her foot impatiently Sansa huffed, “Alright. Tell me about this one
thing.”

“I need to buy Gendry a present.”

Sansa rolled her eyes and resumed her packing without saying a word.

Annoyed at not being taken seriously, Arya jumped to her feet. “He has a present for me and I need to get one for him. I haven’t an idea and I haven’t any time, but I want to buy him something good.”

Sansa did not look up from pairing silk stockings together. “Just because he has a gift for you does not mean you have to buy him anything.”

“But he has a present for me.”

Sansa laid down the last pair of stockings and gave an exasperated sigh. “I am sure you can think of something that does not involve paying in gold.”

Arya looked at her sister blankly.

“Surely you can think of something.”


Sansa arched one eyebrow and pursed her lips together. Surely Arya could not be that naive - could she? She had lived in Bravos after all. The Braavosi were notorious for being much more opened minded than Northerners.

When Arya’s only answer was to shrug helplessly, Sansa raised her eyes skywards and muttered, “Gods be good.”

“Can you help me or not?” Arya asked, failing to see why her sister did not just come out and say what she meant.

“Sexual favours Arya. Use your imagination.”

Arya felt heat rise up her face. “Oh.”

As Sansa set about filling another chest with clothing, Arya thought about everything she had done with Gendry. Remembering the way she had ridden him and teased him that very morning brought a contented smile to her face. Yes, she supposed Sansa was right; Gendry would appreciate a ‘sexual favour’ as Sansa put it, more than another piece of armour he could probably make better himself anyway.

The more Arya thought about it, the better Sansa’s idea seemed. Now all she had to do was plan how to give herself to him.

“How do you have any ideas?”

Sansa was relieved she had her back turned to Arya when she asked the question, for Sansa had to close her eyes lest they betray her shame. What kind of question was that to ask a courtesan? Did Arya not realise that’s what her sister had become?

Instead of answering Arya’s question, Sansa forced herself to smile sweetly as she replied, “I would not worry so much about Gendry buying you a present Arya. Lords like to treat their Ladies.” Sansa looked pointedly at the procession of plants being carried out the door.
Arya followed her gaze and frowned. Was Sansa implying that she was Willas’ Lady now?

“I thought you hated him.”

“I never said that.” Sansa snapped.

“Well you never said you loved him either,” Arya shot right back.

Sansa threw back her head and laughed. ‘Twas a brittle, hollow sound that set Arya’s teeth on edge.

Sansa stopped laughing as suddenly as she had started. “What has love got to do with anything?”

“Everything.” Arya hissed through gritted teeth. “Spring is here, the crops are planted and soon King’s Landing will have no more need of the Tyrell’s grudged charity. Why have you decided to go to Highgarden now?”

With two quick steps Sansa closed the distance between them. With one hand on the table and the other on the back of the chair, Sansa leaned over her sister until their faces were only inches apart.

Arya had never seen her sister like this afore – eyes narrowed and cold, her mouth a hard, tight line.

“I go to Highgarden because . . . I . . . have . . . nowhere . . . else . . . to . . . go.”

Arya was so shocked by Sansa’s uncharacteristic outburst that for a moment she could not speak,

Giving her sister a final hard stare, Sansa pushed herself up and turned away to continue packing as if nothing had happened, as if nothing was wrong – as if she had not just said she would continue to give herself to a man she did not love.

Arya’s heart was thumping in her chest, her throat tight and dry. How could she have been so selfish, so blind to her sister’s predicament? “You . . . we . . . will always have Winterfell.”

Without turning around, Sansa slowly shook her head. “The North holds too many memories for me now. Awful memories. Besides, I would only be thorn in Meera Reid’s side.”

“How so?” Arya gasped. How could Sansa think that? A Stark would always be welcome at Winterfell.

“How naive you are,” Sansa scoffed with another hollow laugh. “Bran and Meera can have no heirs. If I go to Winterfell, I will be courted mercilessly by every Northern Lord who thinks he can claim Winterfell through me.”

“But Rickon is Bran’s heir . . .”

Sansa whirled around to confront her sister, sneering. “How can you of all people be so bloody ignorant?! ‘Accidents’ happen all the time. Do you not know what men will do for lands and power? They will do anything. Men have used me to try to claim Winterfell afore and I will not let that happen again!”

Seeing that her tirade had stunned her sister, Sansa gave a sad half smile and, with a softer tone, sighed, “Nae Arya, Winterfell is no longer for me.”

“Then come with us to Storm’s End,” Arya blurted, desperate to find some cure for her sister’s pain.

“And do what? Sit and grow old and bitter watching you and Gendry enjoy everything I do not have? Nae sister. My jealousy would sour our friendship afore the first winter came.”
Arya was once again rendered speechless. Sansa was jealous of her? All her life Arya had never been as accomplished or as beautiful or as loved as her older sister and yet Sansa was the one who was jealous.

Sansa paced around the room, stopping to hold a particularly striking piece of jewellery up to the light afore setting it down and moving on. Arya could only watch while she tried to think of something to say, some way to help.

“And afore you suggest it Arya, I cannot stay here.” Sansa could not look at her sister as she lied about the reason, “ Watching the bond between Jon and Daenerys’ strengthen with every day that passes is a perverse form of torture that I can no longer endure.”

In truth, Sansa was nothing but glad for Jon and her good-sister. She was not about to reveal the really reason for her inability to stay one more day than necessary in the Red Keep. She had to leave as she could not bear to see Aegon Targaryen ever again. Every time she saw him, or heard mention of his name, she was only reminded of what she thought she had and of what she had lost.

Arya opened her mouth to protest, but Sansa silenced her with a sad smile and a slow shake of her head.

“You know I am not like you Arya. I am not a wolf. I am just a little bird who needs to feather my nest.”

Picking up a necklace with a sparking stone the size of a duck egg on a thick golden chain, Sansa slipped it over her head.

“Another gift from Willas. You see – he takes care of me.”

Contemplating the jewel nestled between her breasts, Sansa gave another wistful smile afore looking up to meet Arya’s gaze.

“You asked what gift you could give to Gendry.”

Arya nodded, her heart aching for her sister. Even through her own pain, Sansa was thinking of others.

“The answer is – nothing. He already has everything he ever wanted.”

Although Sansa smiled, her smile did not reach her eyes. Those beautiful blue Tully eyes that reminded Arya so much of their mother’s, shone with unshed tears.

“Gendry has his name, he has Storm’s End and most of all, he has you and the babe you carry.”

Sansa reached for her sister’s hand.

In that moment, holding her sister tight, Arya thought her heart might break apart. How was it possible that she could be so happy while Sansa was so sad?

Seldom in her life had Arya felt so helpless.

-O-
Once again, I’m sorry for the short length of this chapter. The final scene before the wedding - Gendry in Tobho’s forge (featuring Arya’s present and a visit from a certain Targaryen) was supposed to be here, but it ain’t written yet. However, I hope a short chapter was better than nothing.

Puppy allowing, I’ll post Tobho’s forge scene next weekend. Until then – thank you once again for taking the time to read this and for your patience.
“Is it ready?”

Gendry held the long, narrow blade up to the light. It rested across his open palms as if ‘twere an offering to the Gods. Slowly but surely the former ‘prentice smith tilted the steel this way and that, looking for ripples on the surface or any other sign that the blade was not true.

Eventually a satisfied grin spread across his face. “‘Tis ready.”

When the old man on the stretcher managed to speak, his words came in a breathless rasp, “I told you the secret to Braavosi steel was all in the quenching.”

Gendry nodded, setting the blade down beside the curved guard and grip he had fashioned earlier. All that remained was to assemble the sword and Arya’s wedding gift would be complete.

On what should have been the happiest day of his life, Gendry’s heart was heavy. He crouched down and placed his hand over the dying man’s. Gendry had to force himself not to flinch as he touched Tobho’s paper thin skin and bone. Once those hands had been bigger and stronger than his and Gendry had watched with awe and fascination as they skilfully forged wonders from plain iron and steel. Soon he would see these hands no more.

Masking his sorrow by fixing a smile to his face, Gendry squeezed the old man’s bird-like hand as firmly as he dared. “We should make a Falchion next.”

Tobho snorted in disgust and that started him coughing. His whole body heaved and convulsed as he fought for every breath. Red foam oozed from the side of his mouth and dripped down his chin. Anguy mopped it up when the old man’s wracking cough eased enough to allow it.

When the coughing fit finally ended, Tobho lay still with his eyes closed. He was so frail, his skin so waxy that only the shallow rise and fall of his chest confirmed there was life left in him yet.

Anguy and Gendry exchanged worried glances. The end would not be long now.

Clearing his throat, Gendry continued from where he had left off, “So, a Falchion. I have a fine bit ‘o steel we could . . .”

“Nae.” Tobho rasped, causing Gendry to pause mid sentence.

The old man’s eyes opened slowly, fixing Gendry with a watery stare. “I sold one once to that Bolton bastard. After what he did with it I could never bring myself to make another. Not a Falchion.”

“Mayhaps a fine longsword then.”

Tobho nodded as his eyes slid shut.

They both knew he would not live to see another sword forged, but neither man was willing to admit it.

“You should see the forge I have in Storm’s End,” Gendry said wistfully. “I have the sweetest anvil
that sends the hammer rebounding right back at you. You can work it all day and your arm will still feel as fresh as a spring morn’.”

“I’d like to see that,” Tobho mumbled drowsily.

‘Twas a good dream. Much as he wanted to, Gendry had never managed to devote a whole day to smithing at Storm’s End. There were always far too many other things demanding Lord Baratheon’s attention. But Tobho didn’t need to know that. Not today.

“You’ll like it there.”

Squeezing Tobho’s hand again, Gendry tried to banish an image of Tobho’s remains sitting in a box on a shelf in the smithy in Storm’s End. But he knew that was the only way Tobho would travel to the Stormlands now.

The former master and apprentice sat together like that; Tobho lying on a stretcher, Gendry holding his hand while Anguy looked on awkwardly. The only sound in the once bustling forge was the laboured sound of Tobho’s breathing.

“You’d best get that sword put together or you’ll be late for your own wedding.” Anguy said eventually.

Gendry reluctantly let go of his old mentor’s hand and stood up, rolling his shoulders and flexing his knees. They were stiff after squatting beside Tobho for so long.

“Are the boys ready to carry him?”

Anguy looked at Tobho, wondering if the old man was asleep or if he could hear their conversation. Deciding not to take the risk, he stood up and joined Gendry at the side of the forge, whispering “Are you sure we should move him?”

Gendry shrugged and looked over at Tobho. “Better to go in the Godswood than alone here.”

Anguy followed Gendry’s gaze. “Widow Mott will be coming with us to Storm’s End won’t she?”

“She’s not a widow yet,” Gendry said tersely, “But Aye. She wants to help when the babe comes.”

The two men stood in silence, each lost in their own contemplation of impending birth and death. Both looked up sharply at the sound of someone clearing his throat.

Aegon Targaryen, still dressed in a Brother’s robe stood at the entrance to Tobho’s shop. His silver hair glinted like polished steel in the sunlight.

“I hope I’m not interrupting, but I wanted to speak with you afore the day gets hectic.”

King or no, Aegon was the last person Gendry wanted to see. “You are interrupting. I have a wedding gift for my wife that I need to finish.” Without waiting for a response, Gendry turned his back on the King and began assembling Arya’s sword.

Anguy was not sure what amounted to treason, but he suspected turning your back on a King and ignoring him when he wanted to talk to you, was probably pretty close. Wishing he were invisible, the archer promptly sat back down beside Tobho and busied himself wiping the bloody foam oozing from the sides of the old man’s mouth. Having survived the war, Anguy had no desire to have his neck stretched as a traitor. He prayed silently to the Seven that the Dragon King did not recognise his face nor remember his name and would forget he was ever in Tobho’s forge this day.
Gendry had no such fears. He started hammering the curved guard onto the sword grip, ignoring Aegon all the while. The King stood silently in the doorway watching Gendry smith and Anguy studiously avoided meeting those shrewd purple eyes.

After a while and accompanied by the sounds of Gendry’s hammer, Aegon slowly paced around the forge, casting his eyes over the empty shelves and tools already beginning to rust through lack of use. He waited patiently until Gendry had completed assembling the hilt. Only when Gendry laid down his hammer, did the King speak,

“I’ve come to ask your forgiveness.”

Gendry grunted, but otherwise continued to ignore his King. If he hoped Aegon would simply leave, he was to be disappointed. The King picked up the discarded hammer, contemplatively testing its weight in his hand while he waited for a reply.

Having Aegon standing watching him irritated Gendry so much that he could barely concentrate on what he needed to do. ‘Twould be better to get whatever the Targaryen horse’s arse wanted out of the way so he could get back to finishing Arya’s sword.

“Alright. Apology accepted.”

Aegon gave him one of those smug, arrogant grins that Gendry hated so much. Gods but there was no other man who annoyed him so thoroughly.

“Don’t think I’m apologising to you though,” Gendry gritted out between clenched teeth. “You deserved all you got.” He held his hand out for his hammer.

“I agree.” Aegon’s grin grew even wider as he looked from Gendry’s hand to at the hammer and back.

Seven buggering hells! Did the man have a death wish?! If Aegon didn’t hand his hammer over, Gendry would wrench if from the King’s lifeless hand. Treason be damned!

Just as Gendry was about to make a grab for it, Aegon flipped the hammer deftly and offered it back handle first.

With a growl, Gendry snatched it from the King’s grip.

“You’re welcome,” Aegon smirked as Gendry glowered.

When Aegon still stood there, apparently with no intention of leaving, Gendry growled, “You’ve apologized. I’ve accepted. So are you just going to stand there all day?”

“Nae.” Aegon said solemnly, shaking his head. “I regret I cannot, for I have a wedding in the Godswood I need to attend shortly.”

That damned irritating grin was back on his face. ‘Twas all Gendry could do not to smash his hammer into those gleaming white teeth.

“You should leave then. Now.”

Aegon chuckled, looking down at the brown-and-dun robe he had not removed since leaving the Quiet Isle. “I find that since adopting this Brother’s habit, I have much more time on my hands. I no longer have to worry about co-ordinating my tunics with my britches, my britches with my boots, not to mention my sword scabbard and my dagger and my rings and things . . . like necklaces . . . best
just say all jewellery . . . and as I forsworn the wearing of capes too, I have so much more time for important things – like you Lord Baratheon.”

Gendry ground his teeth frustration. Why would the damned Targaryen not just FUCK OFF and leave him to get on with finishing Arya’s present?


Aegon folded his arms across his chest and crossed his ankles. Leaning against the cold forge he looked as if he had all the time and not a care in the world.

“Your help,” he said simply.


Aegon pouted. “You don’t even know what help I want yet.”

“It doesn’t matter. The answer will always be – nae. A thousand times nae.”

Gendry raised his hammer and began pounding the barrel that would fix the blade into the already assembled sword hilt – wishing with all his might ‘twas Aegon’s face he was pounding rather than Braavosi steel.

“Even if my request for help was a pressing matter that involved your Lady Arya?”

Gendry’s hammer stopped mid air. He considered swinging it sideways and savoured the satisfying mental image of Aegon’s head exploding beneath the hammer like a ripe watermelon.

Tempting though that course of action was, Aegon had mentioned Arya’s name and they both knew Gendry was unable to ignore anything that involved his beloved.

With a defeated sigh, Gendry laid his hammer down. “This had better be important.”

“Would I bother Lord Baratheon for anything that wasn’t?” Aegon said, looking offended.

“So get on with it. I don’t have all day . . .”

“Neither do I. As I mentioned earlier, I have a wedding to attend.”

Gendry’s snarl was sufficient to start Aegon talking. “Do you remember the conversation we had at my father’s graveside?”

How could Gendry ever forget it? “Aye.”

“Well my feelings for Lady Sansa have not changed, if anything they are grown stronger. ‘Tis your good-sister I am here to discuss . . .”

-o-

“I cannot believe you are not ready for your own wedding,” Sansa sniffed, swiping her tears away with the back of her hand. “When I have gone to all this trouble and made all the arrangements. Do you at least have a dress to wear?”
Arya felt she should be saying something meaningful, something helpful which would solve all of her sister’s problems, but she could think of nothing. So, with her sister in tears and with no idea what else to say, Arya found herself talking about something as inconsequential as a dress. “I brought one with me from Storm’s End but it is . . . lost.”

“Lost?” Sansa repeated incredulously.

“Aye,” Arya muttered, looking around Sansa’s room which was strewn with dresses. Any one of them would do, providing it had laces that could be loosened.

“You are getting wed and your dress is lost?!” Sansa’s hands were fisted on her hips, her toe tappin, and her tears apparently forgotten. “Tis your wedding day today Arya.”

“I know.” Arya’s wandering gaze came to rest on a slash of red silk peeking out from under a pile of lace and fur. If that was what Arya thought it was – her problem was solved.

“How can you be so disorganised, so unprepared? Do you not realise this is the most important day of your life? You have a responsibility not only to your House, but to your betrothed and his House and Jon too, what would he think of your . . .”

Arya chose to ignore the rest of Sansa’s scolding. Instead of listening, she stalked over to the open chest, intent on retrieving her treasure. The rest of the clothes were dumped unceremoniously on the floor as she revealed her prize.

“Perfect!”

’Twas the dress she had worn when Gendry had kissed her for the first time – after she had slapped him in front of everyone. She could not help but smile at the memory. “The damned red dress” he had called it. Hadn’t both Sansa and Shireen said Gendry wanted no gift other than his wife? Well, his wedding present would be wrapped up in that damned red dress and he could unwrap it tonight.

Sansa standing at her shoulder jolted Arya out of her happy reverie.

“Have you been listening to a word I’ve said?”

Holding up her prize, Arya clutched it to her chest and twirled around, the way Sansa used to with their mother’s dresses when they were children, “This dress will do.”

“But Gendry has seen you in it afore.”

“Exactly!”

“But ‘tis red.”

“So?” Arya asked, twirling around some more.

“So . . . I think you should tell me how you managed to lose your own dress.”

The way Sansa looked at her through suspicious narrowed eyes, made Arya stop mid twirl. She knew she was going to have to confess.

“You never even had a dress did you?” Sansa said accusingly.

“I did have a dress!” Arya was indignant. “Even I am not that disorganised. But I tried it on yesterday and I ripped a seam.”
“‘Tis all? I have my sewing basket right here. We shall have it mended in no time.”

“Wait,” Arya’s hand shot forwards, stopping Sansa from picking up the basket. Sansa gave her a questioning look and Arya groaned. ‘Twas nothing else for it – she would have to tell the truth.

“Shireen had a dress made for me in Storm’s End . . .”

Sansa snorted, “I might have known you had nothing to do with it.”

There was no point in Arya pretending ‘twas otherwise – her sister knew her too well.

“‘Twas a beautiful dress – blue like the sky and . . . and Gendry’s eyes.” Arya felt herself blush as she admitted to having such a silly notion, but ‘twas true – she had chosen the silk as ‘twas the very same shade of blue as her lover’s eyes. Sansa seemed oblivious to Arya’s embarrassment; indeed she seemed to appreciate the romance of the comparison, for she gave her sister a broad smile.

“Anyway, ‘twas quite fitted across here,” Arya ran a hand across her belly. “In Storm’s End the silk flowed over my hip bones, but when I tried it on here . . . well I am so fat I ripped it.”

“You’re not fat, you’re pregnant!”

“I never even got the dress up to my waist and it ripped – not that I have much of a waist anymore. I’m going to look awful. Like a fat old Septa.”

“Oh little sister,” Sansa said softly, taking both of Arya’s hands in hers, “Do you not know that Gendry would like nothing more than for everyone in Westeros to see his babe growing in your belly?”

Arya had not thought on it like that, but she supposed Sansa was right. Gendry seemed to want her more than ever. He certainly couldn’t keep his hands off her pregnant belly or her growing breasts.

“He loves you so much – everyone in Westeros can see that. Dear sister, you need never fear that you are only a trophy to him, that he only wants to wed you for your name and the connection you bring to your House.”

Sansa sounded so sad and so wistful, that Arya was sure her sister was thinking on another Lord who was only interested in a wife as a decorative prize. Gendry was certainly not of that mind. Hadn’t he readily agreed to their being equal in all things? Arya could hardly remember why she had been so reluctant to wed him.

“I suppose you are right.” Arya conceded

Sansa looked at her sternly. “You know I am right and do not ever doubt Gendry’s love for you. That man loves you more than . . .”

“More than I deserve.” Arya interrupted glumly. For ‘twas true – she could spend a lifetime trying to pay Gendry back for his patience, his perseverance and his forgiving of her past - and still ‘twould never be enough.

“That is not what I was going to say.”

“I know,” Arya sighed. “I love him too you know. It’s just . . . I am not very good at showing it.”

Sansa squeezed her sister’s hands and a twinkle sparkled in her eye. “Then show him tonight.”

Arya looked at the red dress and remembered how wonderful, how alive and how desired Gendry
had made her feel the first time she had worn it. She hoped that seeing her in it again, even if she was fat, would stir the same memories for him. ‘Twas ideal. Why had she not thought of this red dress afore?

“After what you said – about him having everything he wanted, I had thought . . .” Arya felt herself flush scarlet as she admitted her plan to her sister, “I had thought I could be his present . . . seeing as I haven’t got him anything else.”

Arya would not have been surprised if Sansa had laughed at her, after all, before Gendry had returned to her, Arya had never consider anyone would want her, much less as their wedding present.

But instead of laughing, Sansa’s face shone with approval and love. “We had better hurry sister if we are to get Gendry’s wedding present ready in time.”

-0-

Chapter End Notes

I hadn’t intended to bring it back – but LME on AO3 has told me so many times how much he appreciated Arya in her “damned red dress” that I had to let her wear it again. So Leon – that was for you.

I had to go back and read chapter 6 again – as it’s been a loooong time since I wrote it – and I still liked it. A lot. Arya has come a long way since then too. It was nice to go back and revisit the sexual tension A&G had in the beginning. However, if there’s one thing I have to improve on - it’s brevity. It really shouldn’t have taken me 300,000 words (eek!) to get from there to here. I can only thank you all for your patience over all those months.

I also have to thank Brazilian Guy as that forge scene was originally going to be quite different until he pointed me in a different (better) direction. This story owes so much to him as do I. He made writing those 300,000 words fun and I’m so gonna miss him when it’s done.

So, we’re all set up for the big climax. Although I’ve known since the beginning how it would end, there’s a lot still to do. I would like to post it all at once or maybe over 2 days instead of drawing it out over several small chapters as I’ve done recently. But I just hate to keep you all hanging for so long. We’ll see.

Please be assured I want to see then end even more than you do. Believe it when I say I will be back asap.

PS – for all those who asked, my puppy is a German Shepherd x Golden Retriever cross. He is supper cute, supper smart and a super pooper. A big dog like he’s going to be needed a big name. So he’s Hudson – or Hud for short. The name was inspired by the Paul Newman (swoon) movie of the same name. The kids approved – as they loved the “Hudson Hornet” (Paul Newman again – swoon again) in the movie “Cars” and it even ticked a box with BG who enlightened me about “Hudson soft”. Happy days.
Well, ‘tis that time of year again. Tonight Season 6 begins and we boldly go beyond the books. Is Jon Snow dead? Well, he ain’t in this story!

My excuse for the delay is my puppy. Who knew it was like having another baby? Not me. WHAT a lot of work and I’ve simply had no time for writing.

This is regrettably a shortie chapter, but it’s got me back writing again and hopefully something is better than nothing. I wanted to post something today of all days as we once again celebrate GRRM’s genius.

The Gods were being good to Gendry this day. Blossom bobbed on branches above his head, dancing with the Easter wind bearing its sharp tang of salt from Blackwater Bay. The smell of the sea reminded Gendry of home and he turned his face into the breeze, inhaling the scent as a dog might, wistfully wishing he was in Storm’s End. Had the direction of the wind been reversed, the air would have been thick with shit, smoke, sweat and submission – the King’s Landing stink he had been born to. It seemed a lifetime ago. ‘Twas a lifetime ago.

In years past his ambition extended only to having a full belly at the end of the day, Never had he imagined he would rise so high or fly so free. ‘Twas hard, standing in the Godswood awaiting his bride, not to believe the Gods must have had a hand in his fate. Watching the leaves of the Hart Tree afore him sparkle and shine as they danced, Gendry could not help but reflect on his good fortune and the chain of events that had led him here; being apprenticed to Tobbo, meeting Arya and the start of their long journey together, Brienne revealing the circumstances of his birth, Jon fanning the flames of his ambition and ultimately rewarding him so magnificently for his service with the title of Lord Baratheon.

If the Gods were good, Gendry’s life from this day forth would include no more than Arya and the children they would make together, Storm’s End, his House and his people. If the Gods were good he would never again wield his hammer in anger. Gendry wanted, nae he needed, to create rather than destroy. He could not wait to put the war and King’s Landing behind him. One more day, two at most and he could leave here and never look back. Soon, but not yet. First he had to prove to Westeros that Arya Stark was his.

Gendry glowed with pride when he thought of his babe growing in her belly and the promises they had made to each other. That should be enough, ‘twas enough for him, but he was Lord Baratheon and Arya was a Lady, whether she liked it or not. A marriage between two of the greatest Houses of Westeros was never only about a man and a woman. Ravens would carry the news far and wide and by tomorrow all of Westeros would know Arya Stark was his.

His dream had come true – a dream he would never have dared to dream as a bastard boy in Flea Bottom. With a satisfied smile, Gendry turned his face away from the salty breeze and his thoughts back to the present.

The transformation wrought to the Godswood since Gendry had last been in King’s Landing was remarkable. For years it had been overgrown, sombre and forlorn, neglected by a succession of
Kings who had courted the Seven while turning their backs on the Old Gods and their ways. Jon Targaryen’s ascent to the Iron Throne had changed all that. While Jon might be the reason for the change, ’twas Willas Tyrell and the gardeners he brought with him from Highgarden who deserved the credit for it.

The fallen branches and matted smokeberry vines that had choked the floor of the Godswood were gone and in their stead grew a carpet of fresh green grass, dotted with delicate wildflowers basking in the sunlight denied them for so long. Birds sang and delicate pink and white blossom stirred softly in the breeze. ’Twas an oasis of calm and natural beauty amidst the stinking cess pit of King’s Landing. Gendry thought mayhaps he should ask Willas if some of his gardeners might be willing to come to Storm’s End. Bran’s wedding gift of a new Heart Tree for the Godswood there was bothering Gendry. While he was humbled by such a gift, he was also terrified by the responsibility of it. Would a new tree grow on the scorched earth where the ancient Heart Tree had been burnt to the ground? Gendry had no idea and the thought that he might inadvertently kill House Stark’s gift brought an unfamiliar tightness to his chest. He made a mental note to speak to Willas about taking some of Highgarden’s experts to Storm’s End. Gendry suspected the Tyrells would be willing. The Gods knew they were always scheming and would expect something in return, but then again, mayhaps not. After all, they were already getting Sansa Stark.

Gendry turned his attention to Willas, looking as smug as the cat that got the cream, no doubt because Sansa would be standing beside him in a few moments time. Now wasn’t that a strange turn of events? Gendry suspected, nae he knew, there had to be more to Sansa’s sudden wish to visit Highgarden than Aegon had disclosed.

In the forge Aegon had sought Gendry’s approval for Sansa’s visit. Aegon had claimed that Jon, as her brother, should have been asked to give his consent, but as Jon wasn’t here, Gendry, as her good-brother and the next-best-thing must. However, something did not seem quite right to Gendry about the whole thing. Surely it should have been Willas seeking his consent, not Aegon? And what of Bran, should he not have been consulted? After all he was head of House Stark.

Aegon had rather impatiently explained the politics of it all to Gendry who hated having his lack of knowledge of such things pointed out to him - particularly by Aegon fucking Targaryen. According to fucking Aegon, Sansa had asked him to intervene. She wanted to avoid putting Bran in an awkward position – after all, Sansa was his older sister and there were still some troublemakers amongst the Northern Lords. Bran was in the process of rebuilding and Winterfell was not yet the bastion of Northern Power it had once been, its hold on the North still tenuous. Sansa was apparently anxious to avoid any potentially damaging claims that the older sister had a stronger right to House Stark than a crippled younger brother. After all, Aegon pointed out, wasn’t that the basis of the Bolton’s claim to the North during the war? Gendry had found himself agreeing that Sansa might be right to stay away from Winterfell for that reason alone.

But Aegon had gone on to point out “the Meera problem.” Gendry had to ask, “What problem?” Aegon, sighing heavily had proceeded to spell out to Gendry why no new wife wanted a highborn lady from her husband’s House under her feet. That conversation had made Gendry feel very uncomfortable. By demanding Shireen come back to Storm’s End was he not putting Shireen in the same situation that Sansa was so keen to avoid? Mayhaps that was why Shireen, being so much cleverer at this sort of thing than Gendry, had wanted to leave Storm’s End in the first place? And now Gendry was forcing her back. His conversation with Aegon had started Gendry thinking that mayhaps it would be better for Shireen and Arya if he could find somewhere safe where Shireen might find a good husband, providing ’twas far enough away from Aegon that the fucking Targaryen would be no further threat to her reputation. Gendry needed to ask Arya what she thought first afore broaching the delicate subject with Shireen.
So he had two awkward conversations ahead of him on his wedding day – one with Willas and one with Shireen. That thought wiped the earlier smile from his face.

Looking around him, Gendry contemplated how much more complicated his life was now than afore, when his only ambition had been finding enough food to fill his belly. Unfortunately Willas and Shireen were not his only problems. Brienne to his right, gleaming in the sun in a full suit of showy, tourney armour was drawing murderous glances across the glade to a battered but unbowed Hound, now Lord Clegane, who stood menacingly to Aegon’s right.

That King and Lord looked none too pleased by Willas Tyrell’s loud crowing about how he was leaving for Highgarden on the morrow, accompanied by Lady Sansa Stark. ‘Twas clear Sansa intended to take her place beside Willas once she arrived, for the empty seat beside Willas was draped with a white silk banner bearing the grey Direwolf of House Stark. Behind that stood Sansa’s Winter Guard, several of them sporting signs of a recent battle which were suspiciously similar to the Hound’s. Rolly Duckfield looked to have borne the brunt of it, with one purple and black eye swollen shut and a bandaged sword hand. It did not take a Maester to work out that the Winter Guard and the Hound had clashed and ‘twas most likely over Sansa’s decision to go to Highgarden.

No doubt Aegon had a meddling hand in there somewhere. If only Jon were here to sort this out. Then Gendry had the uncomfortable thought that mayhaps Jon would expect him to intervene. There was nothing more important to Jon than maintaining peace amongst the great Houses of Westeros. Jon maintained the only way to avoid another civil war was to prevent conflict between the Lords of Westeros. Thinking on Jon’s expectations made Gendry feel decidedly uncomfortable. Involving himself in whatever was going on between Aegon, Willas and Sansa, would mean staying in King’s Landing and Gendry could think of nothing worse.

‘Twas far too easy to become caught up in the Red Keep’s politics and before he knew it, Arya would be too far gone to undertake the journey back to Storm’s End. The thought of his babe being born in the Red Keep sent icy shivers down Gendry’s spine. Nae, unless the seven hells were freezing over, he was leaving for Storm’s End as soon as his men were sober enough to ride.

Out of all the assembled Lords, only Tyrion Lannister and Sam seemed oblivious to the underlying tension in the Godswood. They were laughing and celebrating with all the Sers and other worthies who surrounded them, irrespective of their House or allegiance. Those two seemed to thrive on the politics and intrigue that Gendry so despised. Seeing them gave Gendry a flash of inspiration. He would pass his concerns on to Tyrion and Sam, who would no doubt deal with anything that arose better than Gendry could, for Sam and Tyrion would not resort to their fists or a war hammer. That would leave Gendry free to bugger off to the Storm Lands with a clear conscience. Having decided that was a good idea, Gendry felt lighter already and Rolly trading snarls with the Hound did not bother him half as much as it had afore.

Aegon, Willas and all the rest were immediately forgotten as a fanfare of trumpets proclaimed his bride’s arrival. Gendry’s heart pumped with anxious expectation as he immediately turned toward the source of the noise but even he, tall as he was, could not see her through the branches and over the mass of people crammed into the Godswood.

‘Twas no use. Although an isle of grass had been strewn with blue rose petals and kept clear for the bride’s approach, it wound its way through the trees, making a clear view impossible. The throng was packed so tight he would not be able to see Arya until she was almost upon him. He would just need to be patient for a while longer.

Frustrated and turning back towards the Heart Tree, Gendry’s eye caught Anguy’s. The archer had been entrusted, not only with the care of Arya’s wedding gift, but also with the care of Tobho and his wife. Mrs Mott clutched Gendry’s Baratheon cloak to her chest as she stood on her tip toes, straining for a glimpse of the bride along with the rest of the crowd. ‘Twas the cloak Gendry would
drape over Arya’s shoulders shortly and he had given it to Tobho’s wife in an attempt to occupy her
thoughts with something other than Tobho’s imminent passing.

The old master craftsman looked tiny huddled under a pile of blankets on the raised pallet Gendry
had ordered erected especially for him. Tobho would have the best view in the Godswood of the
ceremony, but although open, Gendry wondered if the old man’s eyes could see. Although Gendry
had nodded and smiled towards him, Tobho was oblivious, preoccupied with something above him,
staring intently up as if he saw something in the Heart Tree’s leaves that no one else could. Gendry
had no time to ponder this further as another blast of the trumpets, much closer this time, told
him his bride and her entourage were about to arrive . . .

Chapter End Notes

Apologies again for the lack of length and Leon – I hope you weren’t too disappointed. The red
dress (and Ty) appear next chapter! I hope you all enjoy the HBO show and I’ll be back with a MUCH
longer chapter soon . . .
I can only apologise yet again for the delay. Thank you for still coming back to this.

This one has to be for Leon who so loves that damned red dress.

Never in her wildest imaginings, had Arya considered so many would come to watch her wed. Smallfolk, a dozen deep on either side, crammed into every nook and cranny on the way that led through the Red Keep to the Godswood.

Arya had to fight to control the unfamiliar and unwelcome feelings that being the centre of attention brought. Every single person was looking at her, pointing, shouting her name. It went so far against everything she had learned in Bravos and everything she had been that she had to fight the urge to flee from them all and hide, disappear into the crowd. Faceless once more.

For so long she had been No one, trained to be just another face in the crowd, not the focus of its attention. Fight or flight, that was her way and generally she preferred to fight. Although Needle was strapped to her thigh, 'twas her wedding day and fighting her way out through the throng of smallfolk who had come to wish her well was hardly an option.

That left flight and she looked longingly up at the dense green canopy, instinctively picking out the strongest branches, the ones that could carry her from one tree to the next, up and away.

She shivered, but not with cold. Repeating the old familiar words that had calmed her oft times afore – Calm as still water. Fear cuts deeper than swords - she pulled her cloak tighter. 'Twas beautifully embroidered with the running Direwolf of her House, but afore long, the white fur would be replaced by cloth of gold. She could do this. 'Twas only one day and 'twas all for show. She had made her promise to Gendry long ago; their babe growing in her belly was proof enough of that. Eyes fixed straight ahead, with one hand clutching her bouquet of blue roses and the other slipping into Sansa's to grip it tightly, she made her way slowly towards the Heart Tree where Gendry would be waiting for her.

First came the trumpeters to herald her arrival. After them, Bran led the procession, as was only fitting as the head of House Stark. Meera walked proudly by his side, but Bran himself sat in a contraption Arya could only liken to a wheeled throne. When she had asked Bran where he had come upon such a strange chair, he had proudly told her the craftsmen of Winterfell had manufactured it to his own design. He explained how he had tackled the problem of getting around without a horse in the same way Tyrion had solved the problem of his being unable to ride all those years ago. Still, it took two burly Northmen to push Bran's invention through the grass.

Fur draped bearded warriors, some carrying banners flying the sigil of her House flanked their procession. Arya was grateful they stood between her and the staring, crushing mass of smallfolk who had been allowed into the Godswood after the great and the good of King's Landing had taken their place around the Heart Tree.

Everywhere she looked, hands grasped towards her while a cacophony of baying voices called her name. Muttered repetitions of “Calm as Still Water” and her hand gripping Sansa’s, were the only
things keeping her from bolting.

Craning her neck, Arya scanned the crowd ahead for her beloved, knowing that if he was within sight, the crowd could never claim her. Not even an army of smallfolk would prevent Gendry from reaching her once he knew where she was. But no matter how hard Arya tried, she could not see him.

“Will you keep still!” Sansa hissed, “By the Seven, what is wrong with you? You are bobbing and weaving like a prize fighter. Stand tall, pull your shoulders back and act like a Lady for once.”

“If I pull my shoulders any further back, my teats are going to make a bid for freedom.”

The look of horror that crossed Sansa’s face afore the inscrutable, mask-like expression she wore in public snapped back into place, was worth the risk of Bran overhearing them talking about breasts. Arya’s delight at Sansa’s discomfort momentarily distracted her from her anxiety.

“You are so uncouth,” Sansa muttered through clenched teeth and from behind that fixed smile.

“Well, you should have let the bodice out some more and then my teats wouldn’t be able to escape.”

‘Twas all Sansa could do to maintain her Ladylike composure – at least to the watching crowd. “Oh, now I’m supposed to work miracles am I? You should have had your own dress organised weeks ago or made the alterations yourself!”

That jibe hit its mark. Arya knew she could never have done half as good a job as Sansa in altering the red dress, even if she’d had weeks to do it and Sansa only had a few hours. Responding in the only way she knew how, Arya squeezed her sister’s hand until the bones popped.

“Oww! What was that for?!” Sansa yelped, as loudly as she dared.

Arya merely stared smugly ahead. Despite what she hoped, Sansa wasn’t done yet. Extricating her hand from Arya’s lest she be subjected to any further pain, Sansa hissed, “If you hadn’t gone and got yourself with child afore your wedding your teats wouldn’t be a problem, would they?”

They glared furiously at each other as only sisters could, oblivious to the crowd and the fanfare surrounding them.

Rickon, who was next in line behind, leaned forwards, whispering sharply, “Sisters! Stop fighting.”

Arya and Sansa looked over their shoulders at the same time and gave him the same deathly stare.

Everyone had always told Rickon how different his sister were, but in that moment, when they were both angry with him, they were as alike as peas in a pod. He had to bite back a delighted laugh and stop himself from grabbing and hugging them both. To have them back together again ‘twas more than he had ever hoped. Instead he shrugged and smirked, “What’s the problem anyway? ‘Tis not as if Gendry’s going to mind Arya’s teats popping out to say hello.”

Then their little brother had the cheek to wink at them!

“Men,” Arya and Sansa huffed at exactly the same time.

Rickon, and Shireen beside him, erupted with laughter at the sister’s identical reaction.

Arya could not help but laugh too – ‘twas wonderful to finally be back with her family. However Sansa narrowed her eyes at and turned her back on Shireen.
Shireen shrugged and smiled as if ‘twere nothing, but Sansa’s behaviour irked Arya. ‘Twas not the first time Sansa had been sharp with Shireen recently and Sansa was normally impeccably mannered in her dealings with everyone. For some reason, Sansa’s attitude to Shireen had changed since the incident in the library - which made Shireen’s wanting to go to Highgarden with Sansa particularly odd. Still, Arya had given her promise to Shireen to help and she was not about to renege on that. The two of them could sort whatever their problem was. Arya had more important things to worry about – like when she would be out of this crowd.

As they walked on at the same achingly slow pace, she stood on her tiptoes, straining to see what was ahead, anxious to see Gendry. Finally, in amongst the mass of heads and helmets, she saw that familiar glossy black hair and those impossibly broad shoulders. There he was!

Standing head and shoulders above the general throng was her man, her lover, her best friend. At that very moment, as if the Gods themselves had turned his head, Gendry’s eyes met hers. The frown that had pulled his eyebrows together disappeared the moment he laid eyes upon her, his face lighting up – reflecting the joy and relief Arya felt when she saw him.

Grinning like a fool, Arya waved the bunch of blue roses above her head, trying to say with them what she wanted to yell across the Godswood, “I’m here, I’m coming!”

“Seven hells Arya, can you not at least try and act like a Lady on your wedding day?”

Sansa scowled at her sister’s lack of propriety. Oblivious, Arya waved her roses again, only stopping when Sansa grabbed her arm and dragged it down.

“You’ll be beside him in a few moments.”

“’Tis not soon enough,” Arya said dreamily, her eyes never wavering from Gendry’s. Now she had him in her sights, she did not want to let him go.

Rickon made a choking noise and pretended to vomit up his sleeve while Shireen sighed, “’Tis so romantic.”

‘Twas obvious Sansa did not agree. At all. With a curl of her lip, she declared, “Gendry Baratheon is the exception that proves the rule.”

“What rule?” Rickon asked guilelessly.

“That men are all self serving and cannot be trusted.”

Taken aback by the vehemence of her statement, Rickon and Shireen exchanged a concerned glance.

Rickon tried to laugh, but his attempt at levity rang hollow. He was shocked by Sansa’s obvious bitterness but also driven by a need to defend his own kind. “’Tis a bit harsh, sister surely,”

Sansa snorted with disgust, “Not even Kings.”

That statement was directed straight at Shireen, who turned scarlet and dropped her eyes to avoid Sansa’s accusatory stare.

Realising there was much more going in this conversation than what was being said, Rickon looked from Sansa to Shireen and back, bewildered. Clearly neither was prepared to explain. In exasperation he started to ask Arya, but she was entirely focused on the big man waiting for her under the Heart Tree and Rickon’s half-asked question fell on deaf ears.
Not a bit too soon they were through the press of Smallfolk. A large area around the Heart Tree was cordoned off by a protective circle of soldiers from Bad Company and the Targaryen City Watch. ‘Twas a measure of how special this day was when men from those different armies stood shoulder to shoulder, trading good natured insults and jokes.

Arya breathed a sigh of relief. Now Gendry was within sight, no one else’s eyes upon her mattered – only his.

With a final flourish, the trumpeters swept their instruments under their arms and stepped aside to reveal the black and white, beards and fur of House Stark.

Gendry only had eyes for his bride - standing tall and proud at the centre of the Northmen’s procession, resplendent in her white fur; dark hair falling around her shoulders, eyes shining, red lips curved into a smile he wanted to believe was only for him.

Tradition meant that all Gendry could offer Arya before he had to turn his attention to Bran was a brief waggle of his eyebrows. Still, from the way she bit her bottom lip and the way the blush rose up her neck from the white fur of her cloak, he knew Arya understood the message - a teasing promise of the night to come. He hoped anticipation was making her nipples hard and her cunt wet for him, because the sight of her in her wedding finery certainly made his blood pound and his cock stand to attention. The slash of red peeking through white fur only heightened his expectations of what was to come.

He had only seen her in red once – on that wonderful night in King’s Landing when he’d kissed her for the first time and, against all his expectations, she’d kissed him back. ‘Twas a memory he would never forget until his dying breath. The glimpse of a red dress brought all those memories thundering back - wanting her so badly he could hardly breathe.

‘Twas no easy task to quiet his lustful thoughts and to school his lecherous grin into a more appropriate expression. Gendry gave Bran a tight smile and dipped his head as a sign of welcome and of respect.

“Lord Stark.”

Bran returned the greeting with an indulgent smirk that suggested he knew exactly what Gendry had been thinking.

“May the joining of our Houses today seal the alliance between our Houses that our fathers desired.”

Bran extended his arm with a flourish, “Lord Baratheon. I give you my sister – Lady Arya Stark”

Arya’s pink blush turned to crimson fire as all eyes focused on her. She dropped her gaze to the blue flowers she held afore her belly, clutching them in a death grip. Seeing the white knuckles of those skilful hands twisting the stems had Gendry biting the inside of his cheek to stop from throwing his head back and laughing aloud. Only his Arya would try to strangle her wedding bouquet.

The assembled guests clapped politely as the Stark guards wheeled Bran aside. At last, no one stood between Gendry and his bride.

And then the fucking King interrupted.

Spreading his arms wide Aegon Targaryen stepped forwards.

Even dressed in a Brother’s dun robe, he seemed to shine like polished steel in the sunlight. Much as it pained Gendry to admit it, the King had that unassailable aura of authority, confidence and controlled might that very, very few possessed. Jon had it, but he had earned it by toiling as the last
Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, through blood, fire, war and even death. To Gendry’s
disgust (and although he would die afore admitting it - jealously) Aegon Targaryen had been born
with the power to silence all those around him without even saying a word.

Sure enough, the Godswood fell silent. Even the birds and the breeze seemed to pause, holding their
breath, waiting for Aegon fucking Targaryen to speak . . .

“Lords, Ladies, Sers, all those bound to House Baratheon and House Stark, invited guests and small
talk . . .”

Those deep lilac eyes scanned the assembled crowd. Gendry suppressed a groan. He knew from
experience that this was what Aegon did best. He had a gift for making everyone think he was
looking for them and only them. “Twas a gift that made enemies quake in their boots and allies puff
with pride.

“. . . this marriage represents not only a joining of man and woman, not only a joining of two Great
Houses, but hope for the future. As these two people come together, as these two Great Houses
come together, so must we . . . to build a Westeros together where every House has ties to the others,
where no House is isolated, where every one of us works with not only our kin, but our neighbours
and our former enemies, to build a stronger Westeros together.”

Even fucking Aegon highjacking his wedding day for a Targaryen propaganda speech could not
spoil Gendry’s mood. Seeing Arya surrounded by her family, knowing his babe grew in her belly,
delighted him far too much. The beautiful woman whose face flushed with happiness as she caught
his eye bore no resemblance to the sullen, damaged assassin Brienne had brought back from Bravos
and Gendry took pride in knowing ‘twas he who had put that smile back on her face. Knowing that
in moments she would be declared irrevocably his, made him puff out his chest as if he were a
rooster. If he thought he could have got away with it, he would have flung his head back and crowed
his delight for all of Westeros to hear.

Not caring for Aegon’s preaching and immune to this Targaryen trick, or skill, or whatever ‘twas,
Gendry ignored the speech and concentrated on watching the audience. He could do so unobserved
as all eyes were dazzled by the brilliance of the King. What Gendry saw told him more than a dozen
little birds ever could.

To the King’s right the Hound, now Lord Clegane, stood proudly in new armour, his battered face
only serving to make him more menacing, if that was possible.

To the King’s left, Willas Tyrell’s jaw flexed as he ground his teeth, his hands clenched into fists.
Highgarden’s displeasure was obvious to anyone not blinded by Aegon’s magic.

Like Gendry, Ser Rolly Duckfield standing beside Willas had seen the King’s performance oft times
afore and he too remained unaffected by it. Instead of on Aegon, Rolly’s attention was focused on
the Hound. The Duck’s knuckles, though scrapped and bloodied, were white with tension as they
gripped the hilt of his sword. Those two brutes were on course for another collision and when it
came, Gendry hoped he would be long gone from here. He suspected whatever bad blood flowed
between them, would not be resolved until one of them lay dead or dying.

And then there was Sansa and she was a mystery. She had moved from Arya’s side to stand at
Willas’, yet the distance between them told its own story. One of the very few apparently unmoved
by Aegon’s presence – Sansa’s expression was achingly sad, her hands clasped together, eyes
downcast, her lips moving slowly as if in a silent prayer. Why so sad on this happy occasion?
Gendry was confident his Goodsister’s sorrow had nothing to do with this marriage. He knew Sansa
liked him. If anything, Gendry suspected Sansa thought him a fool for taking on her wilful, wayward
little sister. So if ‘twas not the marriage made her so unhappy, then what? Willas was hardly the type
of man to make any woman miserable. Bored mayhaps, but not as wretched as Lady Sansa looked
standing his side.

While studying Sansa, Gendry felt the unmistakably eerie sensation of another’s eyes upon him. Turning, he dropping his gaze to meet clever mismatched eyes. Tyrion Lannister inclined his head towards Sansa and raised his eyebrows in an unspoken question – the same one Gendry had been asking himself. For what was Lady Sansa praying?

“Lord Baratheon.”

Aegon saying his name jolted Gendry out of his revere.

“Would you like to make your vow?”

“Aye.”

Gendry wanted this moment to be perfect. But he didn’t know how to use fancy words. He reassured himself with the thought that if Arya had wanted a silver tongue she would have chosen anyone rather than him. All he could do was be himself.

Mercifully, Tobho’s wife was close by to hand him his wedding gift to Arya, displayed on a golden silk pillow.

Gendry took the sword in both hands, being careful to hold the razor sharp blade flat across his fingertips. He took three long strides towards Arya and dropped to one knee, bowing his head afore her.

The look of shocked horror on Arya’s face as he knelt at her feet made him want to take her in his arms and reassure her that this overtly romantic performance was just that – a performance and that he would be back to his gruff self as soon as they could both escape from here. Instead he offered her up the sword.

“Arya Stark, I offer you no red rose or ruby ring. I made you a sword as deadly and beautiful as the Lady who will wield it.”

Lifting his head, he saw his love reflected in her beloved face.

“Here. Take it and you will find its maker to be as true and loyal as this blade.”

With steady hands, Arya took the sword. Where their fingers met ‘twas as if wildfire rushed into his veins. He prayed that would never change between them.

“Gendry Baratheon, I accept your sword and in return I have only my love to give you. Although it will mark you as surely as your blade, I hope you will accept it.”

“Aye, I will.”

Her name had been etched onto his heart as they rolled around the floor in Acorn Hall. The years had only carved it deeper. He grinned up at her, love and a sense of possession thundering through his veins.

“Do you have a cloak of your House with which to honour your wife?” Aegon intoned the ancient words Gendry had never expected would be directed at him.

With pride making his voice sound even louder and deeper than usual, Gendry replied with the traditional response, “I do.”
Tobho’s wife offered him the golden cloak. If Gendry’s hands trembled as he worked to unfasten the silver clip at Arya’s throat ‘twas only because being so close to her, finally knowing that no man could take her away from him, affected him so.

When the clasp finally came free, he let the white fur cloak fall from her shoulders to pool at her feet and instantly regretted it.

The sight of her breasts, his breasts now!, full and round and soft, pushed up out of that red dress rendered him momentarily speechless. Seven buggering hells! ‘Twas a magnificent sight, but ‘twas a vision that should be for his eyes only. Gods, was that the dark rose of her teats he could see peeking up at him from red silk?

Grabbing the cloak from Tobho’s wife, he swung it around Arya’s shoulders so quickly that both Aegon and Mrs Mott had to step back to avoid being hit by the wildly swirling embroidered golden stag.

As he bent to fasten the golden clasp, Gendry growled against Arya’s ear, “If you dare take this cloak off afore we are alone, I’ll spank your arse until it’s as red as that dress.”

Arya looked up at him with wide grey eyes. Her bottom lip trembled.

Fuck! He was such an unthinking arse to upset his wife and they had only been married mere moments. ‘Twas hardly Arya’s fault the dress no longer fitted. Her breasts were swelling in readiness to feed the babe he’d planted in her belly. If ‘twas anyone’s fault – ‘twas his. He was such a stupid fool.

Blinking back tears, his wife stood on her tiptoes and pulled on his shoulders until she could whisper in his ear. Gendry steeled himself for the reprimand he knew was coming. At least she had the good grace to whisper it instead of giving him the public tongue lashing he deserved.

“Is that a promise?”

He was still trying to get his head around what she had said, that she wasn’t angry with him, that she might want his hand warming her arse, when he felt her warm, wet tongue in his ear. ‘Twas such an intimate, sexual contact that he almost jumped back, just as all his blood jumped to his cock.

When he had pulled far enough away to look at her again, the trembling lip and the tears had been replaced by sparkling eyes and a wicked smirk. The little tease! When the tip of her pink tongue darted out to wet full, red lips he near fell to his knees again but with lust this time.

Aegon clearing his throat brought them both back to the present, reminding them that they were not alone. Yet.

“As your King, I feel it incumbent upon me to say a few words about the sanctity of marriage and the importance of honouring the vows we make.”

Did Gendry imagine it, or did Aegon’s eyes dart to Sansa when he mentioned the honouring of vows?

Gendry had no time to ponder upon it as a shrill voice from somewhere above them called out, “Aegon Targaryen has no right to lecture anyone on honour or the sanctity of vows.”

A hundred hands flew to their swords and all heads, swivelled back, all eyes searching for the traitorous voice in the leafy canopy above.

“Aegon Targaryen, I challenge you to a duel of honour. Do you accept?”
Gendry could not place it, but that hidden voice was somehow familiar.

Aegon Targaryen was never one to run from a fight and it seemed he was not about to start now. Peering up into the trees, trying to see his accuser, he declared loudly, “I accept nothing until you show yourself and state the basis of your challenge.”

The bodiless voice called out again, “I challenge you to a duel for besmirching the honour of Lady Shireen Baratheon.”

All eyes turned from the leaves to either Shireen or Gendry. Shireen shrank back, swayed briefly and swooned clear to the ground, clutching at Rickon’s arm and almost dragging him down with her as she fell.

Arya and Gendry looked at each other, each wearing the same horrified expression – surely it couldn’t be . . .

As if from nowhere, a familiar figure materialized on a low hanging branch afore dropping, to land catlike, beside the Heart Tree’s trunk.

“How do you deny Targaryen?”

Arya opened her mouth, but afore she could say a word, a big warm hand clamped over it, effectively silencing her. An arm of steel wrapped around her waist pulling her back against a body that felt like it had been carved from granite.

Clearly taken aback, the King opened his mouth, closed it again without saying anything, shot another fleeting look to Sansa Stark and shook his head.

At the same time, men of Bad Company and the Targaryen guard rushed forward to protect their King. The boy who had dropped from the tree swung his sword wildly at the advancing men, as if he was prepared to take them all on at once.

The stupid little prick.

Gendry had recognised Ty the moment he had appeared on the branch of the Heart Tree and ‘twas obvious Arya did too, but Gendry did not trust Arya not to make things worse for the boy. She was just as likely to throw the little fool another sword as not.

Fearing for his squire’s life, Gendry barked an order for his men to stand down, which they did immediately – most of them recognising Ty now too. Seeing Gendry’s men retreat and deciding the lanky youth was no serious threat to him, Aegon did the same. The Targaryen guards reluctantly lowered their weapons and stepped back too, leaving Ty alone under the Heart Tree.

Knowing his squire was safe, at least for the moment, Gendry breathed a sigh of relief, but what in the seven hells did the stupid little fuck think he was doing, challenging the King to a duel? In the Godswood? In the middle of Gendry’s fucking wedding? Gendry knew he could end this now but that little shit squire of his had overstepped the mark one too many times. Ty needed to learn his place in life and if he didn’t learn it soon, he was going to end up dead. The boy needed to be taught a lesson and mayhaps a public humiliation at the King’s hands would extinguish all the stupid notions Ty had about chivalry and honour and about being the best Knight in Westeros and marrying Shireen. Mayhaps this was just what the boy needed.

Taking Arya’s new sword, Gendry shouted to Aegon and tossed it to him, pommel first. As expected, Aegon caught it deftly and twirled the new blade, testing its balance, making it flash in the sunlight
Of course, ‘twas also the slight chance that Aegon, cocky arse that he was, might be caught unawares by Ty and suffer a little humiliation himself. At least at the beginning. Gendry hoped so. No one would expect a squire to be more than a fair sword and Ty was far better than fair. And he had been taught by one of the Faceless Men. Gendry was sure the boy had a trick or too up his sleeve and the opportunity to see Aegon suffer when he underestimated the skill of a lowly squire was something Gendry did not want to miss.

Arya struggled indignantly, but she was hampered by layers and layers of tight clothing and Gendry’s damned cloak - that was her sword! But Gendry held her tight, his breath hot and moist against her ear, “Shhhhhh. I can always make you a new one. And don’t you dare say anything to stop this. I want to see it all.”

Arya looked up at him, pleading with her eyes for him to intervene on Ty’s behalf.

He shook his head.

She bit his fingers.

Gendry swore under his breath and blew out a sigh of resignation. He knew Arya wouldn’t give him peace to watch unless he made sure Ty wasn’t going to get himself killed. So Gendry shouted over the noise of the crowd to Aegon, “That’s my squire. Try and not kill him. My horse rather likes him!”

Loud guffaws and shrieks of laughter erupted all around them. Aegon nodded an acknowledgement to Gendry and with a cocky grin, gave Ty a mock bow. The squire’s face turned scarlet. Of course, all this amused the crowd no end.

Arya struggled against Gendry’s hand until he loosened his grip just enough to let her hiss, “That was your idea of helping?!”

“Don’t worry,” Gendry soothed, “Aegon is too fucking honourable to kill a mere squire. Even if he is mine. All he’ll do is teach the little shit a well deserved lesson.”

“’Tis not Ty I’m worried about you fool. Aegon has no idea who he’s dealing with.”

Gendry’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Ty is that good?”

“Yes.”

Gendry clamped his hand over Arya’s mouth again, ignoring her muffled protests. The King and the squire were now circling each other, Aegon strutting around like the peacock he was and Ty crouched in what Gendry recognised as a Water Dancer’s stance. “Even better,” he said with a grin.

Chapter End Notes

So it’s finally Ty’s moment to shine or burn. All will be revealed about Ty next chapter and I will try really, really hard to make it soon.

Thanks for sticking around long enough to read this.
With one hand resting casually on a cocked hip, King Aegon the Confident twirled Arya's wedding
sword in lazy circles with the other. He made every effort to appear effortlessly nonchalant but his
mind was racing fast as a sand steed. By the Seven, what had possessed him to admit to besmirching
Shireen's honour afore half the bloody Lords and Ladies of Westeros? Truth be told, he had been so
taken aback by the boy's sudden appearance and the vehemence of his accusation that he had not the
wit to lie. Him! A King who had taken pride in being the most accomplished liar in the damn Red
Keep. Gods! How Elder Brother would laugh. Aegon could almost hear him now, chuckling, "I told
you the Quiet Isle would affect you."

Aegon decided there and then that the sooner he foreswore any future attempts to help young virgin
Ladies with their research and abandoned this pious Brother's habit the better. He intended to return
to his wicked, wicked ways as soon as he had seen of this impudent youth's challenge.

A probing thrust from Gendry's squire dragged Aegon's whirling thoughts sharply back into focus.
He could afford no more daydreaming as, to his surprise, the boy seemed know a few advanced
Braavosi sword forms. Aegon's imperious reputation had already taken a dent by his agreeing to this
duel in the first place - to let even the tip of a squire's blade touch him was unthinkable. A feint
followed immediately by short, sharp jump forwards – a Braavosi move he'd been taught by Old
Griff – and the squire was on the back foot. Which was just where Aegon intended to keep him?

"Blestra." Arya hissed.

Gendry grunted to acknowledge the comment, assuming Arya was referring to one of her fancy
Water Dancing moves. He was too enthralled with the possibility Aegon might lose to his squire to
care for an explanation of the fancy sword play. Besides, these swords were toys compared to his
war hammer or his Valerian steel.

"Damn that Targaryen knows his technique."

Gendry grunted again, preferring to keep his attention on the action in front of him. Ty had recovered
sufficiently from Aegon's first assault, to make another tentative attacking thrust. 'Twas going to be a
very interesting contest.

"Did you know Aegon was familiar with Braavosi sword play?"

Arya seemed intent on talking instead of just watching, so Gendry supposed he had better reply. "Of
course. He was born a Prince wasn't he? Had his own master-at-arms and all that."

"Jon Connington taught him well. Or should I say 'Old Griff'."

Surprised someone had interrupted their conversation, Arya and Gendry both looked around and
then down to see Tyrion Lannister standing between them. He did not look up, mismatched eyes focused intently on the duel instead.

"I don't suppose either of you ever met him?"

"Never had the pleasure," Arya said. Gendry grunted his confirmation.

"He was Hand to Aerys the Second you know."

If either Arya or Gendry knew, they did not confirm it, for at that moment Ty escaped Aegon's punishing attack by jumping up and grabbing a low hanging branch. With his sword between his teeth, Ty used his momentum to swing around and land again on Aegon's undefended left.

The crowd gave a collective gasp of astonishment – universally impressed by the squire's quick thinking and athleticism.

"He's not bad for a youngster, not bad at all." Tyrion mused.

"Arya taught him well."

Gendry grinned down at Tyrion, not bothering to hide his pride at his wife's, and also his squire's, talent. "What say you to a wager Lord Hand? I have twelve gold dragons who say my squire can give the King the fright of his life."

Tyrion grinned.

Lannister gold was not as plentiful as it had once been and Gendry hoped the Hand was imagining those twelve gold dragons multiplying afore his eyes. But no contracts were ever entered into lightly by Tyrion Lannister – not even wagers. So Gendry was not surprised Tyrion had a query, but the nature of the Hand's question was unexpected.

"Afore I agree to your terms Lord Baratheon, answer me this – to which House does your squire belong?"

Gendry frowned. 'Twas expected that every Lord would foster the sons of his allies and train them as squires under his own banners – thus strengthening the bonds between the great houses of Westeros. Such an arrangement meant years of commitment on both sides and all hoped the squires to be knighted at the end of it. Of course not all were.

Everyone knew Samwell Tarly had never even made it to squire. While Sam's talents lay elsewhere, some boys, no matter how great their House, simply never had sufficient talent at anything. By taking a nameless boy from the stables as his squire Gendry had broken with tradition and he did not relish having to explain himself to Tyrion. Especially on his own wedding day when he had much better things to do – like watch this damn duel.

"I was wondering the very same thing." Brienne of Tarth had apparently also decided to join their conversation.

Gendry cursed under his breath. Tyrion and Brienne had to be too of the most inquisitive people in the whole of the bloody Red Keep. There would be no fobbing either of them off with some half arsed, half truth.

"Well Lord Baratheon? Who is your squire's father?" Tyrion asked again.

There was a heavy expectant silence as they awaited Gendry's answer.
Gendry had to drag his attention away from the duel. Seven Hells. Did no one else appreciate a good fight these days? If they wanted to know so badly he would bloody well tell them the truth.

"He's got no House. He's a Flea Bottom bastard."

Gendry stared at them all defiantly, afore adding rather unnecessarily, "Like me." His fierce expression dared any of them to criticise his taking a bastard as his squire. 'Twas unheard of that a boy with no name be given such a life altering opportunity, but afore Gendry it had also been unheard of that a Flea Bottom bastard could be the son of a King.

Of course, no one dared question Gendry's right to appoint any squire he chose.

Tyrion spread his hands wide in a conciliatory manner. "We only ask as the boy bears a striking resemblance to . . . someone we both know very well." He craned his neck to look up at Brienne, "Don't you agree Milady?"

Brienne blushed a most uncharacteristic shade of pink. "I was thinking the very same thing my Lord."

Wondering who they meant, Arya looked sharply from Brienne to Tyrion. The height difference was so great that looking from one to the other left her feeling rather dizzy. Someone they both knew very well?

Ah ha! The pieces of the puzzle fit together and Arya finally realised who Ty had reminded her of.

"Jaime Lannister?"

Tyrion and Brienne both nodded, their attention fixed on the lanky youth wielding his blade with all the swagger and skill of Bravos' finest.

Arya groaned. It all made an awful, inevitable sense; Ty's age, his looks, the self confidence bordering on arrogance, his turning up in the Red Keep's stables and charming all of Bad Company into making him their Lord's squire and, most of all, his God given talent. Arya should have known that such a gift had to come from somewhere. Anyone who could wield a sword as well as Ty was destined for great things. So few possessed such a magnificent, raw talent that she should have guessed his father had to be a swordsman of the highest order.

It made her feel sick to think the boy she had trained and had come to care for so much was the spawn of the Kingslayer.

With her stomach churning, she followed her companion's gaze to the man-boy duelling with the dragon King.

Ty's stance was impeccable; the placement of his feet light and precise, the straight line of his back, chin up, focused, alert and ready for anything his opponent would try. Put him in a Gold Cloak and he would be Jamie Lannister come again. Arya felt like screaming and crying and shaking Ty all at once for not telling her.

Taking a deep, steadying breath she rationalised her furious reaction. 'Twas hardly Ty's fault his father was a monster. 'Twas no doubt he was oblivious to his parentage and Ty had not changed since the duel had begun. He was the same boy, 'twas only Arya's perception of him that had changed. As Aegon's blade flashed, Ty deflected the thrust with his own blade, his defence crisp, precise and quick as a snake. Just as she had taught him. She had taught a Lannister how to kill another King.
Despite her horror at the circumstances of his birth, Arya could not suppress the rush of pride when the crowd cheered for Ty. It might be treason to support the opponent of your King, but the crowd had fallen under the spell Ty cast just as surely as Arya had. With his golden good looks, his skills, his indisputably chivalry - duelling for a Lady's honour and most of all the balls it took to throw down the gauntlet to the mighty Aegon Targaryen, 'twas no wonder all the girls were half in love with him already and the men wished they could be more like him. 'Twas always the way with Jaime too.

Providing he survived, the minstrels would have songs penned about Ty the squire by nightfall.

Aegon had abandoned his earlier peacock posturing, having realised teaching Gendry's squire a lesson was going to take more than a few well executed flicks of the wrist. The King was on his toes, fighting with all of the skill that had earned him the reputation of one of the most feared swordsmen in the land. The crowd gasped in awe as he leapt and lunged, sword arm extended, blade flashing fast as lightning that had Ty staggering back, defending frantically as he retreated.

"Much as I would like to discover that I had a talented nephew," Tyrion sighed, referencing Tommen's well known lack of any talent, "There is one rather large obstacle that stands in the way of our happy little theory Brienne."

"Which is?"

"The fact . . . and it is a fact . . . that my dearly beloved brother never fucked anyone except my bloody bitch of a sister. May she rot in every one of the seven hells."

Brienne's face did not blush pink this time, but rather flamed as red as a Dornish tomato.

"Until after the war of course," Tyrion qualified, with a smirk and a twinkle in his eye.

Brienne coughed to cover her embarrassment, afore muttering, "Of course."

Arya was rather taken aback by the revelation that Brienne and Tyrion's brother were lovers. Jaime and Brienne might be matched in height and martial prowess, but beyond that the two of them had the most dissimilar natures Arya could imagine. The Maid of Tarth was the truest of Knights and Jaime Lannister was . . . well he wasn't that. Yet any time his name was mentioned, Brienne became as flustered as a silly maid.

It would take Arya some time to come to terms with the fact that Brienne had any lover, much less the Kingslayer. What a day for revelations it had been already and the day was only half way done.

Either Gendry already knew about Brienne's revelation or he had not heard, as his attention never wavered from the duel. Arya thought about poking him in the ribs but decided against it when Gendry winced and groaned with the rest of the crowd as Aegon's sword found its mark for the first time. Blood bloomed red and shocking on the white cotton of Ty's shirt. Even though she knew 'twas a superficial flesh wound, Arya gasped with dismay. First blood to the King.

Ty's hand flew to his shoulder and came away covered in blood. The boy looked aghast at his red fingers; as if unable to believe he was wounded.

A heart wrenching wail filled the Godswood. Until then, no one had noticed Shireen was recovered enough to be eased into a sitting position between Sansa and Rickon. All eyes flew to the Lady Baratheon. She was pale and trembling, her hands clutched to her breast, clearly distraught at the sight of Ty's blood.

Seizing the moment, Aegon stepped back. Holding his arms out, his bloodied sword glinting in the
sun, he addressed the crowd rather than Ty, "You have fought well squire." He walked slowly around Ty - a King magnanimous in his victory. "You have caused Lady Shireen enough distress. Bend the knee and I'll forgive your treason."

The crowd cheered their approval; no one was seriously hurt and they had enjoyed a good afternoon's entertainment. The King grinned, sensing victory, content he had asserted his authority while giving Ty a way to concede gracefully. Aegon had also been careful to avoid the whole issue of Shireen's honour, blaming Ty for Shireen's distress. 'Twas a performance any mummer would have been proud of.

"What do you say boy?"

"No surrender until my Lady's honour is avenged!" Ty cried. "For Lady Shireen!" Holding his sword aloft as he ran full speed towards the King.

Aegon instantly assumed the water dancer's stance and Shireen fainted clean into Rickon's arms.

"Seven buggering hells," Arya hissed. "Do something Gendry!"

"Twenty four gold dragons!" Gendry cried, "What do you say Tyrion? Hurry up man afore it's finished."

"You call that doing something?!" Arya raged. "If you won't stop this then I will!"

As soon as she took a step forwards, two sets of strong arms hauled her back. Arya's slippered feet dangled above the ground.

"Put me down!"

From her right Gendry said, "Not until I win my wager."

From her left Brienne reasoned, "You cannot interfere Milady. Asking duelling men to stop is like pissing in the wind."

Above Arya's head, Gendry gave Brienne a puzzled look. How could any woman, even the Maid of Tarth, piss into the wind?

"It's a turn of phrase," Brienne sighed.

"Ahhh," Gendry nodded as the crowd roared. Ty's blade had finally made its mark on the King.

Bending towards Tyrion, Gendry shouted excitedly, "Hurry up and shit or get off the pan!"

Brienne screwed her face up in disgust.

"What?" Gendry asked innocently, "It's just a turn of phrase."

"I don't bet against my kin," Tyrion mused, "But seeing as I doubt your squire is actually my nephew, I'm in." Clapping his hands together Tyrion yelled, "I accept your wager Lord Baratheon. Twelve gold dragons says King Aegon whips the young pup's arse!"

"I have three gold dragons who say you're wrong."

"Bran, you mustn't," Meera Reed gasped, clearly horrified that her husband was so eager to commit treason by betting against the King.
"I'll take that wager!" Gendry bellowed.

"Seven hells why not," Brienne sighed afore shouting to all, "Who'll take my gold dragon on Jaime's son?"

"You're not going to let me stop this are you?" Arya grunted, struggling within the confines of her wedding finery to break free from her two giant captors.

"Nae!" a half dozen voices chorused together.

Cursing them all, Arya gave up and sagged limply between Gendry and Brienne. She might have lost, but she was not going to concede quietly, "If he dies, the wedding is off!" she hissed at her husband.

"Too late," Gendry chuckled. "Too many witnesses to this one my dear and anyway – look! He's not going to die."

The sight of Shireen fainting again, or mayhaps 'twas the sight of Aegon's blood on his robe seemed to have galvanised Ty into furious action. With a war cry and his sword arm at full stretch Ty launched himself at the King. Aegon was forced to parry Ty's attacking blade again and again.

Arya had never seen Ty like this. In training and in their duels he had been serious and dedicated, sometimes playful, but never out for blood. Part of her wanted yell at him for his sloppy sword form; caught up in his passion, he was swinging too wide and lunging too far, leaving gaps in his defence that Aegon could exploit. The other part of her wanted to scream at him to "Kill that horse's arse!"

Stuffing her hand in her mouth to avoid doing either, Arya could only watch, helpless and mute as the duel reached its furious crescendo.

Aegon could not recall the last time he had been pressed so hard. His reputation as a swordsman was such that few ever challenged him and since becoming King, no one had. Mayhaps he was out of practice as 'twas humiliating to be marked by a squire's blade. Encouraged by the crowd and his strike on Aegon's bicep, the boy was becoming wild, unpredictable and therefore dangerous. The lad had balls, Aegon had to admit that, but enough was enough.

With his chest heaving from the exertion of defending Ty's onslaught, Aegon drew the boy back, letting him believe he was winning, waiting for the moment the squire overextended himself. The boy's inexperience would be his downfall. Aegon had several inches on the boy, half again his weight and mayhaps twice the years. He had the stamina, reserves of strength and experience that Ty could not hope to match. Someday mayhaps, but 'twas not this day.

Shireen's fainting had shocked Aegon too, but ultimately she had done him a favour. The boy was letting his heart rule his head and, by the Gods, the boy had to be head over heels in love with Shireen to have gone this far for her.

Aegon had been that hot headed once too. He remembered ill thought out, heated arguments with Tyrion upon the Shy Maid, but he had learned the error of that way. Maintaining his focus, he kept his defence tight and stuck to his plan. The boy was beginning to tire. Sweat dripped into his eyes and 'twas another distraction for the boy to have to rub it furiously away. Aegon drew him back further, looking for the sweet spot, waiting until Ty had crossed the big tree root. Only then did Aegon begin his counter attack.

Stepping forwards at last, Aegon initiated a classic close quarters riposte. With no room for lunges or sweeps, Aegon's greater height and strength gave him the advantage. Seizing his opportunity, Aegon
attacked with a brutality he doubted the boy had seen afore. Water Dancing favoured skill over strength but Jon Connington had taught young Griff all forms of sword fighting and those skills had been honed through years of war.

Aegon used every punishing move he knew to drive the boy back. Vicious compound attacks rained down upon the boy, who did his best, but who was obviously now out of his depth. Keeping their blades locked in a 'prise de fer', Aegon forced the boy onto his back foot with brute strength, their fine blades screeching and twisting under the force. One more retreating step and Aegon would have him!

Ty had danced over the tree root on the offence, but caught off guard and defending for his life, his back foot landed on it awkwardly, buckling his knee and giving Aegon the opening he had been waiting for. The King was on the squire in a heartbeat, looming over him, using his superior strength and weight to force the boy down. Ty's arm was aloft, shaking with the effort of blocking Aegon's blade, but as soon as his knee hit the grass, 'twas over. There was no way for Ty to recover from that. He valiantly tried a desperate roll to his right, but Aegon was too good for that. Grabbing the guard of Ty's sword as the boy rolled, Aegon wrenched it from the boy's hand. Quick as a snake, he crossed the blades, stabbing them into the ground on either side of Ty's shoulders, pinning him in place on the grass.

Looming over the squire, Aegon roared, "Yield!"

For a moment it seemed as if Ty might actually refuse, for he bared his teeth, snarling like a cornered dog. Mercifully he was startled out of his battle rage by something totally unexpected. The crowd began chanting his name.

Over and over they called for him, a groundswell of adoration for a nameless son of Flea Bottom. If that was to be the last thing he ever heard, then so be it. Few men were ever so adored and fewer still bastard boys.

Ty closed his eyes and capitulated, letting his head sink back into the soft grass. With his eyes closed he could avoid looking at his conqueror and could focus only on that glorious sound. His ears rang with it – a thousand voices and every one of them calling for him. 'Twas inconceivable and yet 'twas something he had dreamt about his whole life.

Lying there on the sweet grass at what might be the end, Ty recalled the first step he had taken on the path that had led him there. A knight had ridden through Flea Bottom when Ty had been but a child. Squatting in a stinking drain he had looked up in awe at the shining armour, the cloth of gold and the magnificent horse. He had been entranced by it all, but especially by the knight's aura of power. Knights had control over their own lives and destiny and could not only fight for themselves, but for others too. Mayhaps if he was a knight, he could have helped his mother. Ty had promised himself then and there he would become a knight or he would die trying.

Ever since that day he had lived for it. His days were spent duelling with stick swords and riding imaginary horses. His nights were spent dreaming of the day he would triumph at a great tourney and hear the crowd roar his name. Most nights those imagined cheers had drowned out the all-too-real grumblings of his empty belly. But in his dreams he was always the victor, never the vanquished. He had lost today yet still the crowd roared his name. If he died now, at least he had lived to hear that.

To his annoyance, his conqueror's voice drowned out the crowd, repeating, "Do you yield?"

Cracking open one eye, Ty was surprised there was no sword pointing at his throat. Instead a hand was extended, offering him help.
What choice did he have?

"I yield," he muttered, the words sticking in his throat like a hunk of stale bread.

The deed done, his surrender complete, he grasped the proffered hand and was hauled to his feet by the dragon King. To Ty's amazement, Aegon Targaryen raised their joined hands aloft and bellowed, "Show your appreciation for the most chivalrous squire in all of Westeros!" The crowd went wild.

Ty looked askance at the King, unable to believe he was as magnanimous as all that. Why praise a bastard boy who had attacked him? Mayhaps he was as insane as his grandfather. The grinning King shook their hands in a conjoined victory pose afore dragging Ty into a low bow to his audience. Only then did Ty realise that the crowd no longer cheered for him. Their King's name filled the Godswood, their adoration for him eclipsing their earlier love for Ty. He learned an important lesson then – that a crowd was a fickle thing and that they loved a showman. And what a showman the Dragon King was.

Letting Ty's hand drop, Aegon had raised his own arms aloft, posing and preening. He was a victorious idol for a war weary Westeros.

Sure he had served his purpose, Ty's eyes began to search for his beloved amidst the throng. His heart leapt when he found her, looking dazed but able to stand. And then he noticed she was being supported by Rickon Stark. Jealously roared through Ty like wildfire. He was about to push his way through the mob and reclaim what was his – the woman he had fought for, but Aegon's vice-like grip on his arm prevented that. Sensing some fresh entertainment, the crowd fell silent.

"You fought well today Lord Baratheon's squire. Any full fledged knight would be proud of your performance."

Ty thought the only performance going on here was the King's. He was trapped in front of the greatest Lords and Ladies of Westeros, powerless to do anything other than play along with the King's game.

Ty's throat constricted with the humiliation of it, but he forced out the words he knew the King wanted to hear, "The best man won."

Aegon's crowd cheered their approval and 'twas all Ty could do to stop from grinding his teeth in frustration. His skill in Water Dancing was equal to the King's – of that he had no doubt, yet he had still lost. How stupid, stupid, stupid to trip over a tree root – one he had even known was there! Ty cursed himself for his stupidity. But he vowed to learn from this defeat and grow stronger for it. The King had used sword forms and techniques Ty had never seen afore. He swore to himself that he would not stop until he had learned them all; long sword, broad sword, scimitar and then there was the war hammer, jousting and the melee. Oh how naïve and arrogant he had been to think one martial art would make him invincible. He would master them all and he would be the greatest Knight Westeros had ever seen.

"Bend the knee squire."

Ty narrowed his eyes at the Targaryen. Must the King humiliate him even more?

Aegon seemed to find his hesitation amusing, for the King smirked as he said again, "Bend the knee boy!"

Mortified, Ty dropped to one knee afore the Dragon King and bowed his head. What shameful oath would he be made to swear?
To his disbelief Ty felt the touch of steel upon his shoulder. It could not be!

Looking up, he saw the King smiling down upon him.

"Songs will be written about this duel and I do not want minstrels to say I was bloodied by a mere squire."

The crowd laughed. Aegon chuckled. That really was the point of a King's sword resting upon his shoulder. 'Twas all unreal. Ty's head swam with the implications of this as he tried to believe it was truly happening. The pain of the wound in his chest was all that told him he was awake, for there was no such pain in his dreams. 'Twas real! He was about to be knighted!

"From this day forth you will be a Knight of Westeros and I hope those damn minstrels will put that in their songs and forget about your being a squire."

The crowd laughed again. Ty did not care what the minstrels sang. He was about to become a knight!

The King moved his sword to Ty's other shoulder.

"To which House do you belong young squire?"

Ty felt as if his heart had stopped beating. He had been close . . . so close.

Of course, King Aegon needed to know the name of his House to complete the ceremony.

Ty looked up at his King with pleading eyes. Could he not just assume 'twas House Baratheon? Or make something up? Ty did not care. All he wanted was those spurs and that one little word that meant everything to him . . . Ser.

'Twas all slipping away through his hands like sand on the beach.

The King was distracted by the sound of someone clearing their throat. Ty also looked to the source of the interruption. Lord Tyrion Lannister and Lady Brienne stood there side by side. 'Twas one of the strangest sights he had ever seen in his life and he might have laughed had his situation not been so dire. Gendry and Arya stood behind - her expression a dazzling mixture of pride and relief while Gendry looked mightily pissed off.

"The name of his House? We were all just wondering the same thing," Lord Tyrion said, his mismatched eyes regarding Ty intently. Ty felt as if the Lord Hand was trying to see into his very soul.

"Surely you must know to which House your squire belongs?"

The King addressed that question to Lord Baratheon. Ty began to realise why Gendry's expression was so thunderous.

"He's a Flea Bottom bastard," Gendry ground out through his gritted teeth.

"Just like you were," Tyrion interrupted, cutting Gendry off afore he could say any more. "Unclaimed by his father apparently."

"But we suspect he might be a Lannister bastard," Brienne added.

The crowd gasped in surprise, but no one was more shocked by that statement than Ty himself.
"One of yours?" Aegon asked Tyrion.

The Lord Hand looked as shocked by that question as Ty felt. Tyrion's mouth moved, but nothing came out.

"First time he's ever been speechless," Gendry muttered to a chorus of chuckled agreements from the assembled Lords.

Looking down at a still gaping Tyrion, Brienne spoke for him, "We did not consider that possibility Your Grace."

The King turned his attention back to Ty. "Is your mother alive?"

Ty had been rendered as speechless as Tyrion. 'Twas all he could do to shake his head.

"Well, someone must know who fathered you," Aegon grumbled, letting his sword slip from Ty's shoulder. All Ty's hope slipped with it.

"Anyone claim this bastard?" The King shouted to the assembled crowd in general.

To everyone's surprise, Tyrion stepped forwards. "I'm not claiming him, I just want a closer look."

Taking Ty's chin in his hand, Tyrion raised the boy's head. With Ty still on bended knee their eyes were level.

"He certainly looks like a young Jaime."

Various Lords and Ladies muttered their agreement, Brienne being the most enthusiastic amongst them.

"If you have no father and your mother is dead, then who raised you?"

Ty was surprised by the gentleness of Tyrion's touch and the concern in his voice. The Hand's earnest expression and apparently genuine interest loosened Ty's frozen tongue.

"My aunt raised me, my Lord."

"And is she still alive?"

Ty nodded, swallowed hard and admitted, "She lives in Flea Bottom, taking in washing."

"Good!" King Aegon cheered, apparently delighted by this news. "Presumably she knows who did the deed." He clapped his hands together to ensure he had everyone's attention afore proclaiming, "Find this aunt and I'm sure we'll uncover the truth of the boy's parentage. Now who fancies a trip to Flea Bottom?"

The chorus of Lords and Ladies pledging to follow the King was deafening.

Only Ty and Shireen were silent, finding each other's eyes across the Godswood, finding that some things meant more to them than names.

-0-

Chapter End Notes
It’s 2am and I have work tomorrow, but I enjoyed writing this and am full of good intentions to start the next chapter soon. The bloomin’ dog is robbing me of all my free time though.

I hope you can bear with me a little while longer. The next chapter, or maybe the one after, should be the last.
I always wondered . . .

Chapter Notes

Here we are again. Better late than never I hope and I owe you all another apology. I just don’t have the time to write that I used to have, no matter how guilty I feel or much I want to.

I have to apologise too for not replying to all the reviews and comments. I want to, but have been so wracked with guilt over the delays with the story that I feel I have to write before chatting. I do read and treasure them all though.

Thank you all for still being out there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 56

I always wondered . . .

Here we are again. Better late than never I hope and I owe you all another apology. I just don’t have the time to write that I used to have, no matter how guilty I feel or much I want to.

I have to apologise too for not replying to all the reviews and comments. I want to, but have been so wracked with guilt over the delays with the story that I feel I have to write before chatting. I do read and treasure them all though.

Thank you all for still being out there.

King’s Landing had never seen a procession like it. The trumpeters who had not so long ago heralded Arya’s arrival, now led the Great and the Good of Westeros from the airy heights of the Red Keep to the cess pit of Flea Bottom.

Gendry draped a thick arm around Arya’s shoulder and bent to nibble gently on her earlobe. “Tis our wedding day. Let us leave them all to it.”

Arya neatly sidestepped his attempt to steer her in the opposite direction, ducking under his arm afore appearing, as if by magic, on his other side. She giggled with delight as he made a grab for her and grasped only empty air.

Making sure she stayed just out of his reach, she batted her eyelashes at him in a show of contrition, “Do not worry M’ lord. You cannot lose me so easily, after all, we have been joined by the Old Gods and the New.”

She toyed with the clip of her Baratheon cloak which both reminded Gendry she was his but also made his fingers twitch with the need to take hold of her. Surely she wasn’t about to take this game so far as to drop her cloak and let every other man see what was his?

“Do not dare,” he hissed, making a grab for the fur edges of her cloak and yanking them tightly shut.

The feel of the soft pelt over warm, womanly curves had Gendry groaning aloud with need. There was a softness to her now that had never been there afore and he found the combination of her strength and her fertility be a most intoxicating mix.
“I am sure I do not know what you mean M’ lord.” Clever grey eyes looked up at him with mock innocence.

“You know very well what I mean wife and stop calling me that.”

“As you wish,” she smiled up at him “. . . M’ lord.” Her smile widened to a delighted grin.

Burying his fingers deeper in the fur of her cloak, Gendry pulled her towards him until their bodies were pressed together. Flexing his hips just enough to let her feel the evidence of his desire, he bent his head to mutter gruffly against her ear, “You will be the death of me Arya Stark.”

Enjoying herself immensely, Arya wiggled against him so as to elicit another, deeper groan of desire.

“Well, wouldn’t you rather ‘twas me than anyone else?”

Had Brienne not cleared her throat loudly right beside them, Gendry might have been tempted to find a secluded spot in the Godswood and find out if Arya could kill him with pleasure.

“I am going to coin a phrase for you two.” Tyrion stared pointedly at the tourney tent which seemed to have erected itself, at his eye level, in Gendry’s britches, “Get a room!”

While Tyrion laughed at his own cleverness, Rickon mimicked from behind them, “Arya, you should ‘get a room’ you two,” adding “preferably a long way away from mine!” over his shoulder as he walked off to follow King Aegon.

“That is exactly what I intend to do!” Gendry huffed, pulling his own cloak shut to hide his obvious erection from Tyrion’s prying gaze.

“Pah! You cannot miss this!” Brienne scolded, “We need to discover who sired your squire.”

Without waiting for Gendry’s reply, Brienne turned on her heel and marched off to follow the rest of the crowd. Tyrion had to do a strange waddling skip in order to keep up with her long strides.

“You might feel the need to discover who his damn father is . . . but we do not,” Gendry grumbled under his breath, scowling after Brienne’s ramrod straight back.

“We do too!” Arya hissed, punching Gendry’s bicep in frustration.

His “Oof!” of surprised pain drew concerned glances from Sansa and Willas Tyrell who happened to be passing.

“He likes it when I hit him,” Arya smirked, earning herself a disapproving scowl from Sansa and a very surprised look from Willas.

Gendry rolled his eyes skywards, beseeching the Old Gods who were said to reside in the canopy of leaves for the strength and forbearance to deal with his new wife, while simultaneously rubbing his throbbing bicep.

When he looked down, Arya had her hands fisted on her hips and her toe was tapping. ‘Twas never a good sign.

“You can leave and get a room if you want, but I am going to see how this story ends.”

When Gendry appeared to be seriously considering leaving her, Arya softened her stance. She did not believe Gendry did not care who Ty’s father was. Rather, Arya suspected Gendry was hoping he might delay having to pay Tyrion the Gold Dragons he had lost in their wager. She knew Gendry
did not have twelve gold dragons and would have to sell something or mayhaps even borrow the gold in order to pay his debt. ‘Twas an expensive lesson, but one Gendry needed to learn. ‘Twas not just his coin now, ‘twas theirs – his, hers and their child’s. Thinking upon the babe growing in her belly gave her soft, warm feelings that she was unaccustomed to and she rubbed her rounded belly happily. Nae, Gendry had to come with her, ‘twas their wedding day after all.

Looking up at him through fluttering her eyelashes, she reached for his hand. Entwining their fingers, she murmured, “Come to Flea Bottom and I shall make it up to you tonight.”

Judging by the way his eyes darted straight to her chest and his tongue moistened his lips, that compromise met with his approval.

“How?” he asked, eyeing her warily, suspecting he was about to fall into one of her traps.

Lifting their entwined hands to her lips, Arya kissed the tips of his fingers. “I got you a wedding present too.”

“Hmmm. What is it?” Gendry was naturally suspicious. He had been taken in by her eyelash fluttering routine enough times now to know that all ‘twas never as it seemed when she used that mummer’s act on him.

Keeping his fingers against her lips, she whispered in her most seductive voice, “You will have to unwrap it to find out.”

When he still looked unconvinced, she took his index finger into her mouth and sucked. With his eyes fixed upon her parted lips Gendry made a low, animalistic sound in the back of his throat.

Arya smiled around his thick finger, loving the power she had over this huge warrior. Giving his finger a last sweeping caress with her tongue, she tugged his hand away, noting with satisfaction that his attention remained resolutely fixed on the silky strand of moisture that followed his hand from her lips.

“Come with me and I promise I shall give you the best present you have ever received,” she whispered breathlessly, finding herself unexpectedly aroused by this teasing foreplay.

“Fuuuuck me,” was all Gendry seemed to be capable of saying.

Arya knew she had won the argument and was grinning with delight and desire when an unpleasantly familiar voice rasped, “No doubt she will, bastard, but you’ll have to wait. Right now you’re holding up the fucking procession.”

Arya’s attention snapped from Gendry to the Hound, her grin turning instantly to a scowl. Afore she could hurl a suitably scathing retort at him, Gendry had her by the arm, dragging her away in his haste to avoid another confrontation between Arya and Clegane.

“He is right. We should catch up with Ty. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I get to unwrap my present.”

Arya snarled over her shoulder at the Hound and he answered with hollow laughter.

-0-

“So tell me about your mother. . .”

Ty would rather have chewed off his own hand, but he could not avoid answering a direct question from his King.
“She died when I was young.” ‘Twas the most honest answer Ty could think of that gave nothing of the awfulness of the truth away.

“But you remember her?”

Ty wished he could have answered “Nae,” but King Aegon would find out the truth soon enough. The King seemed determined to speak with his Aunt. If the Gods were good, Aunt Tyce would have left Flea Bottom and the King would leave with his prying questions unanswered. But ‘twas already clear the Gods were not on Ty’s side today. His Aunt would be in the hovel she called home, as she always was. Taking in washing in order to scratch a living meant an endless cycle of boiling and scrubbing, of folding and drying. His Aunt might as well have been chained to her tub, as she only left it to eat and sleep on the other side of the one room Ty had called home.

“There’s not much to remember,” Ty muttered. ‘Twas no lie. Every memory of his mother was the same – of her moaning and rocking endlessly in the one chair in their one room. That memory of his mother was all he had of her and if could have rid himself of it, he would, but it was all he remembered of his early childhood. If he closed his eyes now he could still see her rocking, still hear her incoherent ramblings, still smell her. Ty took a deep breath, afore admitting the shame that had blighted his young life even more than his bastardy, “...she was mad.”

That certainly caught Aegon’s attention as he turned the full intensity of those lilac Targaryen eyes on Ty as if he was trying to see beyond Ty’s face and into his very head.

“That we have one more thing in common. My father was quite mad too you know.”

Ty did know. The stories of the previous Targaryen King’s madness were the stuff of legend and nightmares. At least Ty’s mother hadn’t murdered anyone. Or not that Ty knew of, but something had happened to her. Aunt Tyce said she was just like everyone else when they were young. But then Tyce, being the eldest and believing herself in love, had left their father’s farm to follow a passing pedlar to King’s Landing.

Something had happened to his mother after Tyce left and afore his mother’s arrival in King’s Landing, something that turned a maid into a mad woman with a bastard babe at her breast. To Ty’s mind, there was only one thing – or rather one man - who could have caused such an awful transformation. Ty shuddered with a murderous fury as he always did when he thought about his father; the man who must be responsible for his mother’s madness. Ty tried to never think him, as there was no outlet for his rage. Whoever he was, he was long gone, as King Aegon and the rest of the court were about to find out.

It had been winter when Ty had last seen his Aunt’s ramshackle home. The long war had taken its toll on Westeros and, as always, the ones at the bottom suffered the most. By the end of that winter, no one cared how they looked or smelled - surviving was hard enough. As a consequence, his Aunt’s laundry had grown quieter and quieter and their food scarcer and scarcer until the two of them were literally starving to death. No longer able to stomach the guilt of watching his Aunt give him the bigger portion of whatever food there was, Ty left. He had slunk away in the night, like a thief, knowing his Aunt would have tried to stop him if she could.

With nowhere else to go, Ty was determined to fulfil his life’s ambition to become a Knight, or die trying. So he headed the Red Keep, for the one place in King’s Landing where that dream could come true. The Gods had favoured him that day as he had seen the body of a boy thrown from the walls of the Red Keep. Ty had been the only one who cared. He had examined the dead boy and to his keen mind, the smell of horse and the straw in the dead boy’s pockets meant the stable master was now one boy short. ‘Twas a sign. Where there were horses there were Knights. Where better to start his pursuit of his dream than in the stables?
Believing the Gods to be on his side at last, Ty had fought his way to the front of the crowd who gathered every day at the gates hoping for scraps. Ty had shouted for the stable-master until his throat bled and then he had shouted some more and kept shouting until the darkest part of the night, when everyone else had given up for the day and his incessant demands made it impossible for the guards to sleep. When the Master of Horse had finally been roused from his bed and ordered the gate opened, Ty had thrown himself at the man’s feet and sworn on all the Gods he would be the best stable boy the Horse Master had ever seen. Wanting to get back to his bed and needing a new boy anyway, the man had readily agreed.

From then on the Gods had been good; he had met the men of Bad Company, become Gendry’s squire, learned Water Dancing from Lady Arya Stark and despite nearly dying in the Stormlands, he had met the light of his life. He had been so close to having it all. If the King had knighted him in the Godswood, Shireen would have been his. Instead he was heading for more humiliation. The Red Keep fed on gossip and no one would forget this day.

“Do you remember the day King Aegon was nearly bested by a squire?” they would say. “Aye,” would be the reply, “Didn’t he have a mad mother?”

That made Ty more determined than ever. He would make them forget. He would become the best Knight Westeros had ever seen and Shireen would be his. He would show them all. He would succeed, he felt it in his very bones, but this day had to be endured first.

“What is your mother’s face like?”

The King’s question interrupted Ty’s scheming. What had his mother looked like? He could remember the rocking, the mad ramblings, her sour smell, but when he tried to picture her face there was nothing. Rather than admit that to Aegon, Ty told another non-lie, “She was small, with dark hair and eyes.”

He was describing his Aunt, but she had oft times had told him how alike the sisters had looked as girls.

“I have no recollection of my mother,” the King said with a heartfelt sigh, “At least you have that.”

“Aye,” Ty agreed, wishing he could forget every awful memory he had of his mad mother, “At least I have that.”

“Tyrion!” The King turned around looking for his Hand. Aegon kept walking, but backwards, with the same effortless grace with which he did everything else.

’Twas Brienne who waved back as Tyrion’s small figure was lost in the crowd. Dragging the dwarf with her, Brienne pushed through the procession, apologising profusely to all around as she dragged Tyrion towards the King.

Panting from the exertion of keeping up the big folk and near dangling from Brienne’s hand, Tyrion bowed his head.

“I have some news for you,” Aegon grinned. His enthusiasm for solving the puzzle of Ty’s paternity was obvious. “The boy takes his looks from his father’s side.”

“And he looks like a Lannister,” Brienne said triumphantly.

“Lots of youths have gold hair and green eyes,” Tyrion pointed out rather breathlessly.

“Lots?” Brienne repeated sarcastically. “I think not.”
She did not look pleased that Tyrion was questioning what she obviously regarded as fact - Ty was a Lannister. She had a nose for these things. She suspected he was Jaime’s as they shared an undeniable similarity in looks, skills and even had the same arrogance of attitude, something which no bastard squire should have. Mayhaps he was not Jaime’s, but she was certain the squire was a bastard son of that great House.

“That combination of hair and eye colour is rare as you well know and I’ll wager there are no other boys in the whole of Westeros with that height, those fine features, bearing and talent who are not Lannisters.”

Tyrion did not know Brienne of Tarth very well, but he knew that stubborn look well enough. ‘Twas no point in arguing with the Maid. The truth would out soon enough, so he merely shrugged which neither confirmed or denied her proclamation.

The King pursued a different line of enquiry, “You must have quite a few bastards Tyrion. What do yours look like?”

Three sets of enquiring eyes focused upon Tyrion; lilac, green and blue, all waiting impatiently for an answer.

Tyrion had carefully crafted a public image over many long years; he was the drunk, the whoremaster, the half man who cared for no one and nothing except power. That facade protected him from the jokes made at his expense, from the scorn heaped upon the deformed freak and from the worst of all . . . pity. He hated being forced to lift that mask and reveal something of his true self. But he could not, would not, lie to his friend Aegon.

Gritting his teeth, Tyrion forced the truth out, “I have none.”

The King snorted, “Come on Tyrion, your love of whores is legendary. You must have bastards all over Westeros and beyond.”

When Tyrion scowled and shook his head, Aegon looked at first taken aback and then contrite. “My apologies Tyrion. I did not know you were unable to . . .” The King shrugged helplessly, not wanting to embarrass Tyrion further by speaking of his inability to sire children or mayhaps even get his cock up.

‘Twas not often Tyrion was lost for words, but the King’s inference rendered him momentarily speechless. When he did speak he fixed Aegon with those mismatched eyes and hissed, “‘Tis not what you are thinking.”

Brienne looked from one to the other in disbelief. Why would they not talk plainly? Men were such fools when it came to their cocks.

“We have a mystery to solve here and Tyrion’s impotence has ruled him out as the father. Nothing more, nothing less. Now let us focus on the other possible candidates.”

Tyrion gaped at her tactlessness while the King and Ty averted their eyes in embarrassment.

When he recovered sufficiently, Tyrion said quietly, “Believe what you like Maid, but I know I have no bastards.”

Brienne did not understand what the three men were so bothered about, but then she didn’t have a cock. Ignoring their awkwardness, she continued on her quest to answer the question of Ty’s parentage.

“So, we have ruled out Tyrion. What about Jaime? We all agree the resemblance to a young Jamie is
uncanny, do we not?”

Aegon shrugged. If he had ever imagined Jaime Lannister as a boy, the picture in his head would have resembled Gendry’s squire, but Brienne and Tyrion know the Kingslayer far better than he did.

“I told you. Jaime was always faithful to my bitch of a sister,” Tyrion huffed, growing impatient with the Maid of Tarth’s insistence that Jaime was Ty’s father.

“What about Tywin then or Kevan?” Aegon asked quickly, trying to avoid another confrontation between Brienne and Tyrion.

Tyrion snorted, “My father had a few high born mistresses, but he was too much of a snob to dally with the lower classes.” Until he fucked Tysha to humiliate me.

“And Kevan?”

“It would not have occurred to him to cheat on his wife.”

When Aegon looked incredulous, Ty scowled at the King. King or no, here was yet another man who thought it acceptable to break the sanctity of marriage vows. Ty would never cheat on Shireen. Never. She was all the woman he would ever want or need. Why would a man wed a woman he was not prepared to honour in every way?

“Lancel then. What about him?”

“Too young,” Tyrion sighed. The truth of it was that none of the other branches of House Lannister were as renowned for their martial skills as Jaime and as Tywin was in his youth. If the squire truly got his talent from his father as Arya and everyone else seemed to believe, then the Lannisters of Casterly Rock were the most likely candidates. Tyrion could not see how ‘twas possible though.

“There is no point in us guessing or offering up the names of every male Lannister between thirty and sixty. Let us speak to Ty’s aunt and mayhaps we will solve the mystery that way.”

“Agreed.” King Aegon’s pronouncement ended the discussion for the moment, but as the procession was now out with the walls of the Red Keep and as the stink of Flea Bottom drifted into their nostrils, Ty knew ‘twould not be long afore his humiliation would be complete.

-o-

Since leaving Flea Bottom Ty had lived in one castle after another. It had not occurred to him that such luxury would have changed him, but upon entering Flea Bottom again, ‘twas as if he was seeing it with new eyes. Afore he had known nothing but filth and squalor but now he knew how others lived and ‘twas not like this. ‘Twas nothing like this. Now he dreaded the King and his Court seeing where he had been raised, would have done anything to avoid it.

He dragged his feet and shot nervous glances over his shoulder to Shireen. Would she think less of him when she saw how lowly his beginnings had been? He hoped not. He hoped Shireen was better than that, but she was a Highborn Lady, born into a life of privilege and he was the product of this. His love smiled reassuringly back at him. Normally one smile from her would have been enough to have him walking on air, but instead his apprehension grew with every step.

Only Gendry seemed to understand how he was feeling. No words were said, but once they had crossed the Street of Flour, Lord Baratheon had left Arya with Sansa in order to walk with his squire. Knowing Gendry had grown up on these same stinking streets and become a great Lord gave Ty hope.
The trumpeters had long ceased playing and now their procession was led by Ty and Gendry, with armed Northmen on both sides who snarled and rattled their swords if the filthy, curious crowd pressed too close to the Royal party. In some places the alleys were so narrow their procession was reduced to single file. Ty wondered how he could not have noticed the suffocating lack of space, of fresh air and of sky afore.

As if reading his mind, Gendry said gruffly, “Flea Bottom has not changed . . . but we have.”

Ty nodded, feeling sick. He had to succeed as a Knight, for he could never come back here again.

A few more turns and they were there. The ramshackle building where Ty had grown up was little more than a shed. He had never noticed the gaps stuffed with mud around the window afore or the bowed roof.

When Ty stopped in front of the open door, he could hear the water slopping noisily back and forth and his Aunt Tyce singing as she always did when she worked. She must be scrubbing as she was singing “Six maids in a pool.” His Aunt had a different song for each laundry task. Suddenly his heart ached with a longing to be home. He desperately wanted to see his Aunt. He just did not want to see her here.

Ty’s voice cracked as he turned to Gendry. “Can she come to Storm’s End?”

Lord Baratheon nodded grimly, understanding Ty’s feelings as no one else could. “Of course.”

“Shall we proceed?” King Aegon stepped forwards, inviting Ty to walk through the open door of the hovel first. Damn him. The man looked equally at ease in Flea Bottom as he did upon the Iron Throne.

“Shireen?!” Ty called for her with a desperation he so wished he could hide. He wanted his love to be by his side when he met the woman who had raised him.

Arya elbowed her way through the crush, clearing a path for Shireen. Gendry was certainly not happy about that, judging by the way he cursed the Northmen and everyone else for failing to get out of his pregnant wife’s way quickly enough.

As soon as they were through the crowd Gendry wrapped his arms protectively around Arya, as if she needed protecting from anything, while Shireen flew into Ty’s embrace and held him so tightly ‘twas as if she feared he might disappear.

Aegon watched them with a quizzically expression. He had never felt the need to hold onto another so tightly. Or had he? His eyes flicked to Sansa Stark as he remembered that day in the Sept, the day he had bared his soul to her. He had been so sure she was the one.

As if hearing his thoughts, Sansa’s downcast eyes lifted to meet his and, for one unforgettable moment there was no one else, only her, only them and the promise of more. As Aegon opened his mouth to speak the spell was broken, her face turned away by Willas’ hand on her chin. With Sansa’s eyes downcast once more, the Tyrell’s hard, accusatory glare replaced Sansa’s sweet face in Aegon’s line of sight and he too looked away.

Was she the one to make him feel the way Gendry and Ty felt? He had to know. His plans were coming together, their wheels in motion. He had to be patient and give no one cause to suspect a thing. As if he had not a care in the world, Aegon repeated his invitation to Ty.

“Shall we?”

With Shireen’s hand in his, Ty felt ready to face anything. Taking a deep breath, he led her through
the door. His Aunt was bent over her washing tub, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, singing at the top of her voice, just as he remembered.

Judging by the amount of wet washing hanging over their heads and his Aunt’s fuller figure, business was good. Ty sagged with relief. He had not been sure what he would find and this was better than almost everything else he had imagined.

Sensing his presence, Aunt Tyce looked up and smiled. ‘Twas so familiar, ‘twas as if he had only stepped out for a moment and then she shrieked, “Ty! Where ’ve you been?!”

It would take him days to tell her of his adventures, so instead of explaining, he dragged Shireen out from behind him. “Aunt, I want you to meet Lady Shireen Baratheon.”

As Aunt Tyce’s soapy hands flew to her face, Shireen shot Ty an angry look afore smiling at his awestruck Aunt.

“Please call me Shireen.”

Aunt Tyce looked Ty’s companion up and down, taking in her fine clothing, elaborate hairstyle, her poise. The older woman’s gaze finally settling on the patch of grayscale on Shireen’s cheek still visible under her carefully arranged hair. Only the greatest Ladies could be cursed by greyscale and not be cast out by their families. That meant Ty’s woman had access to a Maester and enough gold not to have to care what anyone else thought. A Lady. Ty had brought a real Lady home.

“Did . . .did you say . . . Baratheon?” Aunt Tyce gasped, falling into a wobbly, clumsy curtsey, much to Shireen’s embarrassment.

“Aye he did,” a deep voice said and a huge black haired man squeezed through her doorway, batting away the wet washing hanging from the ceiling. “I am Lord Baratheon.”

Gendry held out his hand, being careful not to bump anything in the tiny room. “Shireen is my niece and Ty is my squire.”

Instead of taking Gendry’s proffered hand, Aunt Tyce stumbled backwards and slumped into the one chair.

“Oh Ty,” she wailed, her soapy hands clutching either side of her head, “What ’ave you gone and done now?”

“He challenged me to a duel, one thing led to another and here we all are,” said another man as he squeezed himself through the narrow doorway and into her home. This one had silver hair and striking eyes but his rough brown robe set him apart from the others who already stood afore her. Their fine clothes confirmed their highborn status, but this newcomer looked like a lowly pauper.

“And who are you to invite yourself into my home without being asked?” Aunt Tyce demanded sharply. She needed to speak to Ty, to the Lord and the Lady but this beggar was in the way. “Can’t you see we’re busy ‘ere?”

With a smile tugging at his lips and a twinkle in his eye, Aegon bowed as low and with as much of a flourish as the cramped room would allow.

“King Aegon Targaryen, the First of my Name. I am at your service Madam.”

The look of horror and then absolute embarrassment that settled on Aunt Tyce’s soapy face had Aegon chuckling.
“Ty! How could you?!” Aunt Tyce wailed. Quick as a flash she grabbed a wooden spoon from the tiny table and whacked him with it.

“Ow! What was that for?” Ty demanded, rubbing his thigh.

“Bringing these fancy folk ‘ere without telling me. Look at me!” She patted her greying hair, trying to smooth down the wispy bits that had escaped her tight bun. “I ain’t ready for visitors.”

Aunt Tyce had a kindly face and lively eyes, but her hard life had left its mark. Vertical worry lines had etched themselves between her eyebrows and they ran across her forehead too, however the lines around her eyes and mouth suggested she also liked to laugh a lot.

“Mother, Father, Stranger preserve me,” she wailed, fanning herself with the wooden spoon. “I think I’m having a funny turn.”

Ty struggled around the tub and dropped to his knees afore his Aunt, murmuring soothing words while his heart pounded under the strain of long suppressed memories. How many times had he knelt in front of this very chair while his mother wailed? He reminded himself he was a man now and this was not his mother.

“Is that really you Ty? ‘Av you really brought the King for tea?”

While Ty tried to reassure his bewildered Aunt that no one had slipped Milk of the Poppy into her tea, Shireen, Gendry and Aegon stood uncomfortably by, squashed together and surrounded by dripping washing.

“Room for one more small one?”

They all looked towards the door – grateful for the distraction, no matter how small. Tyrion waddled in and his eyes immediately fixed on Ty’s Aunt. Grabbing Gendry’s fur cloak to steady himself, he too bowed, albeit with rather less grace than Aegon.

“Tyrion Lannister at your service.”

Until then, Aunt Tyce seemed to have calmed down somewhat, patting Ty’s head as if she could still not believe he was real, but as soon as she saw Tyrion, she wailed anew. “A half-man! ‘Tis a nightmare after all.”

Gendry growled, Aegon frowned and Ty started spluttering an apology, but Tyrion waived their concerns away, “Do not worry. I had provoked that reaction my whole life. I am used to it by now.”

Aunt Tyce could not seem to tear her eyes away from Tyrion, staring at him with something between horror and fascination.

“Anyone would think she had not seen a dwarf afore,” Gendry muttered.

“She probably hasn’t,” Tyrion said with a sigh. “How many do you know Lord Baratheon?”

“A few.”

“Let me ask the question another way. How many do you know who are not fools, whores, mummers or me?”

Gendry frowned and then admitted, “None.”

“Exactly,” Tyrion said with weary resignation. “We are regarded as freaks. If we are not drowned at
birth ‘tis because we are useful to entertain the rest of you or because our fathers have more gold than sense.”

When Shireen looked horrified by Tyrion’s blunt explanation, he explained gently, “You and I must not fool ourselves Shireen. Had our fathers not had money and influence, neither of us would be here today.”

“I think I need some air,” Shireen whispered, pushing past Gendry, Aegon and Tyrion to get out of the tiny hovel. Ty was so engrossed in trying to sooth his Aunt he never noticed her go.

Tyrion cleared his throat in order to catch Ty’s attention. “Should we leave your Aunt to recover and return another day?”

“Nae,” Ty and Aegon said together.

Stroking his Aunt’s arms, Ty said softly, “Can the King ask you some questions?”

“Me?” Aunt Tyce gasped. “What could the King possibly want with me?”

“Just a few questions about Ty’s father,” Aegon replied, adopting the same soothing tone Ty was using.

“Oh, if that’s all then I can’t ‘elp you. I never met him see.”

“But surely your sister must have said something about him?” Tyrion pressed.

When Aunt Tyce shook her head and looked at them all blankly, Ty took her hand in his and squeezed it gently.

“’Tis important to them. The King wants to Knight me you see.” Ty screwed his eyes shut as he explained his current situation to his Aunt, hoping and praying that was still the Dragon King’s intention.

“Really? Oh Ty, you always wanted to be a Knight. I am so proud.” Aunt Tyce grabbed her nephew around the neck and hugged him so fiercely Gendry thought he might have to pry the washer woman’s hands off Ty afore he was squeezed to death.

“But we need a name Madam. We need a House.”

Tyce looked from Ty’s hopeful face to the others who she found stern and intimidating.

“My sister was just a simple farm girl. She didn’t know no high born folk. She was a good girl my sister was my Lords, I mean my King . . . I mean . . . oh dear.”

“She must have said something about the boy’s father?” Tyrion pressed gently.

Ty took a deep breath. There was no hiding from the truth after this.

“She couldn’t say anything, nothing that made sense anyway,” Aunt Tyce explained wringing her hands, “She was mad by the time she arrived ‘ere. No one could get any sense from ‘er. Not even me. My husband got sick of it, ‘e did. Left me ‘cos of it ‘e did, but I couldn’t leave my own sister could I? Not like that. Not with a babe.”

Ty hung his head in shame, but had he looked up he would have seen only sympathy written on the other men’s faces.
“Mayhaps you should start at the beginning,” Aegon said softly.

Aunt Tyce took a deep, steadying breath. “All right then. I was born near Lannisport, but not near the sea. My father ‘ad a croft you see.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows shot skywards at the mention of Lannisport, but Aegon cleared his throat and silenced the woman. If they had to listen to her life story they would be there all day and all night.

“Mayhaps you should start from the time you found out your sister was with child.”

“All right then. But I didn’t know. I ‘ad left the Westerlands by then to come ‘ere with my man. My sister, Ty’s mother, stayed behind on the croft with my father. Next thing I know she turns up ‘ere. On the back of a cart. Raving mad she was, with a gold dragon clutched in her hand and a bastard babe at her breast.”

The awful memory was obviously too much for Tyce and she began to cry. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks and her chest heaved with the effort of holding in her sobs.

Tyrion sat on the dirt floor with a sudden thump. Gendry looked down at him. The Hand did not look well. “Is it too humid in here? Do you need some air?”

Tyrion waived away Lord Baratheon’s concerns, his attention fixed on the sobbing woman.

‘Twas left to Aegon to coax Aunt Tyce on with her tale. “What did the driver of the cart say? Surely he knew something?”

Through her tears, Tyce managed to tell them that an order of Septas had asked the driver to take her sister and her babe all the way to Kings Landing. He was a pious man and had done as they asked.

“But how did your sister come to be with the Septas in the first place? And how did they know you were here?” Aegon asked, putting voice to the questions there were all thinking.

“They were a local order. No doubt they asked around. Everyone knew I had followed my man to King’s Landing. Wasn’t no secret.”

King Aegon motioned for her to continue.

“You want to know why she was with the Septas?” Tyce looked at Ty with her eyes brim full of tears. “I ain’t never told Ty this. I ain’t never told anyone.”

“‘Tis important to Ty,” Aegon explained gently. “He needs to know of his father, be it good or bad.”

“‘Tis bad Ser. ‘Tis very, very bad,” Aunt Tyce gasped through heaving sobs. She clutched both of Ty’s hands to her chest and murmured to him, “I never wanted you to ‘ere this Ty. I never wanted to hurt you. My sister loved you so, so much despite everything and I love you too.”

Aegon let her hold Ty and cry for a little while longer afore he pressed, “Can you tell us what happened?”

Tyce’s gaze never wavered from her nephew’s face as she began to hesitantly tell him the secret she had held for so long.

“The driver, ‘e didn’t know much, but ‘e said those Septas helped fallen women . . . and ‘e said your mother was one of those Ty . . . Do you know what I mean?”

Ty nodded. A whore. His mother was a whore.
A heavy hand gripped his shoulder. Ty looked up to see Gendry behind him. Offering his silent support. Gendry knew what it was to have such a mother.

“My own sister. I still cannot believe it. She was such a sweet girl. Something must ‘av ‘appened to ‘er after our father died. Something terrible, for she was a mess . . . inside. You know what I mean Ty? Oh, don’t make me explain. The Gods only know how she managed to birth you. I often wondered if the pain of that was what drove her mad, but she loved you Ty, never doubt that. She loved you as much as anyone could.”

“I always wondered where whores go.”

“What did you say?” Aegon hissed. Tyrion had spoken so softly the King was not sure if he had heard what his Hand had said.

Ignoring Aegon, Tyrion staggered to his feet. “Your sister’s name. You have not told us your sister’s name.”

“Tysha my Lord. Her name was Tysha.”

-o-

Chapter End Notes

Tysha’s fate was something that bothered me since I first read the books and I knew that, someday, I wanted to give her, Tyrion and the child I imagined the happiest ending I could while still keeping it GRRM real (and you know that means it couldn’t be too fluffy).

Kudos to all of you who guessed.

Hope you liked my take on it. It has been a long time coming.

We’re not quite there yet. But almost . . .

Thank you for reading. Thank you even more if you care enough to comment or review and I will see you again as soon as I can.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!