Summary

When Gendry Baratheon demands a wife who will be of more use than just baring sons, singing songs, and sewing, Lord Robert Baratheon sends a raven to an old friend, requesting that they finally join their houses. Gendry never bargained on Arya Stark, the wild wolf-girl of the North, but she might just turn out to be everything he never knew he wanted.
bastard, rather than the secret child of Lyanna and Rhaegar. All the other Stark children are as usual, but Bran isn't crippled. Arya is seventeen in the beginning of this fic.
Winter Storm

By Kittenshift17

Chapter 1: Of Marrying Age
Arya Stark watched the arrival of the wheelhouses and prancing horses baring bannerman of House Reed with a steady boredom that threatened to overwhelm her at any moment. She was so tired of watching people arrive as suitors for the children of House Stark. This time it was in a bid to marry Meera Reed off to one of the Stark sons. Beside her, Robb looked unimpressed as the girl exited the wheelhouse that had carried her to Winterfell. She'd been brought to the castle as a possible bride for Robb, but Arya could tell at a glance that it wasn't going to work out.

Three moons past it had been the girl of Lannister, and before her the girl of Tyrell. Robb's trouble was that he was looking for everything in a woman that he'd been told to expect of a wife, but also the fire and spirit that Northern girls like Arya had. Thus far he'd been unsuccessful in finding a bride who was both witty and tough yet feminine and beautiful. Meera looked like she might be tough enough, and probably witty enough if the sly glance she shot her brother Jojen was any indication, but she wasn't quite as beautiful or as feminine as her brother expected.

When Robb's attention turned to other things even as they were being introduced, Arya caught Bran eyeing Lady Meera with interest and she wondered if perhaps the Reeds wouldn't have to go home disappointed after all. Bran was only six and ten, but that didn't stop his interest in finding a prospective bride. Arya rolled her eyes at him. Mother had already hinted at the idea of finding them all spouses, and Arya didn't at all like it.

In spite of her begging to the Old Gods, they had not granted her clemency from the woes of womanhood, and just as every other woman she'd known before her had, Arya had bled, indicating she was now of age to bear children and so of age to be wed. The very idea made her stomach turn. She wasn't like Sansa, who had been prattling about being married since she'd bled at three and ten. She didn't at all like the idea of being dragged across the realm to meet potential husbands. Something she'd vocally informed her mother and father of often in the two years since she'd first bled. Thus far they had been lenient and had been holding off on seeing both her and Sansa married, but Arya suspected it was not to last.

Just last night Mother had hinted that they would soon be travelling to Highgarden where Sansa was to meet with Willas Tyrell. She was excited about it and Arya had felt sick at the mere mention. The idea of being forced out of Winterfell and into bed with a husband she'd never even met was enough to turn her stomach and more than once she'd seriously considered running away to become a wildling. At least wildling women were spear wives. She didn't at all like the idea of being the simpering Lady to some pompous lord.

Mother disapproved, but in a bid to keep her from doing just that, Father had granted her permission to learn to fight with a sword alongside her brothers from the time she'd turned ten. Often she could be found in the training yard long after the others had finished for the day. Still, all the swordplay in the world would not keep her from having to do her duty as a highborn daughter of a lord.

Time passed slowly while the Reeds visited, and though they were disappointed that Robb was not interested in marrying Meera, they were overjoyed when Bran had suggested to Father that he marry her instead. Mother was pleased too, though the marriage of her second youngest child before the three elder to him rankled her and drove her to search for suitors for her children more urgently.

That was why she had sent letters everywhere requesting envoys from all the far-reaching families of the realm in search of a bride for Robb. And why she was currently driving Arya mad.

"Arya, if you had to choose, where would you most like to live?" Mother asked her.

"Winterfell," Arya replied, causing a newly married Meera to giggle though she attempted to hide the giggle with a cough when Sansa glared at her.
"Arya!" Mother snapped, losing patience, "If you refuse to cooperate I'll see you married off to whomever makes the best political alliance and won't bother to consult you on the matter first. Now stop sulking like a child. Sansa has already agreed to wed Willas Tyrell, and the Martell's have sent a raven requesting a match between Robb and Nymeria Martell. I've heard rumours she might be what Robb is looking for, both fierce and beautiful. That leaves you."

"What does it matter what I say?" Arya demanded, "You know I don't want to be married to anyone and that I don't want to leave Winterfell or the North. No matter what choice you make, I'm not going to like it, so why do you bother asking me?"

"Because I want you to be happy in your marriage, demon child!" Lady Catelyn snapped at her, leaping to her feet in frustration, "You might not like it, but eventually a husband will grow on you. At least he will if you marry a good man. And since there are few who will remain good men when they learn what a wild, unladylike little urchin you are, I at least wanted an idea of where best to send you to keep you happy. If not with your husband then at least with the place you are forced to live!"

With that Lady Catelyn stomped out of the room, slamming the door in frustration behind her.

"You need to be careful Arya," Sansa warned, "Else you'll end up with one of those fat old lords instead of a young handsome one."

"Oh shut up," Arya growled, her arms crossed over her chest in annoyance.

"Is there really no one in all the kingdoms you could see yourself married too?" Meera asked her in a soft, less biting tone that Sansa had used.

"I don't want to be married at all, Meera," Arya replied. The girl had an aptitude for hunting that Arya had taken to and they had grown fast friends in the moon since she and Bran had been wed.

"Well you have to be!" Sans snapped at her, "All the pouting in the world won't change that. Even Father has told you so. It's not going to be the end of the world, and you will get over it. So would you please stop acting like a spoiled brat and accept that there is nothing you can do about this but grit your teeth and accept that you have to marry someone. No one said you had to like him or that he has to be handsome or tolerant of your less than ladylike behaviour! You don't have a choice but to marry, so at least let Mother and Father help you find someone who might be at least mildly accepting of the fact that you'll backtalk him and go against his direction and probably wind up threatening to murder him in his sleep."

Arya glared at her.

"You're only so touchy because you don't want to marry a cripple!" Arya growled at her, knowing that was the real reason Sansa was so testy. "You'd prefer his brother Loras, the pretty Knight of the Flowers, but you can't have him. You'll instead be stuck with a man who only has one working leg. And like a good little highborn lady you'll bite your tongue and smile and pretend you like it when he fucks babes into your belly, all because you're too proper to say anything! I think we both know who the real idiot is, and it's not me."

With that said and her sister gaping at her open mouthed, Arya stomped out of the room, copying her mother as she slammed the door behind her. She paused outside the door when she heard the unmistakable sound of Sansa beginning to sob while Meera tried to comfort her.

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Gendry Baratheon growled out an oath of frustration when his lordly father found him in the forge,
hammer in hand as he swung repeatedly at the sword he was crafting.

"Knew I'd find you here," his father grunted, propping his huge shoulder against the doorway into the forge and eyeing his son and heir with a twinkle of amusement in his blue eyes. Gendry didn't answer him, though his anger did result in him swinging the hammer too hard and almost shattering the sword.

"So what was wrong with that one?" Robert asked him eventually when it became apparent that the younger, handsomer version of the Lord Baratheon wasn't going to speak except for uttering several foul curses. "I thought she had a nice set of tits on her."

"And that was about it," Gendry grunted.

He was sick of meeting simpering little fools his father wanted him to marry. He didn't want to marry. He was only two and twenty, by the Seven! He didn't need a wife. He had no idea what had gotten into his father's head to suddenly push for a wife, but Gendry was tired of it. They were all the same. Oh they might have had different coloured hair or different sized tits, but they were all just the same simpering, annoying little twits. They all batted their eyes at him the same. They all oohed and aahed over his muscular form and his blue eyes. They all wanted to marry him just so they could outdo their friends and one day become Lady Baratheon of Storm's End.

"Too stupid for you?" Robert asked him knowingly. His father never cared if they were stupid. Sometimes he even preferred it since it made them easier to talk into bed.

"Too interested in being Lady Baratheon and not interested enough in what I want," Gendry retorted, his words punctuated by each clang of his hammer against the malleable metal.

"Too docile, you mean?" Robert chuckled, "Not enough of a hellcat in bed for you, then?"

Gendry aimed a glare at his father for that. All his father ever thought about was fucking them. It drove him mad. If it weren't for his Lady Mother and her capable presence, Storm's End would've been run into the ground by his father years ago. Since Lyanna Stark had refused to marry him and instead chosen to become the second wife of King Rhaegar, Robert had become a furious, empty shell of the man he'd once been. All he cared about was hunting, whoring, drinking and war-mongering.

Besides, he hadn't been able to bring himself to even imagine fucking Larissa Lannister. He knew a scheming bitch when he saw one - not to mention a whore - and he had no doubt that had he fucked her and pulled out to ensure she wouldn't get pregnant, she'd have fucked someone else and claimed the bastard to be his just to get her claws on Storm's End.

"I didn't let that whore into my bed," Gendry grunted, "I wish you'd forget this marriage idea. All these girls are the same. They look different, they talk different, they even smell different, but all they want is Storm's End."

"You need a good woman to help you run the place when you're Lord," Robert replied,

"Then find me one that knows how to actually run a castle!" Gendry growled at his father, "Find me one who knows about things other than singing and sewing and ridiculous dancing! If you insist that I must take a wife now, then by the Seven, Father find me one who'll kick and fight and scream at me when I'm an arse! I need a woman not afraid to scream at me when I mess up! One who won't be afraid at the sight of me in my battle armour swinging my hammer! One who will be a hellcat in the bed chamber! I'm tired of these meek, scheming pathetic women you're shoving me at that are so set on being Lady Baratheon they'd let my horse fuck them for the chance!"
Robert had begun to chuckle and Gendry stopped his hammering to glare some more at his father, wondering what was so funny. He was making these demands though he knew there was no woman like that. At least none he'd ever met. They were all meek and malleable to his will.Forging a sword was harder than getting them to cooperate and Gendry found it unacceptable. His hope was that his father would spend so long looking for the woman he spoke of that he would have several years before he would inevitably have to settle for one of the scheming bitches or, more likely, a meek, pathetic twit who would devote herself to raising his children and leave everything else to him.

"I'll see what I can do," Robert said, still chuckling as he stood straight again, "but be warned son, when I get her here, don't you go telling me you don't want a stubborn mule for a wife or I'll give the Lordship to Edric."

"If you find me one like I asked for I'll marry her on the spot," Gendry retorted grumpily.

"I'll hold you to that, son," Robert said before he walked away, leaving Gendry to his forge and his hammer and the sword that shattered beneath the final blow he landed in frustration.
Chapter 2: A Wolf-Blooded Woman

Lord Eddard Stark stared hard at the letter that had arrived that morning. The stag sigil stamped in the wax seal was a surprise to him and Ned frowned in curiosity. He'd not spoken to or heard from Robert Baratheon in many long years. Not since his children had been very young. Robert had never gotten over Lyanna choosing to marry Rhaegar as his second wife, rather than marrying Robert after she'd learned of Mya Stone's existence and realised what a whore-monger Robert was.

They had tried to get past it several times, but always Robert would get drunk and start shouting about how Lyanna had spurned him. Ned could only imagine what might've prompted Robert to be writing to him now and as he broke the seal on the letter, he vaguely hoped it wasn't some new war Robert was thinking of starting. The man had a thirst for battle that could never be slaked, much like his thirst for wine and whores.

Ned,

You're probably shocked to read this and thinking I'm back at my war-mongering ways, but hang it all we're friends! Word has reached me that you're seeking a husband for that wild daughter of yours. Sod it all, Ned, I'm tired of this mess with Lyanna hanging between us. I propose we join our houses. My son Gendry seeks a wife and he tells me he won't settle for some meek, pathetic little tart, so I reckon we'll give him just the opposite.

If what I've heard of your Arya is true, I reckon she's anything but meek.

What do you say? I heard word too that your eldest is wedded to Tyrell and you'll need an alliance with the Stormlands when the Martells and the Greyjoys hear of that. We can give you that.

Our houses should've joined long ago, but since Lyanna won't have me it'll be up to our children to join us.

~ Robert Baratheon.

Ned felt a small smile tug at the corners of his mouth as he read the letter. It was typically Robert, and the messy scrawl suggested his old friend had already been a few wines into the day when he'd penned the letter. However, it did pose an interesting solution to his current problem.

Cat had been harping at him for moons now to find Arya a husband and for the life of him he hadn't been able to think of a single man he'd want married to his daughter. Sansa had been easy to see wedded. She was the picture of a dutiful bride and had happily agreed to a match with Willas Tyrell, in spite of his crippled leg. Just a seven-day ago he'd returned from High Garden where he'd seen them wed in the Godswood there and had left his beautiful eldest daughter there with the Tyrells.

Bran was wedded to Meera Reed, and already the girl was expecting a babe. Robb too had finally decided that he would accept Nymeria Martell to be his bride and currently preparations were being made for their matrimonial. He wouldn't need to worry about the Martell's being put out over Sansa wedding Willas because Robb would wed Nymeria. The Tyrell's too had been appeased after Robb
had refused their daughter Margery when Sansa had agreed to a match with Willas and so there were no hurt feelings from either house.

Arya however, was proving far more difficult to marry off to anyone. Word of her wilfulness had reached the ears of all within the Seven Kingdoms and many refused to even entertain the idea of such a match, saving those houses that required the alliance such a match forged with house Stark. Ned didn't know what to do about it. Of all his children, though fathers weren't meant to have them, Arya was his favourite. He knew it was his own doing that had resulted in her being so wilful and so defiant. She was proud and wild and the wolf-blood ran strong in her veins.

She was his baby, and he hated the idea of seeing her married off at all. He knew that she needed to be, that Cat would never forgive him if he let her stay unwed and that eventually people would talk. Not that Arya would care. She had no time for gossip unless it directly affected the way she lived her life and the opinions of others mattered little to her. Perhaps Robert might've offered a solution to how he could see Arya married without crushing the spirit out of her.

Robert himself had always favoured Lyanna for her beauty and her wild ways, and Arya resembled her aunt in appearance and demeanour more than anyone cared to admit. He hadn't met Gendry Baratheon in many long years, not since he'd been just a lad when Robert had brought his young sons and daughters to Winterfell in another failed attempt to reconcile their differences after Ned's father had allowed Lyanna to back out of her betrothal to Robert.

He had heard of him though. Word throughout the realm was that Gendry Baratheon was a huge strapping man as similar in appearance to Robert as Arya was to Lyanna. On the battlefield he wielded his war hammer with precision and skill, not to mention enough strength to singlehandedly wipe out battalions. Outside the battlefield however, he did not match Robert in his whore-mongering or drinking. He was a stern, self-contented lad with a knack for smithing and a head for strategy. Ned wondered if perhaps he might be tolerant enough for his fierce daughter.

"Cat?" Ned said, wandering the castle until he found his ladywife overseeing preparation for the upcoming wedding between Robb and Nymeria Martell.

"What is it Ned?" Cat asked, looking surprised to see him.

"I need to speak with you. It's about Arya," Ned told her, taking her hand and pulling it through the crook of his elbow as he led his ladywife away from the Great Hall and into their private bedchamber far from whispering servants and smallfolk.

"What has she done this time?" Cat sighed when they were locked inside their chamber.

"Actually, it's not what she's done. I had a raven this morning," Ned told her, "From Robert Baratheon."

"What does he want?" Cat asked, her eyebrows lifting and her lip curling a little with distaste. Cat still hadn't forgiven Robert for his last visit when he'd told Ned to go and bury his head in the snow if he wouldn't help him convince Lyanna to have him instead.

"He's proposed a match between his eldest son, Gendry, and our Arya. Said the lad wants a wife who's not some meek little behaved woman and he thought Arya might test the boy," Ned explained, dropping down to sit on the edge of the bed he shared with her each night and waiting for her to take a seat beside him.

"You think it wise?" Catelyn asked him seriously, "You know how wilful Arya is, and for all that Gendry might not want a proper lady for a wife, he doesn't want a defiant witch like Arya either."
You know Robert wouldn't hesitate to pull her into line and his son will be the same."

"I don't think he would lay a hand on her Cat, or I would never even consider the possibility. Robert loved Lyanna for the same wildness we see in Arya every day. He wouldn't take it as a personal slight from her or from the Stark's if she isn't always a demure lady like Sansa is. She'd be safe there," Ned told her seriously, "I don't want to see her wed at all, but since she must be I'd prefer it to be into to a family I trust."

"But the Stormlands are so far from here," Cat worried at her lip with her teeth.

"No further than High Garden," Ned reasoned, "Closer even. And you let Sansa go."

"Sansa has never done anything to make me think she would be in need of us when she gets herself into trouble. Not the way Arya has."

"True, but she'd be with Robert. The man I've entrusted my life to many times over on the battlefield. What I've heard of this Gendry is that he's a better man than Robert ever was. Rarely touches the drink, no bastards to his name. According to Robert's letter he specifically requested a wife who'll test his patience and push his limits. If he looks anything like Robert did – and I've heard he does – he could have his pick of willing brides, and yet Robert's writing to us. He wants to finally join our houses the way they should've been before Lyanna married Rhaegar."

Catelyn pondered it a while, and Ned sat watching her. He wasn't sure of the entire idea himself and he shuddered at the idea of telling Arya that they'd found her a suitor when she was so against the entire idea of marriage.

"She's going to hate us Ned. She won't just test Gendry's patience, she'll destroy it. You think she's been wilful and difficult so far, but imagine her when we tell her she's to be married off and sent to the other end of the realm to live with a man she's not laid eyes on in her life," Cat said.

"Well what do you want me to tell Robert? I doubt he'll extend the offer again, and I can think of no one else who would have a chance of wrangling Arya. At least Gendry will have the brute strength to hold her the way no one else ever has. If he's as interested in a non-traditional wife as Robert says then there's a chance he'll tolerate her weapon wielding and her dressing like a man and her cheek."

Cat sighed heavily, leaning sideways into him and resting her cheek against his shoulder.

"Tell him we'll bring her to meet Gendry Baratheon in a moon's time, after Robb's wedding. We'd best let them meet her before we agree to anything, else she'll be widowed or divorced and they'll declare war on us. Until we hear from him again, we'll keep the news from Arya," Catelyn told him quietly, nuzzling her face into his neck and taking a deep breath as though reaching for the strength to tell their wild daughter she was to be married.

Ned couldn't help thinking that it would be easier to simply declare war with his oldest friend now without the hassle of travelling to the Stormlands without his bannermen at his back.

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Gendry was suspicious of his father in the weeks that followed his outburst about a wife who would test him and help him and enthral him. He'd seemed entirely too dedicated to the task of finding such a woman and had even taken to drinking and whoring less. So much so that there was a noticeable difference in the amount of wine ordered each moon. His mother too appeared happier, and Gendry chose not to think too hard on why his father needed less whores and his mother was happier.

All he knew was that there was some strategic planning going on in his father's head and Gendry
suspected he might just get his wish. There was little Robert couldn't achieve when he wanted to.

So when his father came to the forge where he was moulding some new armour for his destrier, Gendry knew that he was no doubt going to learn something that would upset him. After all, he'd requested such things in a wife in an attempt to stave off marriage for a few years, yet within weeks his father had news for him. It did not bode well for Gendry's status as a bachelor.

"I've found her," Robert said casually by way of greeting and Gendry paused in his moulding to look at his father's gleeful expression. It was a sight to behold. The bloodshot red of his eyes from the drink that Gendry had grown so used to was gone and if he wasn't mistaken his father had lost some weight too, not doubt thanks to less wine on a daily basis. His dark hair and beard were neatly trimmed for the first time in Gendry's memory and Gendry could see the remnants of the handsome face his father had possessed in his youth.

"Found whom?" he pretended ignorance, knowing his father was positively delighted to be telling him who the woman he'd found might be and playing along for the sake of seeing his Father grin so gleefully.

"The woman you told me you'd marry. The little hellcat that will give you as much cheek as she will help and one unlikely to fear you in your armour, no matter how intimidating you are," Robert announced, wandering into the forge and inspecting the armour he'd been making with more interest than Gendry ever remembered him showing before.

"You've managed to locate a woman who can achieve what few soldiers can?" Gendry scoffed at him. Everyone feared him in his armour. Even his own mother. The idea that there was some woman who wouldn't was slightly unnerving and Gendry supposed she must be a great brute like Brienne of Tarth if she truly wouldn't fear him.

"I believe so," Robert said, inspecting the breast-plate Gendry had moulded for his war-horse.

"Well who is this mystery maiden?" Gendry asked, beyond intrigued now to see his father so gleeful and yet trying to feign indifference.

"Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell," Robert replied, stopping Gendry mid-swing of his hammer to hear the Stark name. His father rarely spoke of them outside of war stories featuring Ned Stark. His bitterness over Lyanna's rejection of him and his fury over her father allowing her to break off their betrothal had always been a sore spot for Robert and so Gendry rarely heard the Stark name in Storm's End.

To do so now in relation to a possible bride for him must mean his father had already contacted the Stark's on the matter. Gendry felt something inside him squirm uncomfortably at the very idea. It was no secret that Arya Stark was wild. Everyone said so. And it seemed age had not broken that spirit of hers that Gendry recalled from when he'd been very young. Two and ten years past Gendry recalled his father dragging them all to Winterfell, the huge, towering castle, the stronghold of the North. He didn't recall why they had been there, only that he'd met the Stark children during the visit.

He fondly recalled the fast friendship he'd made with Robb Stark and Jon Snow, and the way they had often teased the elder Stark girl, Sansa for her prissy properness even then. Her long red hair and Tully blue eyes had become the talk of the realm as she'd matured and Gendry knew that she had wed Willas Tyrell a few weeks ago. Word had spread throughout the kingdom and Gendry had not been alone in the opinion that such beauty was wasted on the crippled Tyrell heir. Gendry had met Willas more than once and while he was indeed a fine man, his crippled leg did lower the opinion of many.
Gendry recalled too, that during his visit in the North as a lad there had been another younger daughter, though when he'd first laid eyes on the little urchin Gendry had thought her another Stark boy. He remembered that she had always been muddy and dirty, her long dark hair always in a nest. He recalled the sly grin she often wore and the way she so often fled the Septa and her mother as they tried to make a lady out of her. He recalled playing with her, Robb and Jon both fond of her and willing to let her tag along with them. In fact, if Gendry recalled correctly, the little urchin had challenged him to more than one sword fight in the training yards and had beaten at him with her little wooden sword until they'd both been black and blue with bruises. He'd gotten a hiding from Father for it when they'd seen the sight of Arya, bruised and limping. As though he too hadn't been covered in welts and sporting a black eye that had lasted nearly a moon thanks to the way the little brat had shoved her sword pommel into his eye when he'd tried to trap her in a stranglehold to keep her from hitting him.

"You've gone from one extreme to the other," Gendry told his father in an attempt to hide his reaction to the news that he might wind up wed to that little urchin, doubting that she had outgrown the need to challenge every order and push every limit.

"Extreme?" Robert asked him, a big grin on his face. He looked very pleased with himself for thinking of Arya Stark at all and Gendry realised his mistake had been in thinking that his Father would balk at the idea of seeing his heir wed to the farthest thing for a Lady while still remaining female. And she was female. Though the last time he'd seen her he hadn't believed it until that had all gone swimming without their clothes. Gendry chose not to think of what it might be like to do so again now that she had an additional twelve summers on the five she'd counted back then.

"First you send me that Lannister bitch with her scheming and her whorish nature that tried to fling herself into bed with me, and now you tell me you've asked the wildest woman in the realm to come here to meet me, as though she won't attempt to stab me as soon as she lays eyes on me over the very idea of a marriage," Gendry replied drily, not exactly looking forward to the meeting. Even if there was a nagging curiosity to learn if she truly was as wild as they said.

"Ned's not going to let her stab you. I'm sure the rumours are exaggerations anyway, she'll still have some manners about her. But you wanted a woman who won't fear you in your armour and who would tell you when you were being an idiot and fight you on every decision. I found you one," Robert grinned at him widely now, and Gendry got the feeling his words from several weeks past would come back to bite him on the arse.

"When's she arriving?" Gendry asked, resigned to the fact that he may wind up wedded to the most infuriating, defiant woman in all the Seven Kingdoms.

"Should be here within the seven-day. Although last I had a raven from Ned he still hadn't told her about this match yet, so there's always the chance she'll still try to run when they do tell her," Robert scratched at his beard absently, as though it were no big deal that his prospective bride might attempt to flee at the very thought of marrying him. Gendry didn't know if he should be more offended over the idea of a woman wanting to flee him, or flattered that his father clearly believed he'd be able to win over the icy she-wolf of the North.

"They haven't told her?" Gendry choked, "What? They're just going to drag her down here and announce it to her on arrival? You want me to be murdered in my sleep?"

"You're afraid of a woman?" Robert asked, looking disgusted now.

"Don't be ridiculous," Gendry snapped. "I just don't want to be around when they tell the girl famous throughout the realm for her hatred of marriage, that she's got to marry me."
"You'll marry her then?" Robert asked and Gendry could tell from the sudden glint in his father's blue eyes that he was being entirely serious in spite of his amused tone. It didn't surprise him. It would have taken a lot from his father to go to Ned Stark looking for help in finding him a wife he might actually accept. Gendry didn't doubt that even if he couldn't stand the woman he would be required to marry her regardless.

He only hoped she was decent enough to look at.

"I told you that if you found me a woman that was all I asked for I would marry her," Gendry replied.

"Good lad," his father praised and Gendry felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth at the uncommonly heard words of praise.

"Why haven't they told her? Surely she deserves to know her possible fate?" Gendry pried, wanting to know why they would keep the woman in the dark on the matter.

"Ned said the less time she had to plan an escape before they left, the better. I don't doubt she knows by now, since they'll already be on the road, but for all I know Ned might've had to strap her to a wheelhouse to get her here. He reckoned she was going to take the news badly, and if I'm honest he was reluctant to have her marry anyone," His father told his as he wandered deeper into the hot forge and began picking and inspecting the other weapons and armour Gendry had made.

"Lord Stark's not a fan of me then? Or he just hasn't forgiven you for what you told him to do when we all went up there years ago?" Gendry queried over the sound of his hammering as he went back to nonchalantly working on the armour he was shaping.

"You know all his children have been wed since last summer but the youngest and the bastard. Robb wed Nymeria Martell just a few seven-day ago, and a couple of moons back the red-haired thing, Sansa, she wed a Tyrell. Bran, the middle son, he was first, wedded a suitor his brother didn't want, Meera Reed." Robert said slowly, "Ned wouldn't have had much trouble letting those three go. Robb's his heir and Bran will always be around. Sansa too, she was one of those prim, proper lasses who knew her duty and took pride in her lot in life as a highborn lady to wed a lord and let him fuck babes into her belly. Them three would've been easy for Ned. Not so with the wolf-child."

"Wolf-child?" Gendry asked, knowing his father meant Arya but not understanding the name.

"Aye. The Starks are Old Blood boy, they've been up there in the North lording over it all for eight thousand years. They're a direct descendant traced all the way back uninterrupted to the First Men. And since the Pact was made between the First Men and the children of the forest, there has always been a Stark with more of the Children of the Forest blood to them than that of the other kind. Up there they call it the wolf blood. They've all got it, but some more than others. Lyanna had a touch of it, Brandon more than a touch. In Ned's brood, the wolf-child is Arya. I hear tell that bastard of Ned's, the middle lad and the youngest lad have a touch of it too, but Arya is the wolf-child of the litter."

"What does that mean? The wolf-blood?" Gendry asked, intrigued now.

"It differs in every Stark. In some there's a touch of the Old Magic, visions and the like. In others it's simply a wildness. Makes them wild. Makes them defiant. Makes them not fit into the rules society dictates. Arya Stark has all the wildness that once allowed the Queens of the North to run their kingdom with skill and authority. Today we tell our women to smile and look pretty and fuck us when we want to fuck, in return we go to war, we run the castles, we protect them. Women with the wolf-blood never fit that mould. If you want a woman who will sit in this castle and keep the wives
of your underlords happy, don't marry the Stark girl. If you want a woman as willing to ride out in battle for the people as you, she'll never let you down."

"And you want me to allow that?" Gendry asked him father. Sure his mother picked up the slack when his father was too drunk to run Storm's End, but she was still a proper lady. She wore dresses and drank tea with the other ladies of the realm.

"It's what you asked for son," Robert replied, "It's up to you how you deal with her and whether you permit such behaviour. But know this: If you marry this girl, don't do it with the intent to fuck her full of babes and have her as something pretty for the other lords to admire. She'll slit your throat in the night and be gone before dawn. If you marry a Stark with the wolf-blood, you don't do it for their ladylike ways or their demure nature, because neither thing exists."

Gendry frowned a little at the words his father had said. He didn't really know what he wanted in a wife. Not really. He imagined he wanted a woman with more use to him than bearing him strong sons. He imagined it would be harder to run Storm's End than he believed, and a capable wife would go a long way in assisting him do so. But did he really want a wife as like to stab him in his sleep as fuck him?

Did he want a woman who might offend the other Ladies of the realm with her crass behaviour and her preference for britches over dresses? Did he want to deal with having the other lords and his own men scoff at him for the lack of control he had over his wife?

"Father?" Gendry asked, laying down his hammer and meeting his father's curious gaze. "Why did you want to marry Lyanna Stark?"

Gendry saw the pain even the mention of her name caused his father, and he felt bad for it, but he also needed to know. If this Arya Stark was even wilder than his father claimed Lyanna was, he needed to understand how a man he'd only ever known as being a self-entitled, arrogant, whore-mongering chauvinist could have craved the hand of a woman who wouldn't be put in her place and told to smile prettily.

"I wanted to marry her for her beauty. I wanted her for the way she'd throw off the restraints of being a proper highborn Lady in favour of having a horse-race with her brothers. There is a wildness to her, and no doubt to Arya, that better men than you or I have craved, son. Think of the wolf. When you see it, you first feel a fear for the livestock it might take, for the possibility that if it's hungry enough it might rush your horse, unseat you and tear your throat out." Robert explained, a faraway look coming to his blue eyes, "But the longer you look, the more you notice it's grace, the calculating way it assesses you, the calm way it might trot away into the undergrowth, at one with the winter and the world in a way you and I never will be. That sense of heart-racing, spine-tingling fear; that yearning you have when you see it lope across the fields; that total wildness that will never be tamed. That is what you admire in the wolf when you see it."

Gendry raised an eyebrow, not quite understanding what that had to do with Lyanna or Arya Stark. Before he could open his mouth to ask, Robert spoke again, in little more than a sad murmur.

"Now imagine all of that in the most beautiful woman you've ever laid your eyes on, and you tell me how you resist her."
"Surely you jest, Father?" Arya Stark demanded of her father as they sat in the deserted hall. He had summoned her just that morning to inform her that he had been contacted by a lord of the realm, seeking her hand in marriage.

"It's no jest, Arya," Ned Stark replied, a small uncomfortable smile playing at the edges of his mouth. "There was a raven a few seven-day ago, requesting a match between you and Gendry Baratheon, heir to Storm's End. Robert has asked that we travel there so that you and Gendry might meet and decide if the match might be agreeable."

"And you expect me to just nod and smile and daydream of the babes I'll be expected to bear? I am not Sansa, Father. I will not pretend to be happy about this match. I thought you promised me it wouldn't have to come to this?" Arya demanded, her cool grey eyes snapping icy fury at the man who had sired her.

"When did I promise that?" Ned asked, chuckling in confusion.

"When I was just a girl and Sansa told me that no man would ever want me because I have a horse-face and wear britches and am always muddy. You told me that would be ok because I didn't have to marry," Arya replied seriously.

"You knew this day would come, Arya," Ned told her, watching her as though he expected her to attempt to assassinate him.

"You really want me to travel across the realm to meet some Lord who will reject me when he sees that I'm not like the other Ladies? When he sees I'm no lady?" Arya asked him, wondering what could have possessed her father to do this to her.

Arya was no fool, she knew there were few lords in the realm looking to welcome a good-daughter who couldn't be controlled. Word had spread quickly that they didn't want her, and Arya had been overjoyed to hear it. Part of her wondered if perhaps this was some desperate attempt of her mother's to see her wedded off and no longer the laughing stock of the Seven Kingdoms. Another, smaller part of her knew her father wouldn't be telling her all this if he hadn't already agreed to meet these Baratheon lords.

"Would I do so if I thought that would be the case?" Ned asked her reasonably and Arya felt the hope she had to avoid this situation begin to die. No, she didn't think he would drag her across the realm if there was a likelihood this Gendry Baratheon would say no.

"I don't want to marry him, Father," Arya replied quietly. She didn't know what else to say. With her mother and her sister she could argue and scream and fight and try to flee, but there was no use trying any of that with father.

Arya knew in her heart that her Father loved her, perhaps more than he loved the others though he'd never admitted it. There was an understanding between them that she'd simply never had with her siblings or her mother. Father knew her feelings on marriage and he didn't need to hear them again. He knew too that he had told her this without the intention of whisking her off immediately, she
would run for the hills, so Arya knew there would be a horse saddled and ready in the stables awaiting her, along with an armed guard and probably her mother to begin their travel to the Stormlands before afternoon fell.

"I know, love," Ned said heavily, getting up and walking over to her. Arya held her breath when he placed his heavy hands upon her slim shoulders, tilting her head back to hold his grey-eyed gaze. She could see the regret in his eyes at the idea of letting her go and she knew in her heart that it hurt him almost as much as it hurt her to even consider letting her go.

"You're going to make me, aren't you?" She asked, voice very tight as she attempted to blink back tears that unexpectedly threatened.

"I'm going to make you meet him, yes. I wouldn't even consider allowing this match if I didn't think this would be right for you, Arya. You know that, don't you?" He asked her, still staring at her mournfully.

"Right for me?" Arya demanded, letting her anger flare in attempt to fight back the tears that prickled her eyes at his expression and his tone. "Doing what's right for me is letting me stay here with you and mother, with Robb and Nymeria. With Bran and Meera. With Rickon. Winterfell is my home. And now you tell me you want to send me away South to the heat and the oppressive storms of that place. Away from the cold of the North, away from my family, away from everything I know. How can you say this is right for me? You know my feelings on marrying a lord who only wants to fuck babes into my belly to continue his House! And now you tell me some Southern lord will be right for me?"

She was screaming by the time she paused to draw breath, and she could see the way it was breaking her father's heart to see her so upset.

"I believe he will be," Ned answered, "Would you like to know why?"

Arya growled like the wolf she was so often referred to in an uncanny replication of the snarl coming from the wolf at her feet. She didn't answer, knowing Father would tell her.

"He asked for you, Arya. He's met with several other ladies and he's turned them all away because they were too prim and proper and demure. They've asked for a woman who will be as capable of running a castle as him, who will challenge him when he makes a bad decision, who won't be afraid to tell him when he's being stupid." Ned told her, and though she didn't show it, Arya was surprised to hear such things. "Now, if they wanted a woman who would just bear his children and smile at his under-lords, he'd have married that Lannister girl or one of your Targaryen cousins. They wouldn't have come calling on you."

Arya didn't say anything else. She wanted to. She wanted to kick and scream and have them strap her to her horse and drag her the whole way so they would know just how much she didn't want to leave Winterfell and didn't want to marry an idiot. She wanted to, but she wouldn't. She could see it in her father's eyes that he would do so if he had to, but she could see to that if they arrived and this Gendry Baratheon wanted a wife that she wouldn't be, he wouldn't leave her there, no matter how much her mother might try to insist on it.

"Do you mean to leave me there?" Arya asked him, feeling her heart break as she looked past him and around the hall, "Do you mean to leave me in that place I've never been with men I've never met?"

"Don't do this, Arya," Ned said and though he sounded stern Arya could almost hear the way he begged her not to say such things, not to put him in this position. "Don't make me tell you that if I
think it's a good match that, yes, I will see you married to Gendry and leave you in Storm's End as his wife where you will bear him sons and help him run the castle and be his wife."

"Why? Why must I marry? Why can't I stay here?" Arya demanded, her voice icy now and a glare levelled at her father that would chill even the sunniest of days.

"Because that is what highborn ladies do Arya. That is how the world works. Just as I took up the place of Lord of Winterfell and married your mother when my brother died, doing my duty to the Stark name, you will do the same. You will marry a lord and you will bear him children. You will not try and kill him in his sleep, you will not maim, injure or otherwise dishonour him. You will be his wife. You will bear his children and you will do so because I am asking it of you." Ned told her seriously, his voice hardening at her expression, "I don't want to do it, Arya. I don't want to see you forced into a marriage with a man you don't want, far from your home and your family. I don't want to leave you there. But that is the way of the world, and you my girl, must learn that even being a man and being a Lord of the realm does not mean people can do whatever they want."

"Well I want to stay here. I want to ride into battles and fight with my swords. I want to be free to do whatever I feel like rather than stuck in a life I will hate just because it's my duty all because some stupid old man somewhere made some stupid rule that women should be of less value than a good war-horse. I am not some chip to be bartered for the political alliance it will make for you, Father. I am not just going to go and be some stupid man's wife and sew him things and let him fill my belly with his sons. I will not sit quietly in a castle when there are wars to be fought. I am more than that. If you can't see that and this lord can't see it, I will simply prove it."

"And how do you mean to do that?" Ned asked him.

"If he wants to marry me, he's going to have to fight me for the privilege," Arya replied coldly, "And when he loses you will allow me to renounce my title as a Lady. If you do not, I will flee from them, flee from you and flee the realm. I will go beyond the wall and become a wildling woman, free to make my own choices and do as I wish. Or I will cross the narrow sea and join the ranks of the Faceless Men, where I can put my skill with weaponry to use. I will not just go quietly and be some idiot's wife just because he has deluded himself into thinking he wants a woman like me."

With that said, Arya pulled her shoulders from her Father's grip and spun on her heels, stomping away from him furiously. Her mood did not improve when Theon and Robb met her outside the door to escort her to her chambers, where she was made to change into riding attire by her mother before she was frog-marched to the stables and handed the reins of her horse, told that they would ride for the Stormlands just as soon as she was mounted up.

~ O ~

A score of nights later, Arya was grimy and cranky and glaring up at the looming castle of Storm's End from horseback as it grew in the distance. They had been travelling for what felt like forever, and had long since left the North and the calming coolness of the air. Here, the air was thick and muggy with moisture. It clung to her skin and made sweat gather beneath the folds of her riding tunic.

Arya hated it.

Father kept assuring her that it wasn't always this oppressive. That it was the result of the near constant summer storms that gave the Stormlands their name. Arya didn't care. She missed the chilly air and the summer snows of Winterfell. She missed the peace of the Godswood. She didn't at all fancy the sight of those thick, rolling thunderheads that had been gathering out over Shipbreaker Bay in the distance beyond the castle where her possible husband awaited her arrival.
The lands were rich and lush with field upon field of green grass that waved in the slight breeze that had begun to build, but Arya found no beauty in them. She longed for the rolling hills and snow-browned grass of the North. She most certainly did not look forward to their arrival at Storm's End, even if there was the promise of escaping the gathering storm. She dreaded the meeting of Gendry Baratheon, and though she'd been informed by her mother that she had met him once before when they'd come to Winterfell, Arya had no interest in it. Or in him.

Since they'd left, her father's loyal men who rode with them had been telling stories of the noble battle-deeds of Gendry Baratheon. They always did so loudly in the hope that she would overhear, ensuring her impending doom was never far from her mind. She had learned many things about Gendry since they'd rode out the gates of Winterfell, the foremost of which was that he was terrifying to even the most battle-hardened soldiers. Huge and hulking they spoke of him with reverence and a little fear in their voices as they told tales of the way he swung his mighty war-hammer, crushing legions of soldiers single-handedly. They spoke of the truly terrifying sight he made decked out in full battle armour, of the heart-stopping fear he instilled in his enemies when they caught sight of his enormous antlered helmet as he sat astride the twenty-hand destrier he rode – the only steed large enough to hold such a ferocious and powerfully built man.

Other deeds too had been spoken of around the campfires they built each evening. Of his penchant for smithing in his free time, of the ways he differed from his whore-mongering father, the quite nature of the fierce man. They told of his Baratheon temper, so easily flared and destructive in its expression. The men spoke of how he would make a fine leader, and she had heard more than one of them comment that it would take such a powerful, fierce and relentless man to contain a woman like Arya as his wife.

Mikken had told them that if there was any man in all the Seven Kingdoms with any hope of hanging onto Arya Stark, it was Gendry Baratheon. He'd said that all the others were too proud and too pathetic to tolerate her fiery nature and her defiant will and her ruthlessness. Arya had been pleased to hear him speak so highly of her, and put out that he thought this Baratheon lord stood a chance at keeping her as his wife.

Didn't he know that even the fiercest lords had to sleep sometime?

"There it is," Ned announced as the castle loomed in the distance, the last sight before the land fell away in sharp cliffs and into the sea below. Arya would admit that it was an impressive structure, though she wouldn't do so out loud lest someone hear her and get the wrong idea. However, the tower and the strong stone walls did hold her attention in spite of how loath she was to be seeing it at all. It wasn't as impressive as Winterfell, she thought bitterly.

She could feel the eyes of her father's men and the eyes of her mother on her, waiting for some reaction, and Arya refused to let one show. She eyed the structure with boredom and a cool detachment, her steed stirring restlessly beneath her when thunder growled in the distance. Nymeria, her direwolf, loped alongside her horse as the party began to move forward once more, and Arya was thankful for the presence of the wolf. She was Arya's only source of comfort in this journey, and as they drew ever closer to the castle and the lord's waiting inside, Arya felt her resentment for her situation grow.

~ O ~

"Milords! Milords!" The messy haired stable boy shouted, dashing into the Hall of Storm's End with a bang of doors and a flurry of excitement that interrupted the midday meal the Lords Baratheon were enjoying. "Riders, Milords! Riders coming down the King's Road. A whole host of 'em!"

Gendry glanced at his father as he got to his feet. They'd received a raven that very morning from
Lord Stark indicating that their party should arrive before nightfall, and his apprehension over meeting Arya Stark had been growing with each passing hour. Word of their coming had spread through the Stormlands and lowborns had been flocking to the city to witness the arrival of the Starks. Gendry was nervous. He wouldn't admit it aloud, but he was nervous about meeting.

He wondered what she looked like, what she was like as a woman, whether she would fear him. He'd wanted to don his armour and greet their guests in it, all the better to gauge whether his father was right in believing that Arya Stark might not fear him in his battle armour, but he’d decided against it. It set a bad standard to greet invited guests dressed for war. Even if his men had jested that he’d need it to keep the Lady Arya from murdering him on sight.

He strode out of the hall after his father, across the court yard and up onto the battlements where several of his men had already gather to watch and await the approach of the Stark host. Gendry was surprised when he caught sigh to of the group.

"There's no wheelhouse?" He asked, glancing and his father who's brow wrinkled into a frown too.

"I wondered how they meat to get here so quickly dragging one. Clearly they didn't bring one," Robert replied, frowning deeper now.

"Then where are Lady Catelyn and Lady Arya?" Gendry asked. "Is this even the Stark host? We've had some whispers lately of raiders in the outfields. Maybe they've banded together and think they can storm the castle."

"Bandits don't fly banners, boy," Robert told him, "Especially not banners bearing the Stark sigil. Ned must be losing his mind if he's travelled all this way with his daughter and his wife on horseback alongside his men."

"Ain't crazy, milord," An elderly soldier manning the battlement interrupted, "Crazy would be forcing that little Lady into a wheelhouse and expecting her to stay in it. There ain't much ladylike about Arya Stark. She ain't the type for wheelhouses. Ain't the type for sitting in castles like a kept woman neither! Seen her gut a pig once, bare-hands and all. You want a lady for this castle, you best send them Stark's back North. You want a woman who'll hurl a dagger at you when jerk her pigtails, she's it."

Gendry eyed him, remembering that this was a solider who'd come south alongside some others from Ned Stark some years ago when the cold of the winters got too much for his old bones. He was a decent enough soldier in spite of his age, and he'd been in the service of Lord Stark for many long years before the cold drove him south. If any would know the truth to the rumours of Gendry's impending wife, it would be this fellow.

He turned his attention back to the riders on the road, and in the light of the gathering storm Gendry caught the flash of red hair that marked Lady Stark. She sat astride a bay gelding and wore a deep green dress as she rode alongside her husband. Lord Stark rode at the front of the company, astride a huge white destrier. Gendry's eyes didn't linger on them for long.

Riding beside her mother was a young woman in a blue riding tunic. She wore dark britches and her long dark hair bobbed in a braid against her back with the easy lope of her grey steed. One look at her and Gendry understood why she was so often compared to an ice sculpture. Her face was long, but beautiful, her chin pointed, her cheekbones high and sharp. Even from a distance Gendry knew her eyes were Stark grey and he could see them narrowed with anger and hatred as she rode towards his castle.

It was no secret that she wasn't happy about the idea of being married off to anyone, and Gendry
tried not to take it personally. He followed his father off the battlements and into the courtyard to welcome their guests, apprehension almost making him stumble on the stairs.

He'd not expected her beauty. He had heard tell that she wasn't a troll, but he'd also heard she was nothing compared to the beauty of her sister or to the likes of Larissa Lannister. Lady Arya was a different kind of beautiful, and he suddenly understood his father's reference to the wild beauty of a wolf and how it fascinated and ensnared him.

When they rode through the gate, Gendry felt her eyes lock onto his the minute she spotted him and he tried to plaster a smile of welcome upon his face. He was not used to such an arrival, usually having more time to come to terms with meeting a new woman because she was secreted away in a wheelhouse rather than astride a horse and riding with the company. The sight of the humungous dire-wolf that loped easily alongside her horse made Gendry swallow involuntarily, realising that Arya wasn't the only she-wolf likely to rip his throat out if he put a foot wrong.

The beast was huge, it's coat thick and ruffled, grey flecked with bits of black and white. She was almost as tall as the horse Arya Stark rode, and looked as though she could easily kill anything that got in her way or threatened her mistress. Gendry wondered if she meant to keep it here with her and whether she treated it like hunting dog - confining it to the kennels when it wasn't time to hunt - or if it was a beloved pet that would follow her everywhere Arya went. Would Gendry have to share his bed chamber with a new wife and a humongous wolf?

He watched in fascination at the way her horse didn't balk even when the wolf wandered over and began sniffing at its legs while Arya dismounted with an easy grace he'd not seen in any of the other women he'd ever encountered before and he realised in a hurry that it was the ease of practiced movement that leant her such poise as she slid from the back of her horse to land neatly on her feet beside the beast. She was frowning as she dismounted, though he detected a flicker of a smile dancing at the corners of her mouth when her wolf dashed over to her, tail wagging happily and began trying to lick her face. Arya allowed the affection with a grin as she ruffled the wolf's thick fur around her neck before pressing a kiss to the top of the wolf's head.

He realised too late that he ought to have offered to help her down from her horse, the way he watched Ned Stark take the hand of his lady-wife, who smiled regally at him and allowed him to assist her off her mare.

"Ned!" Robert boomed, clearly growing impatient with the way they were all gathered as the party dismounted. They looked travel weary and Gendry noted the fact that Arya and even lady Stark looked a little grimy, as though they had spent many hard days riding in the mugginess of the afternoon.

"Robert," Ned Stark grinned a small grin as he stepped forward to shake hands with Gendry's father, where Robert pulled the man into a brotherly type of hug in greeting.

"It's been too long, old friend," Robert told him and Gendry found himself watching the pair. They had lived together as wards of John Arryn in their youth, and fought many battles together. Their falling out over Lyanna Stark had created a distance between them, but Gendry could see at a glance that the pair were both happy to see their old friend and brother in arms once more.

"It has, you look well," Ned commented, agreeing with a smile. Gendry didn't doubt that the rest of the realm knew of Robert's like for drink and whores, but in the past moons he'd cut back considerably, slimming down with the decreased consumption of Dornish wine and the increased activity he'd involved himself in around the castle as a result.

"And you, and there's Cat!" Robert boomed, obviously excited to have company, he lurched
forward, pressing a kiss to Cat's cheek while she gave him a tolerant but not entirely happy smile.
"Ned, you remember Gendry?"

Gendry jolted out of his thoughts at the mention of his name, he'd gone back to eyeing Arya, who seemed to be glaring around the courtyard with a look of annoyance on her face, telling Gendry she did not want to be there and would probably prefer to fling herself from the cliff's into Shipbreaker Bay below than be in Storm's End meeting her husband.

"Lord Stark," Gendry smiled in welcome, steeping forward and offering his hand to Ned Stark to shake.

"Gendry," Ned greeted him, shaking his hand firmly and holding his gaze. Gendry knew he was being scrutinized by the lord and he knew that if he didn't win over Ned and Catelyn Stark he wouldn't have a hope in all the seven hells to marry Arya.

"Welcome to Storm's End," Gendry said, releasing Ned's hand and greeting Lady Catelyn with a kiss to the back of her hand. She eyed him wearing a much friendlier and more hopeful expression than her husband or her daughter did and Gendry had to suppress a chuckle at the way she seemed so hopeful to have anyone interested in Arya.

While the lord and lady greeted his mother and his siblings, Gendry turned his attention to his bride-to-be. She was shorter than him by a head, and lean. Her body was thin, bordering on skinny, and beneath the fabric of her dark britches and her blue tunic he could see the definition of muscles toned from many long hours spent riding and wielding a sword, if he had to guess. She was not beautiful in the way of Larissa Lannister or her cousin Rhaenyra were, with long flowing hair that hung in elaborate styles, swathed in the finest silks and dolled up with things to make her lips look shiny and full and red. Instead she bore a wilder beauty that he recalled seeing in Queen Lyanna. Her features were longer, her nose pert and just the tiniest bit upturned at the end. She didn't have the lush soft curves he'd seen on other women either, but was instead lean with just a hint of definition that marked the dip of her waist between her breasts and her hips. Her clothing did nothing to encourage him to think of her in a sexual way either, and he suspected it was a size too big for her, as though she enjoyed dressing in ways not designed to allow folks to confuse her as being a highborn lady.

"Robert, Gendry, you recall my daughter, Arya?" Ned's voice cut into his inspection of the girl who was doing her best not to bother looking in his direction.

"Aye, she's grown since I saw her last," Robert said, taking her hand and kissing the back of it. Gendry caught the way she tried to pull it out of his father's grip the minute he took it. "Grown as beautiful as her Aunt. You probably don't remember us little lady, but I'm Robert Baratheon, and this is my son, Gendry."

"My lady," Gendry greeted, taking Arya's hand from his father's grip and bending to press a kiss to the back of it, as was courtesy.

"Don't call me that!" Arya hissed, looking more annoyed by the second as she snatched her hand back out of his grip just as his lips brushed the back of it.

"Arya!" Lady Catelyn warned her immediately and Gendry got the feeling when Arya rolled her eyes in annoyance that this was a regular occurrence and display of poor manners.

"What would you prefer I call you then, if you don't like to be called my lady?" Gendry asked her seriously and he caught the way surprise flickered in her cold grey eyes at his reasonable reaction, realising that she must've been intending to offend him. He got the feeling she was going to make sure he knew just how painful she could be in the hopes of deterring him from marrying her.
Gendry smirked a little to himself. He hadn't wanted to be married yet any more than the woman before him wanted it, and he'd had every intention of putting it off for as long as possible. The sight of her though, made him think maybe he wouldn't mind being married so much after all and he was guilty of wondering if she would be as much of a hellcat in the bedchamber as she was rumoured to be outside of it.

"You can call me Arya or Stark or just about anything else. I'm no lady and I don't like to be addressed as one," She told him, sounding snippy.

Just as he opened his mouth to reply, thunder boomed across the sky and the storm that had been gathering all day looked poised to break open over them all.

"Let's take this inside, shall we?" Robert asked, sounding far too cheery and chipper for Gendry's liking as he waved over the stables boys to take care of the horses. "I'm sure Cat and Arya might like a chance to freshen up after such a long ride in this heat and Ned, we need wine!"
Arya grumbled the whole way into Storm's End. She was already cranky about being there at all and to be forced to bathe, even if she did feel sticky and dirty, was rubbing her the wrong way. She'd been surprised by Gendry Baratheon's manner, and when he'd calmly responded to her childish insistence not to be referred to as a Lady, she'd realised she really might be in trouble here. She had every intention of letting the stupid fool know exactly what he would be in for if he went through with marrying her, and she got the feeling he was more than prepared to ride out whatever she might throw at him. She was led into the castle by Lady Baratheon alongside her mother, who was already glaring at her for her behaviour.

"During your stay you will be in this bed chamber, Lady Arya," Mina Baratheon informed her as she led Arya and her mother into the chamber. It was lavishly decorated with the Baratheon house colours, the spread on the featherbed a fine looking yellow silk. The walls were adorned with fantastic artworks of stitched wall hangings and quilts depicting the sigil of Hose Baratheon; a proud stag amid a forest clearing here, a pair of rutting stags there. Arya tried not to let anyone see her roll her eyes. What did the woman think? That being in a room decorated with the colours and sigil of House Baratheon would sway her to falling for Gendry?

"Thank you," She replied instead, noticing that the ladies maids had already drawn a warm bath for her and placed towels and soap and things by the tub.

"It's no trouble, I do hope you will enjoy your time with us here," Lady Baratheon said and Arya got the feeling the woman disapproved of her as a match for her son. "If you need anything, just call for one of the ladies maids that will be stationed outside your door to give you privacy while you bathe. My daughter's rooms are down the hall if you should require anything and cannot locate one of our household staff."

Arya nodded her thanks, not trusting herself to speak without saying something snarky that might rub the woman the wrong way even further. Not that she cared if the mother of her intended husband disapproved of her, but she didn't want to blurt out something that would embarrass her father either. She intended to come across as self-possessed and independent rather than simply appearing childish and bratty.

"Lady Stark, if you'll follow me I will show you to the chamber you and your husband shall share," Lady Baratheon said, leaving Arya in the room.

"Arya, please wear a dress to dinner," her mother asked of her with a sharp look. Arya pretended not to hear her and her mother left the room, closing the door with a snap. She breathed a sigh of relief to finally be alone.

She hadn't been expecting Gendry Baratheon to be quite so large and intimidating. He was easily a head taller than her and built like a bull. His arms bulged with powerful muscle and his chest was deep and wide. She suspected his shoulders were wider than her arm was long. He was lean, for all the muscle, unlike his father whom to Arya had appeared rather soft around the middle. His hair was dark and wavy, his jaw clean-shaven but darkened with shadow of the beard he must've removed for her arrival.
When he had met her gaze, Arya had noted that his eyes were a brilliant shade of blue. She didn't trust those eyes. He had the types of eyes Sansa would've swooned over and Arya didn't doubt that if she'd allowed herself, she'd have been able to get lost in the brilliant colour of them. She kind of hated him for being handsome and not at all the scrawny little Southern lord she'd been expecting. She also kind of hated herself for even thinking the word handsome. She'd intended to insist upon a duel if he wanted to marry her, but Arya suddenly understood what the other soldiers had meant when they'd said he was one of the few men likely to be able to hold her, because he was one of the few whom she would not be able to beat in a fight. Sure she'd be able to test him, but he had the raw power and brute strength allowed by his size, not to mention experience in battle. He also had a gleam of intelligence in those blue eyes of his, meaning she wouldn't simply be able to try and outwit him.

It seemed she might have to find other ways to test his mettle and to make him earn the right to marry her. Because Arya would not go quietly. As she kicked off her boots, Arya watched the way Nymeria jumped up on that pretty yellow silk bed cover and flopped down on it with a huff. The wolf wasn't appreciating the heat any more than Arya was. When she looked towards the balcony of her room, Arya felt her breath catch in her throat.

It overlooked Shipbreaker Bay and the brilliance of the storm was unfolding before her very eyes. Lightning flashed over the distant headland and with a sharp crack the skies opened up, pouring rain over the bay and the outside world. Arya found herself annoyed when she caught herself feeling grateful to be inside out of the storm. As she stripped out of her travelling clothes, Arya was grateful to be out of the fierce storm that rattled the windows. The bath water was warm when she stepped into it, but in spite of the heat Arya enjoyed the water. The maids had added some kind of sweet smelling oil to the water that made her smell like a flower and Arya scowled about it even as she scrubbed soap through her hair. She was going to have to cut it if she got stuck here in this humid place married to that stupid man. It was far too difficult to tolerate the long waves, especially since the heat kept making the ends curl.

When she was scrubbed clean, Arya laid in the bath a while longer simply enjoying the warm water on her travel weary muscles. A score of days in the saddle had been harder on her body than she'd expected. She was used to riding daily, however to ride from dawn until dusk, travelling mostly at a lope had been more physically demanding than Arya would've believed. It felt nice to stretch her legs in the warm water and to simply be naked. Arya liked being naked. Clothes were so restrictive, especially the types of clothes her mother always tried to forced her into. Heavy dresses with all those small clothes were simply too much for Arya. Give her britches and an oversized blouse any day.

That, she decided, was why she was not going to do as her mother asked and wear a dress to dinner. Choosing instead to find a clean pair of britches and a sleeveless tunic with two long slits up the sides to her hips. The britches were tan, the tunic an eye-catching shade of red. It had been a gift from Sansa on her last nameday, and while Arya had expected that any gift form her sister would be of little use to Arya, she'd found the tunic to be both pretty and functional. Even if it did plunge over her breasts to show off her modest cleavage. Arya thought it actually a rather interesting and graceful solution Sansa had designed for her. The tunic was comfortable to wear, and allowed her to avoid the dresses she so loathed, but still showed off her feminine form beneath the layers of cloth. In fact, she'd liked it so much when Sansa had given it to her, and been so pleased with it, that Sansa had gone on to make several more for her, pleased and utterly delighted by her sister's reaction.

Mother couldn't object to her wearing it either, because it had been a gift from Sansa. It showed of her fighting-toned arms, and flirted with her collarbone, before plunging at the neckline to display her cleavage. It hugged at her waist and then flared to allow for her hips, falling to mid-thigh with slits to allow for ease of movement. The finishing Sansa had added - some intricate embroidery - decorated
the tunic in a way that gave it elegance whilst still maintaining the functionality that Arya so loved. She was rather pleased with it, all in all, and she had several more in many other colours that Sansa had gifted to her for when this one got dirty. Arya pulled her boots on over her feet before straightening. She ought to style her hair in some intricate Northern do that mother would be pleased over, but Arya didn't see the point in bothering. In spite of the storm raging outside the castle, the air was still humid and whatever she did with it would end up looking stupid because the ends would curl and kink in ways that didn't fit the style.

Though she didn't want to, Arya dragged a brush through the long dark waves that fell to the middle of her back, wondering how her mother would react if she cut her hair short so that it brushed her chin.

"Are you ready yet?" Arya asked her direwolf, who was lounging on the bed, stretched out on her back with her feet in the air looking very comical indeed. Nymeria groaned at her in a very wolfy way before rolling to her feet and jumping down off the bed. She trotted over to Arya and sniffed at her curiously, no doubt thanks to the floral oils that had been in her bath tub.

When she opened the door to her chamber, the pair of maids outside the door jumped in surprise and then shrieked in fear when they caught sight of Nymeria.

"A wolf!" One yelled, both of them dashing off down the hall screaming bloody murder. Arya glanced at Nymeria, who looked up at her mistress before her tongue flopped out of her mouth and a wolfish grin spread across her face.

"I love doing that," Arya told the wolf as she set off after the maids, assuming they'd gone in the direction of the Great Hall to summon men to protect the lady from a wolf. Nymeria yipped in agreement and Arya chuckled in spite of the storm and the humidity and the fact that she was far from home, meeting with some lord she didn't want to marry all because Father said she had to.

"Arya?" Father called when she came wandering into the hall, looking around at the layout and noting the difference between this castle and Winterfell.

"Yes, Father?" she asked, glancing over at him where he was seated with Robert and Gendry Baratheon. Many of the men of their guard from the road were also there, all of them sipping on wine and ale and looking to be having a jolly old time. The hysterical maids could be seen over by their lord, gesticulating wildly about a monstrous wolf that had gotten into the castle and was in Lady Stark's room. Arya curled her lip with distaste for their dramatics and for the mention of her title. Was such pathetic moaning really necessary?

"Did you set Nymeria on these ladies maids?" Father asked her, drawing her attention back to him and the other lords. Robert was eyeing her, no doubt for the cleavage she had on display, and looked highly amused. Gendry on the other hand was simply watching her with an unreadable expression on his face.

"You think me so heartless, father?" Arya asked coyly. Last moon she'd set Nymeria on her own ladies maids in Winterfell when she'd found them trying to smuggle her weapons out of her chamber on her mother's orders.

"Yes," Father replied dryly, "And don't try and tell me you would never do such a thing. We both know that you not only would, but that you have in the past and would do so again."

"I didn't even have time to realise they were still in the hall when I opened the door after my bath, Father. They screamed and ran immediately. If they don't stop all that dramatic sobbing, however, I will give them something to cry over," Arya threatened, making sure her voice carried over the
sound of their sniffling, which stopped rather abruptly at her words.

"Must you threaten people everywhere you go?" Harwin asked her with a grin that he tried to hide behind his cup.

"I find it saves time," Arya replied glibly, "Not to mention that I can't then be accused of simply acting on impulse and without warning."

Robert Baratheon began to chuckle at her reply, and Arya's eyes darted to Gendry, who was still watching her. He did so in such a way and with such focus that Arya found herself feeling more the stag and he the wolf. Maybe it was the tunic...

"Does your mother know you're wearing that? She told me you'd be wearing a dress," Father asked her, eyeing her tunic with a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"This is a dress," Arya replied, "A dress Sansa made for me. It would be wrong of me to spurn a gift from my sister, Father."

"I see," Ned replied as all the men at the table chuckled at her logic and her defiance of her mother, "Do you want to join us?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Arya grinned. She'd been expecting to be told she had to go and find the other women.

She practically skipped as she made her way over to the table, being sure to take a seat next to Father, rather than the vacant one next to Gendry Baratheon, which she suspected she was supposed to take. Harwin and some of the others chuckled as she shuffled her chair in beside her father, allowing the serving wenches to pour her a glass of Dornish wine. Nymeria plonked herself down beside Arya's chair and she felt the eyes of her intended husband still on her as she sipped it without looking at him.

"So you were saying that you've been having some issue with bandits in the Stormlands recently?" Father asked of Robert Baratheon, making Arya realize that the serving maids had clearly interrupted their discussion when they'd come running in screaming about Nymeria.

"Right, yeah," Robert said, though he too seemed to be having trouble controlling his mirth over Arya's behaviour and demeanour, "We've had some reports coming in of late about raiding in the outer farms and some brawling in the taverns."

"Any leads on where their base is?" Ned asked while Arya listened avidly.

"Not yet. We sent some scouts out, and a few extra patrols around the borders, but they seem to be slipping in anyway," Gendry answered.

"Mayhaps we should ride out on the morrow and do a thorough search," Robert said, clearly thrilled to have his old friend visiting and the idea of going out hunting raiders from the lands. Arya wondered if she'd be allowed to go. Somehow she doubted it. Of course if she were to simply be riding in the same vicinity that would be a different story.

"Arya?" her mother's voice suddenly came over the top of the men's voices and Arya bit her lip to hide her smile. She had no doubt her mother would ask her to get up from the table where the men were so she could be scolded for wearing her tunic instead of a dress.

"Mother?" Arya asked in the same falsely sweet tone without looking at the woman, noting that all the men had fallen silent at the approach of Lady Catelyn.
"Could you come over here for a moment? I need to speak with you," Mother said and Arya bit her lip harder, trying very had indeed not to snicker at the preposterous situation and at the idea of her mother thinking she would actually willingly go to be scolded.

"What would you like to discuss Mother?" Arya asked, "It's rude to keep secrets, you see? And now that you've made something of a scene over the matter it would be wrong to leave these lovely folk in the dark about it all, wouldn't it?" Arya asked her, pasting an innocent expression on her face, trying to look as though she simply wanted to exhibit good manners, rather than that she wanted to get away with being defiant.

Lady Catelyn pursed her lips, levelling a glare at her daughter for knowing she wouldn't want to make more of a scene by insisting they speak privately.

"Very well. Would you mind telling me why you aren't wearing a dress when I expressly asked you to?" Mother asked and Arya coughed to cover her little snort of laughter.

"I wouldn't mind at all, Mother," Arya said, smiling in what she hoped was a serene way. "You see, I looked in my travel case and there were no dresses inside it. I did choose to wear this tunic that Sansa made for me, however, rather than one of the shirts I stole from Father."

Ned coughed this time to cover the snort that escaped him, his hand going to his mouth as though to excuse his cough. Arya wasn't fooled. She knew that beneath his hand he was smiling.

"What do you mean there were no dresses in your travel case?" Mother demanded, looking angrier by the minute, "Don't you lie to me young lady! I was there when you packed it. I watched you pack at least four dresses into that bag. I made you pack them!"

"Oh yes. Well, you see Mother, when we were travelling here we stopped at several Inns," Arya began unable to hide her wicked smile now, "And while we were at some of them, I noticed that several of the Innkeeper's daughters along the way didn't have many personal belongings. So you see, I felt bad for these other young women who had only soiled, stained old dresses to wear when I had so many. And so I gave them all one each."

"You..." Mother spluttered looking horrified and outraged now, "You gave away all your dresses?"

"Those girls needed them more than I did, Mother. What was I to do? Leave the poor girls in rags when I had so many unneeded dresses?" Arya smiled widely at her mother, knowing there was nothing else Catelyn could say. Not without suggesting that she shouldn't be charitable to those less fortunate than herself.

"Well... wasn't that kind of you?" Mother said through gritted teeth.

"They seemed very appreciative," Arya agreed with her, feeling the flush of triumph to have outsmarted her mother and to have so successfully rid herself of the dresses her mother had forced her to bring.

"Yes, I'm sure they were. I don't recall seeing any of the Innkeeper's daughters that would fit into your dresses, Arya?" Mother asked and Arya smiled.

"I did suggest that some of them might not fit Mother, but the girls I gave them too seemed to prefer to wear the dresses rather tighter than I would wear them, and so they were happy enough to squeeze into them. One told me that wearing that blue one I gave her, she was likely to make twice as much money than she had been making in her stained brown one," Arya said, pretending ignorance while her mother seethed. All around the table the men had begun to look as though they were all close to
breaking into laughter at Arya's performance but doing their best not to lest they offend Lady Catelyn.

"I see. Well I'm sure she will be grateful for such a fine silk dress," Catelyn replied. "No matter, we can simply have some more made for you."

"If you feels that's best Mother," Arya replied, the smile falling from her face, "Not too many though, lest I be struck by another bout of charitable intentions."

"Of course," Cat replied, "We'll have you measured and have them made alongside your wedding dress."

Arya felt her eyes narrow with hatred when her mother nodded and spun on her heels, stalking out of the hall, no doubt with the intention of finding a seamstress. *Wedding dress, indeed!* She thought bitterly.
Gendry Baratheon watched the expert way Arya Stark manipulated herself into not needing to wear dresses for as long as it would take for more to be measured and sewn with a sense of awe and dread. There could be no mistaking that she had obviously planned out her strategy and expected her mother's fury and disapproval. She had even come up with a viable reason to have given away her dresses that wouldn't allow Lady Stark to question her on the matter without sounding as though she disapproved of Arya being charitable.

He was even more unnerved when Lady Catelyn managed to pull Arya back into line in spite of the gloating grin that had spread across the younger woman's face by telling her she would have more dresses made alongside her wedding dress. Gendry found the deathly glare Arya levelled at her mother's retreating figure most unsettling and he didn't doubt that she was thinking about throwing a weapon of some kind at the woman.

She didn't speak for a long time after her mother left the room, but had fallen instead to swigging from her cup as though she didn't really like the taste of the wine she was drinking but approved of the mind-numbing effects of the brew. She had been frowning for a long while as Gendry watched her.

He was vaguely aware of the fact that he was being rather unseemly to be watching her with such scrutiny, but he couldn't help it. She intrigued him. The minute she'd walked into the hall dressed in that form fitting tunic, he'd been guilty of imagining tearing it off her in his bedchamber. That in itself was unnerving because while Gendry ordinarily fancied a fuck as much as the next person, he very rarely imagined himself actually fucking anyone. He'd certainly never done so in regard to the other ladies he'd met in the past moons. When he'd met Larissa Lannister he felt certain his cock had tried to crawl back inside his body where it would be safe from her taloned clutches.

That wasn't the case with Arya. Gendry wanted her. Badly. He was discovering all the stories he'd heard from other men about their lovers or the whores they paid were suddenly accosting him in the most vivid of daydreams, all of them starring the grey-eyed woman glaring around the hall. It was just as well she'd been contrary and purposely ignored the empty seat beside him, choosing to sit by her father instead, because Gendry felt sure that had she sat so close to him he might've been unable to keep his hands to himself.

Every time she moved, his eyes were drawn back to her, even when he tried forcing his gaze away from her. He felt certain that even simply upon meeting and scarcely interacting with the Stark girl that he was gaining new insight to why it was that his father had been so bitter about Lyanna Stark choosing another. He felt like a man possessed as he watched her. That feeling of gazing at something beyond his control and yearning to possess it gripped him fiercely and Gendry knew without a doubt that he was going to do whatever he had to in order to marry her. Of course, he'd have to be smart about it. Telling her fervently that he wanted to marry her because he couldn't stop fantasizing about fucking her didn't seem the best approach and other than her formidable presence and her uncanny ability to manipulate others, Gendry really knew nothing about the woman.

He suspected however, that were she to learn of his interest in actually marrying her, she would run from him faster than a deer from a wolf. He would have to go about approaching the entire idea very carefully indeed, lest he spook her or otherwise irritate her into refusing. He didn't doubt that while her parents might condone the match, Arya would be impossible and might try to murder him in his sleep should he attempt to marry her against her will.

Focusing his attention back on the woman across the table from him, Gendry narrowed his eyes as
he noticed that she had taken hold of the arm of the serving girl who had just refilled her cup with
wine and she was whispering to the girl whilst looking pointedly at something over his left shoulder.
He frowned when he saw the serving wench glance where she looked before looking confused and
then turning to Arya and shaking her head to whatever question Arya had asked her.

"Gendry," his father interrupted his scrutiny with a booming voice, "What say we ride out at dawn
and see if we can't find these raiding bandits?"

Gendry glanced at his father before looking at Ned Stark and the other men at the table, all of whom
were paying far more attention to the discussion at hand than to his future bride.

"Sounds like a solid plan, Father," Gendry replied before shooting a glance over his shoulder to see
what had captured Arya's attention enough to speak to a serving wench about it. He saw nothing out
of the ordinary, only a collection of servants preparing the hall for the feast they would have that
night in honour of the Stark's arrival.

"Excellent!" Robert boomed, his cheeks glowing a ruddy shade of pink due to the wine he was
consuming, "We'll sort these bastards out and get the situation back under control. Hopefully they'll
put up a decent fight!"

Gendry caught the way Ned Stark looked as though he wanted to roll his eyes at the idea of the war-
mongering his Father was spouting. No doubt it would grow from this discussion and Gendry didn't
doubt that soon his father was like to suggest something ridiculous like beginning a battle with the
Greyjoys or something of equal measure in ridiculousness. As they continued to speak, the women
arrived and Gendry caught the look of disdain his mother shot at the tunic and britches Arya wore in
place of a silk dress, the likes of which she and his sisters were clad in. Of course, the look lost some
of its effect when Mya Stone strode into the hall dressed in dark britches and a white blouse beneath
a leather vest. Her dark curly hair was wet from the storm and Gendry didn't doubt she'd been out
riding all day.

His bastard sister was acknowledged by his father and yet Mya made no effort to look like his more
lady-like younger sisters. Instead she was like Arya. She wore britches and preferred riding horses to
sewing, preferred to talk about battle tactics than the gossip of the realm. In fact Gendry noticed as
his sister strode over to the table, her short hair curling about her ears, that Arya was watching Mya
with interest as though she had spotted a kindred spirit.

When Mya dropped into the vacant seat beside him, Gendry grinned at her sideways.

"And how are you today, dear sister?" He asked her in a low voice as his mother and sisters, along
with Lady Stark took their seats.

"Fine, brother, and you?" Mya asked him. Her voice was low pitched and husky when she spoke,
and her eyes - identical in colour to his own - glittered with mischief as she grinned back.

"Just fine. Well, in fact," Gendry replied, knowing she was grinning over the idea of him meeting
with another prospective bride. He often lamented to her that he had no interest in marrying and she
had even less tolerance for manipulative bitches than he did. He and Mya had spent many a good
evening laughing and joking about the women of the realm his father had thought to see him wed.

"Well, where is this newest prospective bride of yours then?" Mya asked him, reaching for her cup
of wine and taking a healthy swig from it as her eyes scanned the hall, clearly looking for some
simpering idiot.

"Over there, in the red tunic," Gendry nodded in Arya's direction. He watched with amusement
when Mya's eyebrows rose at the sight of Arya.

The tunic really was rather becoming on her lithe form, and the colour matched her olive skin tone nicely. The low cut of the front was perhaps his favourite feature, but Gendry was blaming that on the fact that his cock had clearly decided she was to be his bride and so had already taken a liking to her. After all, she bore only a modest amount of cleavage on display and like the rest of her, her breasts were small and pert beneath the tunic rather than great jiggling globes of flesh the likes of which he'd noticed on girls like Larissa Lannister and even Arya's cousin Rhaenyra Targaryen. He certainly preferred Arya.

"Well, she's not what I expected," Mya commented from behind her wine glass even as Gendry noticed that Arya's gaze had strayed to something behind him again.

"I told Father I wouldn't marry a simpering little fool, and he wrote to Ned Stark to send for her. She's even more defiant of the customs and traditions upheld by women than you are," Gendry told his half-sister, unable to hide his own smirk.

"That's Arya Stark?" Mya asked him cutting a glance his way.

"Sure is," Gendry nodded.

"Oh, Brother. I think perhaps Father has you in something of a pickle with this one. I've heard many a tale about the wolf-girl of the North. Are you sure you can handle a woman like her?" Mya asked him seriously, holding his gaze. Gendry wondered what she'd heard.

"I suppose. I put up with you, don't I?" He shrugged, refusing to give away his misgivings about the idea of actually wedding the girl.

It was one thing, after all, to daydream of fucking her three ways from Sunday. It was entirely another to contemplate the idea of tying his life to hers for the rest of his days. If what he'd heard was true she was more than likely to fight him at every turn; to defy his instruction or his will; to involve herself in things a Lady of the house ought not really be involved in. Mya got away with it because she was a child born of fierce passion between his father and a woman from his youth whom he'd fancied himself in love with before he'd learned of his betrothal to Lyanna Stark. Mya was the apple of their Father's eye and he indulged her habits because she was bastard born and therefore required to live a different life to that of a highborn lady, even if she was acknowledged.

Arya, on the other hand was a Lady no matter how she might protest the idea and abhor the label. She was of high birth, born to a Lord and a Lady of the Realm and as such she was expected to behave in certain ways. Were he to marry her, his people would expect her to behave like a highborn lady. They would expect her to be ladylike and polite, to represent his House and her own when in public.

And he doubted she would ever do so adequately.

"You do, but not in the capacity of a wife. If you marry this girl... she'll keep you on your toes Gendry. Are you sure you can handle the stress she will cause you? You have a short temper, you know it as well as I. And every time you lose it she will believe that to be a battle won in her favour. She will provoke you for the sake of it, she will defy your wishes. Can you run the castle and see to your subjects and perform all the Lordly duties expected of you when you have a wife who will embarrass you among the other Lords and Ladies, who will challenge your every directive, fighting you tooth and nail over everything? Can you see her bearing your children and raising them to be respectable future lords and ladies of the realm?"
Gendry pondered the idea for a few long moments.

"I can see myself fucking her into submission if I have to," he replied eventually.

"Oh no," Mya sighed, eyeing him closely now, "You've already decided to marry her, haven't you? She's ensnared you just the way her Aunt ensnared our Father so many years ago."

Gendry didn't comment, though he did return his gaze to Arya, noticing that she was fiddling with something at her hip. He narrowed his eyes, trying to see what it was, but he couldn't make it out, the fold of her tunic and the table hiding whatever it was from view.

"I don't know if I'm ensnared," Gendry told Mya as he turned his attention back to her, "But I'm certainly intrigued. She is anything but a simpering little fool, and thus far I've not even seen her look at me favorably even once, let alone seen the bat of an eyelash or the seductive smile of a tart trying to lure me into bed with her."

"So basically she hates you, doesn't want to be here, doesn't want to marry you, and you're intrigued by that?" Mya asked, laughing now at whatever expression was on his face.

Gendry nodded, knowing it sounded ridiculous but unable to feel ashamed over his yearning to possess Arya Stark in every capacity.

"Well then I wish you luck. You're going to need every bit of it," Mya told him.

Gendry clinked his cup against Mya's accepting her luck, knowing he would need it.

As he did so he noticed the sound of footsteps behind him, and just had time to see a flash of skin rushing towards him in his peripheral vision before Arya Stark hurled a dagger across the room right at him face.
Never a Dull Moment

The path of the dagger, it turned out, was not directed straight at his face but instead at something over his left shoulder. A something that shrieked in pain and surprise the when the dagger found its mark. Gendry spun towards the sound, even as chaos broke out around the hall and Arya Stark sprung up onto the table and bounded over it towards him. He barely had time to snatch her out of the air as she made to leap off it, even as he turned towards the victim currently whimpering on the floor.

Gendry stared at the man lying on the floor with a dagger point embedded in his left shoulder. He couldn't believe it.

"What is the meaning of this?" Robert was booming while Ned was looking shocked and concerned. In his hold, Arya Stark wriggled like a mongrel pup wanting to be put down, but Gendry refused to do so. The woman had just hurled a dagger in very close proximity to his face, he wasn't about to let her loose.

Gendry glanced back at the man on the floor. He was dressed like one of their servants, but in his hand he clutched a wicked looking gold dirk, which he was feebly waving in Gendry's direction as though he meant to stab him with it even though the poor fucker had a knife in his shoulder. It was buried to the hilt, indicating that Arya had thrown it with a great amount of force, for it had pierced the cloth the man wore and become embedded deep in his shoulder.

"Who sent you?" Arya Stark growled at the man on the floor, clearly annoyed by Gendry's hold on her but undeterred.

"Larissa Lannister sends her regards!" The man snarled back at her and Gendry felt his blood run cold. Shock coursed through him as he realised Arya had just saved him from an attempted assassination. He stood her on her feet and she immediately fell on the man, driving her knee into his chest while the other foot stomped hard on his wrist that clutched the dirk he'd meant to use to stab Gendry. She seized hold of her dagger and began twisting in the man's chest, causing him to scream.

Gendry eyed the weapon the blonde man clutched, wondering what kind of damage he'd meant to do with the tiny weapon.

"It's poisoned," Arya said through gritted teeth as she struggled against the man on the floor who was trying to wrench his arm free of her and trying to throw her off him. Gendry wondered how she'd seen his confusion when she wasn't looking at his face.

He wrestled the knife away from the assassin on the floor with ease while Arya twisted her boot on the blonde man's wrist, causing him to yowl.

"Larissa Lannister sent you?" He asked, his temper mounting now.

All around the room, everyone seemed to be in shock. Mya was standing looking furious, his Father's face was turning a shade of angry red, Ned Stark looked as though he was proud of his daughter and simultaneously shocked by the attempt on Gendry's life. Gendry himself was confused and angry.

"Aye," The struggling man growled, "Seems you spurned the wrong woman, Baratheon."

"Give me that dirk," Arya demanded, glancing up at him and Gendry turned his gaze on the young woman. In spite of the man struggling beneath her and the awkward position she held with one foot
on the man's wrist and the other knee on his chest, she looked perfectly in control. He didn't know why he handed her the knife, but in that moment Gendry was very aware of the fact that she had just saved his life and so he simply passed it to her.

One of his younger sisters was sobbing dramatically, his mother looked appalled and his Father was cursing up a storm about the Lannisters and the war they would wage. Lady Stark seemed unable to decide if she ought to be horrified by her daughter's actions, or proud and grateful that she had acted to save Gendry's life.

"Now listen, you little cunt," Arya growled, causing another of Gendry's sisters to utter a shriek of shock at her language. Arya ignored them, the blade he'd given her pressed to his intended assassin's throat and causing a small trickle of blood to leak out around the sharp weapon. "You're going to be taken back to Casterly Rock. You're going to be deposited by some of our men into Larissa Lannister's bed. By the time you get there, you will be dead. The poison she intended for Gendry Baratheon has entered your system now, and will continue to do so as I do this."

Gendry watched in morbid fascination as she scooted her knee back until she was kneeling on the assassin's stomach, causing him to cough and wince and writhe for escape. The dagger she clutched slashed at his clothing, exposing the man's bare chest beneath the thin layer of servant cloth he wore. When the expanse of his chest was bared, Arya used the tip of the dagger to stab into the assassin's skin before she began to use it like a quill, drawing a design in the fleshy part of the skin.

"Arya, what are you doing?" Ned Stark demanded of his daughter as she finished carving something into one side of his chest and began carving something else into the opposite side.

"Sending a message to Larissa," Arya replied evenly, as though she weren't using a poisoned dagger to draw in a man's flesh and getting covered in blood in the process.

"And what message might you have for her?" Ned asked her while Gendry squinted, realising the first carving was the Baratheon sigil. When he caught sight of the Stark sigil on the other side beneath her dagger he felt a cruel smile curl across his face.

"Oh, just a love note really," Arya replied, "I'm sure she'll understand. We had such a close friendship when she came to Winterfell to see Robb."

Gendry suspected he ought to be concerned when he saw Catelyn Stark put her face in her hands at that.

"I see," Ned replied, "Robert, I suspect you might want to hold off on your call for war until after this package is delivered to Lady Lannister."

"You want me to ignore a slight from those cunts?" Robert was exploding.

"I doubt Lord Tywin is even aware of his granddaughter's little gift this evening," Arya replied, "This fellow was very particular that Larissa sent him, no doubt because she raged about it to her father and the other Lannisters and they pointed out that it really wouldn't be worth risking war with the Stormlands over a silly little thing like marriage. You have far more loyal soldiers than they do. They know it wouldn't be worth it to attack simply over her hurt feelings at being turned down. Larissa strikes me as the type of conniving snake who would've proceeded to hire this sellsword to have Gendry assassinated behind the backs of her family. She would have the gold to do so."

"You think she did it independently?" Gendry asked, "Why?"

Arya didn't look up from the intricate carving of the Stark sigil she was creating, her hands coated in
"The timing of the attempt," Arya replied, "She has probably had this fellow lying in wait for some time pending our arrival here, allowing the idea that a foreign man suddenly in your midst is the result our arrival, leading you to believe that he had been hired by me rather than her."

"How did you know he wasn't simply another of our household staff?" Gendry's mother demanded of the girl who had finally finished her carving. She stood slowly, the swordsword on the floor at her feet already drifting into delirium due to his pain and the poison now coursing through his bloodstream. She took both the dagger and her throwing dirk with her, being sure to wipe the blood and the poison off on the assassin's clothing before she sheathed her dagger. She made a point of taking the sheath from the assassin and strapping it to her own belt too, hidden away beneath her tunic.

"I asked one of the other serving girls when I noticed several of you household staff looking at him oddly. She told me she'd never seen him before and that she thought he'd arrived with us, and so didn't know why he would be waiting upon us as such a small travelling party didn't call for servants. Since he wasn't one of yours, and he certainly isn't one of ours, I've kept an eye on him throughout the afternoon, wondering what he was doing. When I noticed him carrying a weapon, I grew suspicious and when he pulled it out and began to move quickly towards Gendry, I threw my dagger at him," Arya explained as though it was all very simple.

His mother looked annoyed by her cohesive answer and his father looked impressed by her attention to detail and her willingness to act in such a situation. One of his sisters or even his mother would've instead demanded answers or gone to a Lord with their concerns, if they noticed anything at all, which was doubtful. Arya on the other hand, had simply thrown the knife.

Gendry suspected that was the moment he decided that no matter the effects of attempting to do so, he wanted to marry Arya Stark. He liked her blunt honesty. He liked that there was no other woman he knew who would have done such a thing. Were it not for her attention to detail and her fast actions, he'd be delirious and on his way to the Nightlands by now. She was the type of woman he wanted at his back should he ever need to rely on his wife to run his kingdom while he battled in war. Hells, she was the type of woman he'd want in battle alongside him! Sure, in the meantime having her at his back when she was so opposed to marriage was a dangerous endeavour, but Gendry had never been one to play it safe.

"It would seem I owe you my gratitude, Arya," Gendry said solemnly, unable to keep a small smile off his face, "In spite of you misgivings over the idea of marrying me and the fact that had this assassin succeeded you wouldn't have to, you still acted to stop him."

"I acted to prevent my House from having to war with yours by being wrongly blamed for your murder. Do not construe my actions to the idea that I wanted to save you," She retorted, "If I were you, I'd be on the lookout for others trying to kill you, Lord Baratheon."

"Now you're threatening me? You save my life one minute and threaten it the next," Gendry chuckled entirely too amused by her crass threat to care about how his sisters and his mother and her mother all gasped in horror at the idea of a Lady threatening the man to whom she might soon be wed, "At least things between us shall never be dull."

"At least there's that," Arya growled sarcastically and Gendry got the message loud and clear that she thought there was little else between them and that if he had any sense he would make sure it stayed that way.

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When the excitement began to die down, Arya returned to her seat, being sure to point out to Gendry that he ought to send one of his sneakiest men alongside her own – Grendlin – in order to have the body of the assassin delivered in secret to Larissa Lannister's bed so she would know better than to mess with Arya or Gendry again. She didn't know why she was so cranky. All she knew was Gendry's suggestion of her saving him as some subtle hint at the idea of wanting to marry him made her want to hurl herself off the topmost tower of the castle and into the sharp rocks and treacherous waters of Shipbreaker Bay below.

Throughout the rest of the evening her mother continued to shoot her looks of approval mingled with frustration, especially when Arya refused to sit next to Gendry as the feast to celebrate their arrival began. She got away with doing so by pointing out that had she done so earlier in the evening Gendry would probably be dead and she might very well be too. Lady Baratheon was less than subtle in her disapproval of Arya, in spite of her actions having saved the woman's son. She glared often in Arya's direction, and as a result, so did many of her daughters.

Arya chose to keep her comments to herself about the woman having so many daughters to begin with. She also chose not to speak unless spoken to, lest her participation be construed as enthusiasm for the idea of marrying the great hulking idiot of a man across the table. The one who seemed to be having trouble keep his eyes to himself. He'd been staring at her even before she'd saved his life, but now he watched her the way the wolf watches the fawn, with a yearning that glittered in his blue eyes and an intense kind of focus that made her just a little nervous.

She didn't like it.

No one made her nervous. Why should the intense stare of this man make her so? She could still feel the ghost of his hold against her as she sat through her dinner from the places where his strong arms had clutched at her, impeding her from reaching the assassin when she'd thrown her dagger. She knew he'd probably only caught her on instinct and had seen her expression of shock when she'd hurled her dagger in his direction. To suddenly find her bounding over the table like no other woman would no doubt unnerved him, the way it did so many others. And yet she felt the ghost of his hold.

She hated herself for still being able to feel his touch against her and she wanted to go back upstairs and bathe again. She'd been given a wet cloth when she'd finally stepped back from the dying sellsword covered in blood from her carvery, and she'd noticed the way Lady Baratheon had eyed her distastefully as she rubbed half-heartedly at the red blood staining her hands. Arya had rolled her eyes at the sight. She didn't care if the woman didn't like her and she certainly had no intention of becoming the woman's good-daughter. Something she hoped to achieve by proving how far from being a Lady she was.

"So Lady Arya, how was your trip south?" the woman with short black hair dressed in men's clothing who sat by Gendry asked her politely midway through dinner, no doubt noticing that Arya had been stabbing viciously at her food beneath Gendry's constant stare.

"Don't call me that," Arya said through gritted teeth. They'd been introduced earlier and Arya had already told Mya more than once not to call her a Lady.

"Sorry, Arya, I keep forgetting," Mya apologized, clearly enjoying the look of Lady Stark and Lady Baratheon's faces as Arya corrected everyone over and over again. It was no secret that rejecting the title as she did was an act of disobedience and defiance against the restraints of their society and many in the past, especially her mother lamented the idea of Arya so willingly casting aside the title that signified she was more important than the common folk, that she was entitled to protection and finery and all the food and featherbeds she could ever need.

"My trip south was unpleasant," Arya replied to her question rather than commenting further on the
matter of her title lest she begin sounding like a parrot in her repetitiveness, "I prefer the cold of the North to the oppressive heat of the South."

"I understand. When I travel between here and the Eyrie I often lament leaving it again for the sticky heat of the Stormlands. The winter is not so oppressive and much rainier than the long summer," Mya told her, clearly noticing that Arya was commenting on her distaste at having to come south at all and making her feelings known on the subject but glossing over it in favour of continuing the conversation.

"Do you ever have summer snow?" Arya asked pointedly.

"Not in the middle of the long summer but as we draw close to Winter we occasionally get a freak snow storm out of nowhere. But usually no," Mya told her, grinning at her across the table. Arya got the feeling she was going to like the woman. There was a carefree, mischievousness about Mya that Arya recognised and it made her think the two of them could someday be fine friends.

She already liked the way Mya wore her hair short, the curls playing about her ears easily. It looked far easier to manage than her own long hair, which was currently still swinging loose because she'd been resisting her mother's attempts to braid it for her. Arya was thinking of suggesting she style her own hair the same way.

"That's a shame," Arya said to her, figuring that if she was going to be stuck here she ought to at least try to make a friend who might be interested in sparring with her. "Do you often travel between here and the Eyrie?"

"Every few moons. My mother remains at the Eyrie and I like to visit with her and bring her what I can. She's not well, and though she always pushed to have me live here with Father she misses me when I'm away," Mya told her.

"Perhaps I might accompany you sometime?" Arya suggested.

She didn't want to acknowledge that she was likely to end up wedded to Gendry, but it seemed unavoidable. After all, she had just sent off a rather offensive package that would undoubtedly cause further bad feeling between her own house, along with the Baratheon house, and the Lannister house. She could also see how pleased Father was to be in the company of his old friend again, and that he was warming up to Gendry, who was keeping half his attention fixed on Arya but the rest on the discussion the men were still having about the possible location of the gang of bandits.

"I would enjoy the company," Mya said, "I usually travel alone or with very few guards, so to have another woman along, one who isn't likely to whine and moan and begrudge the long ride would be most welcome."

Arya felt the first real smile she'd smiled since Father had told her of her fate to come to Storm's End slip across her face to hear Mya's words.

"Is that a smile I see?" Ned interrupted before Arya could reply and Arya realised that he'd been keeping a close eye on her too.

"Mya has invited me to accompany her on her next trip to the Eyrie, Father," Arya replied, unable to help her smile at the idea of escaping this place of storms and watchful men who made her nervous.

"I see," Ned replied, "It's been a long time since I travelled to the Eyrie myself."

Robert drew Father's attention away at the mention of that and Arya stiffened when her mother leant over and hissed at her.
"Must you look so pleased by the idea of leaving this place already?"

"Must you insist on forcing me into a marriage I do not want to a man I do not know all because the outdated and utterly preposterous traditions of highborn society within Westeros dictate that as a woman I've less value than the lands we live off or a valiant steed?" Arya retorted, her temper flaring immediately at her mother's words.

Many at the table fell silent at her less than subtle exclamation. Arya was too angry about the idea to care. If there was one thing she hated, it was constantly being reminded by her mother about the image she ought to be putting forward and how she should be like Sansa – a shy, blushing bride to be, polite and demure and utterly delighted over the idea of being wed. Too bad Arya was none of things and had no intention of pretending to be all for the cause of seeing her wed or avoiding rankling the sensibilities of others.

"Arya!" Catelyn warned her, her Tully blue eyes sparkling with fury over the idea of Arya making a scene once again. She was aware of the fact that Robert Baratheon was chuckling very quietly to himself and that her Father was watching her with a mildly pained expression on his face. Mya across the table from her was looking as though she agreed with the sentiment but also like she disliked the idea of Arya not being interested in wedding her brother.

"Oh, I'm sorry Mother," Arya bit out sarcastically, "Was I not supposed to mention that part of this ridiculous meeting? We all skirt around it and smile and pretend, but the fact of the matter is that you've dragged across the realm for the purpose of pushing me into a marriage in spite of my feelings on the idea of marriage and on the idea of being a Lady. I don't know how many times I need to say it, but it seems I must do so again. I do not wish to marry. I have more to my life than the need to have a man protect me and to fuck his sons into my belly. I am just as capable of fighting and protecting the realm as any man, as was proven this very evening when I slayed a man attempting to assassinate a Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. The fact that you believe I ought to instead spend my life sewing and gossiping and raising babes I don't want, for a man who is only marrying me in order to validate his title is degrading and offensive and I'll not allow anyone, least of all the man you intend to force me into nuptials with, to be deluded about my feelings on the matter."

With all of that said and her mother left gobsmacked, Arya pushed her chair back from the table and stalked out of the hall with Nymeria on her heels. She ignored her mother when Catelyn tried to call her back, and her father when he called her name too. She also chose to pretend ignorance of the expression Gendry Baratheon wore. She hated him a little more when rather than looking offended or embarrassed over her outburst and her rejection of the idea of marrying him, as any other Lord might've done, he instead looked like he kind of wanted to fuck her.
Sweet Rain

Arya barred her door to all who tried to enter the chambers she'd been given within Storm's End and ignored all laments that she open the door and apologise for her behaviour and her slight on Gendry's honour. She ignored her mother, who raged outside her door for nigh on an hour before Lady Catelyn began beat her fists on the door in frustration. She also ignored the voice of her father through the door sometime later when he tried to reason with her.

Rationally she knew that what she'd done was a poor display of manners, especially on the very first evening, and a poor reflection on her mother and father but she was too furious to care. For days she'd been riding for Storm's End though she positively abhorred the idea of marrying anyone. She'd proved all her life that she was more than a piece of property to be transferred; that she could take care of herself; that she could fight; that she could defend the lives of others.

How could it still not be enough? How could her father do this to her? Arya held no real anger towards her mother, beyond a certain frustration with the woman over her naivety on the matter of marriage. Lady Catelyn had undoubtedly come far since her own time as a nervous bride-to-be but she still believed that a good marriage was the only path for her daughter's lives to take, where they would raise babes for their husbands and do all that was expected of them. Since childhood Arya had known her mother felt that way.

Her father, on the other hand, had been different with Arya about it all. With Sansa he'd simply told her he would make her a good match one day, but with Arya he'd allowed her to think she might have a different life. He'd allowed her to tussle and scuffle with her brothers, to spar with them at weaponry, to wear the clothes she liked rather than dresses. He'd taught her to think of things beyond the gossip of the realm and the art of sewing.

To find that at the end of it all she would still be sold into a marriage she didn't want hurt Arya more than she could say. On some level she knew it hurt her Father too and that if there was some other option he would probably allow her to take it. The fact of the matter was that there was no other option. She could of course live out her days at Winterfell doing nothing with her life, and relying on her brothers and her house to provide for her. She could remain childless and alone with no real purpose other than existing in Winterfell.

Arya knew that while it was all she wanted now, she would no doubt come to resent that existence too. She wanted the glory of riding into battle, of having all in the realm know her name for her great deeds in battle. She wanted the freedom to choose to become a knight or to take the Black or travel across to Braavos and become a Faceless assassin. Arya wanted to be a man. Men could do whatever they wanted and no one pushed them into marriages they didn't want. They could go to war. They could do anything. Growing up, Father had allowed her all the same freedoms as her brothers and to find herself in this position made Arya wanted to rage and scream and cry and break things.

She knew too, deep down, and there would someday come a day when maybe she might begin to think about having children, when she might do as her Aunt Lyanna had done and fall in love with a man. She knew it was possible, and she'd had crushes of her own in the past so she knew she wasn't some unfeeling freak. She knew that there would probably come a day when she was old and spent that she might wish she'd had a husband who would've shared in her life. When she'd might wish for children to carry on her line and her values.

But it was not this day.
Today Arya wanted her freedom like a caged bird yearns to take wing and fly. She wanted to run wild like the wolf, free to do as she chose.

When finally the hours wore on and her parents and even her friends finally stopped calling through her door in an attempt to chastise her, to comfort her, to demand that she apologize to Lord and Lady Baratheon, to Gendry, to everyone who'd been at dinner; Arya finally got to her feet. Nymeria lifted her head to peer at her mistress from the place where she'd laid curled against Arya's side on the bed in her chambers and she watched as Arya donned her cloak and her boots once more.

She couldn't stay here. Not another moment. Not in this chamber with it's silly Baratheon sigils and colours. Not in this castle with these silly Baratheon people. Perhaps not even in the Stormlands. All evening, amid her fury she'd been preoccupied with the strangeness she'd seen in Gendry Baratheon and the ways she'd noticed he was different from the other men she'd met, even her brothers. She kept returning to the fact that he'd been grateful to her for saving him, rather than appalled at her actions, even when she'd carved sigils into the chest of the sellword. She couldn't forget the gleam in those bright blue eyes as he'd watched her curse over the idea of marriage to him.

She wanted to know if he actually enjoyed and condoned her behaviour or if he was simply one of those men interested in seeing the fire in a woman, if only to claim the glory of taming and extinguishing that fire. She wanted to know why he'd asked his father to write to hers. Arya was no stranger to the rumours about the realm concerning her fiery spirit and wild nature. She didn't doubt he'd heard of them. Was he simply interested in being able to say that he was the man who'd tamed the wild wolf?

Did he think his fierce, handsome presence would be enough to intimidate her into agreeing to the match? That she would see him and swoon like one of those fools in the songs? That she needed a big strong bull of a man to protect her? That she might fall in love with him simply for his blue, blue eyes and his roguish grin? His strapping build and strong arms? Did he believe that would be enough to tame the fire in her soul? Did he truly believe he wanted a wife like her?

Arya didn't know, but she was certainly going to find out by proving just how much fire and ice there was inside of her. If he wanted a wife like her, he would have to learn to play by her rules, else she was going to chew him up like the wolf she was.

She slipped from her chambers and into the night to a symphony of thunder and rain and the soft click of Nymeria's claws on the cold stone floor. It was not so easy to navigate this new place in the dark as it was to do so within Winterfell, but eventually Arya made her way out of the castle and into the night. The rain poured down from above, but Arya paid it little mind even when it permeated her cloak and began to drip off her skin. She didn't know exactly where she intended to go. For a moment or two she contemplated the idea of taking a horse from the stables and riding away, disappearing into the night never to return, but she would not bring the dishonour on herself or her House with such actions.

Instead, she wandered the yards of Storm's End. There was no one about at the late hour, and beyond the hearth fires burning low inside houses, no lights were lit. Lightning helped guide her in the darkness, and Nymeria clung to her side. Unlike in Winterfell, the courtyard here was paved with smooth stones sunk deep into the dirt, creating a cobblestone road of the yards. Arya suspected it was to combat the amount of constant rain that fell that would otherwise turn such places to muddy quagmires where one might lose a boot and slip and fall.

She didn't know how long she'd been wandering the yards when she heard the soft clanging of metal on stone and she followed her ears and then her eyes to a forge where the fire was still lit and a solitary figure could be seen hammering away at some new creation. From the size of him, Arya was
able to detect who the smith was and before she could think better of it, she found herself moving towards the forge and her intended husband.

He was unaware of her presence when she lingered in the dark just beyond the door, and Arya took the moment to observe him as she'd been unable to since their arrival without arousing suspicion over her interest. He was a beast of a man, easily a foot or more, taller than her. Each of his arms was as thick around as her torso. He was currently shirtless as he lifted and banged his hammer again and again, causing each muscle in his back, arms and chest to ripple and contort with the movement in a way that Arya found almost more hypnotic than watching the firelight flicker.

His chest was covered in curly black hairs that matched those on his head and he was intent on his work as he hammered before he paused to stick the metal back into the fire once more. Arya hated herself a little for the way she felt unable to simply turn and walk away from the forge before he could find her there. She didn't know what it was, but there was something about watching him work the forge that ensnared her as she'd never been ensnared before. There was a smooth rhythm to his motions, a practiced ease to his movement, and with his attention focused on the metal rather than on her as it had been all afternoon Arya realised that if ever there was a man that she was intrigued by, it was Gendry Baratheon.

His intensity showed in his attention to his work, just as it had when he'd watched her inside and Arya found that perhaps there was more to this entire situation than she'd realised. She felt a yearning to ask him all the questions she'd been pondering since her father had told her of their trip.

"Are you just going to stand there in the rain all night watching me, or are you going to speak to me?" his voice growled out over the sound of the rain when he turned a little towards the door as he reached again for the piece of metal he was moulding.

Arya wondered how he'd seen her and whether or not he actually knew she was there. Could she simply slip away as though she'd never been there?

"I can see the firelight reflecting in that wolf's eyes and since she's bigger than any other I've ever seen, I know it's Nymeria. Since she's never far from you, I know you're there Arya. You might as well come in," Gendry continued when she didn't speak or move and Arya glanced down at Nymeria who was watching the man just as intently as she was.

Resigning herself to not being able to walk away now without looking like a coward, Arya stepped forward into the doorway and out of the pouring rain.

"You're soaked," Gendry commented when he caught sight of her and Arya glanced down at herself. She hadn't really noticed the rain, too lost in her thoughts to heed it. The night was still too warm for her blood too, even with the rain, but as she looked at her own soaked clothing and skin Arya realised that she would catch a chill if she stayed this way for too long.

She didn't speak as she took off her cloak and lifted it, twisting it in her hands to try and wring out the heavy water weighing it down. She flinched a few minutes later as she was struggling to wring the whole thing out when Gendry's hands took the material from her and he wrung it with far more strength than she'd been able to, causing another bucketful of water to pour out of it.

"How long were you in the rain, woman?" he complained when he continued to twist the fabric and even more water dribbled out of it.

"I don't know," Arya replied honestly, wondering how he would react if she were to remove her tunic too, which was now dripping wet patches into the hard-packed floor of the forge.
"Give me that," Gendry instructed when Arya's fingers toyed with the fabric.

"What?" she asked, startled by his command and by his familiarity.

"I said give me the tunic, before you catch your death," He told her. Arya hesitated. She wore only a strip of binding material beneath the tunic. Gendry eyed her as he waited, having hung out her cloak already by the fire to dry. "Do it, before I take it from you. I'll not have you dying on me now."

Arya scowled at him and he lost patience with her. She squawked in surprise when he stepped closer and snagged hold of the hem of her tunic, lifting it off over her head before she could fight him off. He chuckled when she growled at him unintelligibly, even as he began wringing the water out of the tunic too, leaving Arya standing with her midriff exposed and her breasts bound only by a thin cloth that was also soaked through.

"I see you're going to difficult about absolutely everything," he commented when she stomped her foot in protest.

"I see you're going to be a big brute and try to push me around as though I won't kill you for it," Arya retorted coldly. She felt self-conscious being so exposed in front of him, in spite of the many times she'd been so scantily clad in the past whilst at Winterfell. Gendry laughed at her threat.

"You haven't changed a bit," he told her as he hung the tunic to dry too before turning that intense stare of his on her once more.

"How would you know?" Arya growled at him, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at him angrily.

"We've met before. At Winterfell, when you'd seen only five namedays. We beat each other to a pulp with training swords and both got our arses beaten for it," He told her as moved over to lift the metal he'd been heating back out of the fire as he picked up his hammer and began whacking at it once more.

Arya glared, trying to recall the meeting he spoke of. She'd beaten lots of boys with her little sword, and been punished for it.

"What were you doing wandering around in the dark? Spying on me?" he asked when she didn't comment.

"I wasn't spying on you! I was walking in the rain and contemplating escape when I heard the sound of your hammer," Arya argued.

"You shouldn't be working a forge in the middle of the night either," Arya retorted, still glaring at him.

"Still cranky, I see?" Gendry commented, shooting her a look over his shoulder at her attitude.

Arya lost her temper at the idea of him trying to tell her what to do and being so flippant about her hatred of him and of their situation.

"Why did you have your father contact mine about this ridiculous marriage idea? You can't actually
"You made them quiet plain at dinner, yes," he replied, "And I didn't have my father do anything. I don't know where you got the idea that being male has any less effect on when a person is expected to marry, but I can tell you right now that it doesn't."

Arya glared at him, doubtful of his words even as he stopped his hammering to turn and look at her in the small forge.

"I don't want to be wed any more than you do, Arya," He insisted, clearly interpreting her disbelief, "However, as heir to Storm's End I have no choice. I can't take over as Lord without a wife, and Father is insisting that now is the right time for me to do so. And so for the better part of a year he's been having eligible ladies from all over the realm brought here for me to meet with them, all with the hopes of making a good match and seeing me wed one of them."

"And you thought it would be fun to meet with me?" Arya scoffed at him, unable to keep from laughing.

"I thought after meeting Larissa Lannister that I wanted nothing more to do with a simpering, foolish little idiot of a woman whose only interest was in bragging to her friends over becoming Lady Baratheon of Storm's End. And so, in a fit of frustration I shouted at my father that if he was so insistent that I must marry now, he had to find me the type of woman who would argue with me and fight with me about things. Who would challenge me on decisions when I was making the wrong one. Who would call me an idiot when I made mistakes. I told him to find me a woman who actually knew how to run a kingdom and who wouldn't be terrified at the sight of me in my battle armour," Gendry retorted, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at her hard.

"And so he wrote to my father," Arya sighed, feeling deflated now and leaning against the wall across from him.

"I didn't expect my father would have any luck finding the type of woman I shouted at him that I wanted for a wife. I expected he might search for a few more years, giving me the freedom to avoid being wed and becoming Lord for a time longer, before I would inevitably have to settle for one of those simpering idiots whose only concerns would be gossip and sewing and raising my sons. Leaving me to run my kingdom however I want without interference," He said.

"Then why am I still here?" Arya demanded, beyond frustrated now.

"Because you're all those things I shouted about wanting in a wife," Gendry shrugged, "And since I doubted such a woman existed I gave Father my word that if he found such a woman I would marry her. Don't delude yourself into thinking I'm any more pleased about this match than you. I'm not. I don't want to be wed either, but as we both must, it makes sense for us to wed each other."

"How does that even remotely make sense?" Arya asked, confused now and feeling a little better about the whole situation to know he was no more for it than she was.

"Because we both have to be wed. Whether we like it or not. So you can make a big deal about this and kick and fight and scream all you want. If you outright refuse to marry me then you'll be taken away back to Winterfell and your mother and father will continue to search for a husband for you. One with far less tolerance of your behaviour and your attitude. No doubt one who would eventually resort to beating you to keep you in line."

"I'd kill any idiot stupid enough to try," Arya interrupted through gritted teeth.
"I don't doubt it," Gendry said, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth, "Which is why it would make far more sense for you to stay here and be married to me. I don't care if you prefer horse riding to sewing, and sparring with weapons to dancing. If you want to ride into battle with me, be my guest. At the end of the day, the two of us wed will result in you being able to be who you are without being chastised for it, and I'll get a wife who will actually be useful to helping me run this kingdom rather than some simpering fool who'll bat her lashes at me and smile coyly as though that is all I require in a wife."

"Do you really have any idea what you'd be getting yourself into, marrying me?" Arya asked him seriously. This discussion was one that was actually improving her mood over the entire idea of being wed to anyone. She'd expected a man like Gendry, so handsome and rugged and foreboding, to hold certain ideals about what he wanted in a woman. All of them being what she was not.

"A shit-storm, I imagine," Gendry replied drily.

"To put it lightly," Arya smirked.

"If that's what it takes. I'd rather wed you than some scheming bitch like that Lannister whore," Gendry shrugged at her.

"Why?" Arya asked, baffled by the very idea.

"Because at least with you, I'd know if you were trying to kill me because you'd come running at me with a sword or try to smother me with a pillow or something. You wouldn't send anyone else to do the job for you because that wouldn't bring you the satisfaction of seeing me die."

Arya realised in that moment that Gendry Baratheon was far smarter than she'd given him credit for.

"Wouldn't you prefer a wife who doesn't want to kill you?" Arya asked.

"You don't want to kill me. Not really. At least not because of who I am. You just don't want to get married," Gendry grinned at her then.

"You're not going to give up on the idea of wedding me, no matter what I do, are you?" Arya asked, knowing a lost cause when she saw one.

"Not a chance," Gendry replied, "Are you going to continue to be difficult about it and make a scene at every meal?"

"Why would I need to? Everyone knows now how I feel about marriage." Arya shrugged.

"So what happens now Arya Stark?" Gendry asked her, a grin still playing on his face and making him look far handsomer than any man had a right to.

"Now I test your limits and we work out whether you really want to marry a woman like me or if you should've just picked a woman who would raise your children without a peep," Arya told him, returning his grin with a vicious one of her own.

"But you already know I'm not going to throw you out of here," Gendry frowned.

"So says the currently calm and untested Lordling," Arya taunted.

"But marrying me is in your best interests too," Gendry argued.

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. It's well and good for you to say now that you don't care what I do,
that you'll tolerate it and condone it, but for all I know, you're just saying that so you don't have to marry someone boring. It might be that you can't actually stand it when I ride out on my own to explore without an escort, or when I say something not at all ladylike to your small folk or your mother or some other lord. And if you can't handle it when I do those things, you certainly won't handle it when all your bannermen protest having their Lady among the ranks of your army or when they call for me to be bearing your sons rather than defending theirs."

"I see, so you're going to test me and see how long it takes for me to lose my temper with you and try to relegate you to our bedchamber?"

"I'm going to test you and make sure that if I marry you, I won't end up needing to kill you."

"By pushing me and seeing how long it takes for me to want to kill you?" Gendry nodded as though he understood and Arya couldn't help but grin.

"Exactly."
Gendry couldn't take his eyes off the woman standing before him smirking at him as though she thought she was the cleverest in all the Realm. The sight of her standing there with nought but that little bit of cloth strapped around her breasts and her sodden britches made him want to take her right there against the wall of his forge where she leaned so provocatively.

It was hardly fair and the urge to have his way with her beat at him furiously, demanding his strength of will to keep from doing so, lest she stab him with the pair of daggers he could see strapped to her belt. Her britches hung low on her bony hips, weighed down by the water from the rain and exposing her sharp hipbones. Her flat toned stomach was on display and her britches flirted with the idea of slipping right off her and down her long legs to the floor. Gendry wished they would.

"You really should get out of those too, you know?" he said, nodding his head towards the strip of cloth she had bound around her breasts and her sodden britches. He told himself it was a suggestion made out of concern for her health, but the fact of the matter was that he wanted to see all of her.

The look on her face told him she knew it too.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she sneered though she flashed a grin at him. Gendry found himself grinning back wolfishly.

"Yes," he admitted, "But you really do need to take them off or you're going to get sick. Put this on."

He snagged his discarded undershirt from the wall behind him and held it out to Arya, who eyed it warily. When she didn't make any move to take it or to remove the rest of her wet clothing, in spite of the way she'd begun to shiver despite the warmth of the forge Gendry narrowed his eyes on her.

"Do I need to relieve you of those the way I did with your tunic?" he asked, doing his best not to sound too hopeful.

"Do I need to stab you with something to make sure you don't go trying to manhandle me into doing whatever you think is best?" she retorted, narrowing her grey eyes on him.

"Won't have to manhandle you if you do what's good for you," Gendry shrugged.

He hid his grin when Arya moved forward away from the wall to snatch the offered shirt from his grip. He also did his best to keep his eyes on her face rather than on the sinewy grace she exuded when she moved. He was surprised when she went to the door of the forge and closed it, sealing them both inside it before standing with her back to him.

Gendry bit his lip on a groan when she slowly unravelled the strip of cloth binding her breasts, revealing the smooth expanse of her back and shoulders to his gaze. He knew it was too much to hope for that she might turn and give him a full frontal view of her breasts too, but that didn't stop him wishing it would be a reality.

He consoled himself with the knowledge that come what may he was going to marry the little urchin. And when he did he'd have her any way he wanted her. He wouldn't just get to see her naked. He'd get to run his hands and mouth over that tight little body of hers and do all the unspeakable things he'd been imagining himself doing to her since the minute he'd laid eyes on her.

Gendry jumped in surprise when she tossed the balled up cloth over her shoulder at him, catching it one handed and nearly braining himself with his hammer in the process.
"Wring that out, would you?" she asked without looking at him as she slipped his shirt over her head, concealing her body beneath the folds.

While he put down his hammer and began to do so, he caught the way she slipped her hands under the hem of the shirt and began to wiggle out of her sodden britches, toeing her boots off her feet as she did so. Without them on the shirt came to mid-thigh on Arya and completely overwhelmed her slim frame, hiding every curve he'd just been admiring. Just like the rest of her, the legs poking out the bottom of his shirt were long and toned, hardened from years of use fighting and horse-riding Gendry suspected. With her feet bare, she turned towards him, clutching the now balled up pair of britches.

Gendry held his hand out for them, intending to wring the water from them too after having hung up the strip of binding cloth alongside her tunic and cloak.

"Put your boots back on," he instructed when she made to step towards him, "Or you'll get metal shavings in your feet."

Arya narrowed her eyes at him again at being told what to do but Gendry just stared at her. She didn't have to do it. He wasn't going to make her. But he would make fun of her if she'd didn't and then got a metal splinter in her foot. He suspected she realised that too, because though she continued to glare at him, she slipped her boots back on her dainty little feet before walking towards him.

When she tossed the sodden britches at him Gendry caught them. And he began to smirk when he noticed that she clearly hadn't been wearing any kind of undergarment that ladies usually wore. He could see from the outline of her hip through his shirt that she was totally bare beneath the folds of fabric, and there were no undergarments amid the ball of cloth he began twisting, watching the water cascade out of them.

"Why do you keep looking at me like that?" she asked him when he was done and Gendry raised his eyebrows at her. She'd wandered away from him a little and begun inspecting the many complete works lying about his forge.

"How do you know I'm looking at you?" he asked since she had her back turned and was studying the intricate detail he'd put into making a collection of metal arrow heads that he intended to gift to Mya on her next name-day.

"I can feel you looking at me," she replied without returning the gaze he had trained on her and Gendry wasn't sure if he should be pleased or concerned that she was so aware of his attentions, "Not to mention you've been routinely staring at me since I walked into the Great Hall inside earlier. I assumed it was the tunic, but you're still staring."

"Maybe I like the way you look," Gendry suggested.

"I'm not surprised that you're totally damaged," she replied and Gendry frowned at her words, wondering what she meant.

"Damaged?" he asked, "You think I'm damaged?"

"I know you're damaged," she said, moving on to the armour he'd forged for his destrier the day his father had come to tell him he'd asked Arya Stark to meet with him as his potential bride.

"You're insulting me?" he asked, his hands itching with the need to cross the room and touch her, to turn her to look at him. He was surprised when she lifted the heavy war-horse armour from the bench where is rested so she could turn it to study the symmetry of the piece. Gendry had to admit he was a
little impressed. One of his youngest brothers, Roland, had tried to do so just days ago and had almost fallen on his face for his trouble. Not that the lad was weak. Gendry was more than impressed that she was able to turn it this way and that and as he watched her he was learning there was a good deal more to Arya Stark than simply unladylike behaviour.

"Of course I'm insulting you," she laughed, this time actually choosing to glance at him as she put the armour back on the bench and continued on to inspect a sword he'd forged for his brother Edric.

"For looking at you?" Gendry asked, feeling entirely confused. Of course when she began swinging the long sword in a combat stance he got turned on too.

He'd never met any female as interested in his work or in weaponry at all the way Arya was and it was a surprising and refreshing change. One that made his cock throb painfully in his britches.

"Your continued staring and your statement to the idea that you're doing so because you like the way I look indicate that you're a little weird. On top of the fact that you rejected the idea of marrying one of those pretty simpering ladies more interested than me in smiling at you and shining your knob in the hopes of giving you sons indicates that you are entirely damaged. Probably because you're so big. You mustn't be getting enough blood to your brain to think rationally," she explained as though it made total sense and Gendry kind of wanted to hit her with something.

She'd basically just accused him of having as much intelligence as the average fool and to make matters worse, she'd done so with a smile, still toying with the sword. He narrowed his eyes on her when she proceeded to whack the blade against the padded practice post he'd brought in here to test the balance of his weapons.

"Oh I see, the idea of wanting to spend my life dealing with someone who has half a brain and an idea of how to run a kingdom rather than some stupid little idiot with no use but letting me fuck them makes me damaged?" He asked hotly, his hand clenched around his hammer in annoyance.

As though sensing his mood the huge wolf that had followed Arya into his forge got to its feet at that moment and let out a very low, very threatening growl, warning him away from her mistress.

"Not at all," Arya disagreed with his summation, glancing at him now as though she was very much enjoying herself and letting Gendry know she had already begun testing him, tormenting him to see how he dealt with his temper which she seemed so capable of inspiring in everyone.

"But wanting you instead does?" he challenged, blue eyes flashing.

"Now you're getting it," she grinned at him, replacing the sword she'd been playing with, "What are you making?"

Gendry had to put down his hammer.

Not because he wanted to hit her with it after one minor moment of torment, but because he got the feeling that if he didn't her wolf might bite him. It was eyeing him as though it wasn't sure whether to simply tear his throat out or to come over and sniff his hand and maybe let him pat it.

"Pair of gauntlets," he told her evasively. He'd come out here simply to find something to do, knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep without dreaming of fucking the fierce woman currently walking towards him in naught but his shirt. However, once he'd started working the metal, he'd realised he'd begun to make something. They were small. Far too small to fit any man he knew and he hoped the little urchin wouldn't notice that fact. He meant to gift them to her when she was a little more used to him.
Perhaps he'd even make her an entire suit of armour and arsenal of weapons and gift it to her on their wedding night.

"They're small," she commented, picking up the still warm metal as though the heat in them didn't bother her and inspecting them. They were barely begun, he was still in the process of shaping the metal, but she clearly had an eye for blacksmithing if she'd been able to tell that from a half-shaped hunk of metal.

"They're for a small person," Gendry shrugged, his eyes fixed on her hands as she clutched the piece, noting the width of them and the length. It would be hard to make them to fit her without knowing the measurements he needed from her, but he would do so. It would give him an excuse to study her closely.

He was so fixated on her hands in fact that Gendry had to blink to suddenly find her very much in his personal space. She came to stand very close to him and was looking up at him with a sly grin on her face. Sensing some other kind of test from her on his patience as she attempted to goad him into sending her packing back to Winterfell, Gendry held his ground and simply stared back at her. He suspected from the way her grey eyes darted over his face that she could see how badly he wanted to fuck her.

And Seven Hells he wanted to. From so close to him he could smell that floral scent that clung to her skin. It was the same one he'd noticed when he'd caught her bounding over the table towards his would-be assassin at dinner, and if he had to guess he would say it was a result of the ladies maids who'd drawn her bath mistakenly thinking she'd like it. Beneath that smell he caught the warm, womanly scent of her that betrayed her gender despite the yards of loose-fitting cloth shrouding her body from his gaze.

"So," she began her voice light as her wolf came over to butt against her arm, clearly wondering if her mistress required help and wanting a scratch. Gendry heard the beast groan delightedly when Arya dug her hands into the wolf's fur and scratched behind her ears.

"So?" he asked when she grew distracted by the beast, unable to keep from smirking a little when she had to repeatedly roll back the sleeves on his shirt as they flopped over her hands. She glanced up at him again and Gendry felt his breath catch in his throat at the way the firelight from the forge behind him danced in her grey eyes, alighting the slyness there.

"How many of those other visiting little idiots that you turned down did you fuck before sending them away?" she asked bluntly and Gendry was grateful he'd already put down his hammer, otherwise he might've dropped it on his foot in shock.

Before his mouth could fall open or his shock could show, Gendry narrowed his eyes a little bit, knowing she was testing him again.

"Not one," he replied.

Arya rolled her eyes as though she didn't believe him.

"Yeah, that's why Larissa Lannister is sending assassins here to murder you. Because you didn't fuck her before telling her you wanted nothing to do with her," she snarked.

"I'd say that's exactly the reason she sent me an assassin. She tried to fuck me every day she was here and every single time I told her to fuck off. I'm no fool. Had I fucked her, she'd have also gone out and fucked as many other men as she could to ensure she was knocked up and then I would've been forced to marry the scheming whore."
Gendry felt his cock shrink a little at the very idea of getting anywhere near the Lannister bitch.

"You expect me to believe you spurned her and my cousin Rhaenrya Targaryen and Margery Tyrell and all those other ladies you had here vying for the chance to be Lady Baratheon?" she demanded and Gendry wondered if she was offended by the idea of him fucking other women or simply trying to work out what he wanted from her.

"I don't fuck anyone unless I'm paying them or mean to marry them. And since paid whores around here tend to have fucked my Father and like to giggle over the idea of seeing how many Baratheon lords they can fuck, I tend to avoid them too," Gendry warned, "Meaning that since I mean to marry you, you're fair game."

"Now you're going to tell me you want to fuck me too?" she rolled her eyes, "Laying it on a little thick, aren't you?"

As he stared at her, frowning and unsure of what she meant by that, Gendry realised that she'd called him damaged for staring at her and perhaps liking to look at her, and was now insulted by having him say he wanted to fuck her because she didn't believe he, perhaps anyone, could actually mean it.

Gendry stared at her with widening eyes at the very idea. He supposed that having grown up in the shadow of her sister's beauty, surrounded by the beauty of her mother and always hearing of the beauty and poise of her sister, her cousins, her mother, her aunt; that perhaps Arya Stark thought she was naught but a woman who didn't want to be a lady not only because she despised the customs and ideals surrounding such a title, but also because she didn't think herself beautiful enough.

"Let me put it this way, Stark," Gendry said, his voice low and husky, his desire to have her returning tenfold, "Of all the women I've ever met, you're the only one I've ever imagined myself fucking repeatedly against every flat surface I see."

She stared at him for that and Gendry could see a shadow of doubt in her eyes, but also a spark of something else. He hoped it was desire. When her gaze left his and skidded down his body to the prominent bulge in his britches Gendry felt like she might as well have rubbed herself all over him for the effect it had. He had to clench his fists to keep from grabbing her and pulling her to him when she glanced back up at him, a smirk playing on her lips now.

"You probably say that to all the girls," she said, and Gendry could tell she believed it to be true. He wanted to prove it to her, but he didn't trust himself not to fuck her on the floor of his forge should he even lay a finger on her right that moment.

"Seeing as how I usually don't even talk to the ladies brought here hoping to be my wife, I have to deny that," he answered tightly, "But the only way you'll believe it is if I prove it by actually fucking you, which will really only confirm that you think I fuck them all before sending them away."

"And here I thought you were all bull and no brain," she needled him, stepping back and away from him, "You know I'm keeping this, right?"

Gendry raised his eyebrows at the change in topic and watch the way she plucked at his shirt hanging about her slim frame.

"Are you just?" He asked, amused in spite of the fact that he desperately wanted to fuck her and prove to her how badly he yearned for the chance to prove to her that he was more infatuated and intrigued with her than he'd been with any other woman he'd ever laid eyes on. He barely knew her, to be sure, but for all that she was a conniving, cunning, unladylike little urchin, she was the only woman he'd ever imagined being able to lie
with afterwards and discuss battle tactics or how best to run a castle when the peasants constantly called for something.

"Yes. I am," she said in a straightforward manner even as she began gathering her damp clothing as though she was intending to leave, "You'd do well to remember it the next time you think of giving me something. If you want it back, don't give it to me."

"So now you're a thief?" he asked her, realising she did mean to leave the forge and that if he wanted to spend any more time in her company he'd have to follow her.

"Don't be ridiculous. You offered this to me, like a gift," she argued, smirking again. Gendry felt himself smirk back. He didn't know why, but he sort of liked the way she looked so smug about it.

"Of course," he chuckled. He chose not to mention how much he wanted to fuck her at the sight of her wearing his shirt, or how she looked so sexy in the oversized garment. He'd seen his fair share of naked women and painted whores in his time, and yet the sight of Arya Stark in his too-big-on-her undershirt made him harder than steel.

He doused the forge fire quickly while Arya gathered her things and made for the door. He smirked at the fact that it took her a while to work out how to open it once it had been closed. He needed to replace the frame. It had gotten wet in a wild storm a few moons ago and since then the door and been getting stuck in the frame. However, right then he was thankful he'd been putting it off because it kept the woman from escaping into the night without him.

"You're not going to offer me your arm to escort me to my chambers, Lord Baratheon?" she sneered when he strode along beside her, trying to keep his gaze on the road where he walked rather than on the sinewy bunch and release of her legs as she moved in the dark.

"Why is it that when you use my title like that, I feel like I need to bathe?" He asked her, glancing sideways at her in the dark. Most of the torches had been doused for the night, so he was relying on his memory of the castle layout as he led her in through the many long hallways.

"Maybe you're unclean," she suggested and Gendry narrowed his eyes at her though she couldn't see him in the dark.

Before he could think of a witty reply, she tripped on the stairs the led to the chamber she was staying in and Gendry smirked at the way she cursed up a storm about it.

"Having some trouble there, Lady Stark?" he replied in the same sneering voice she'd used to pronounce his title.

"Screw you," she snapped, huffing in annoyance.

"Anytime you like," he offered before he could catch the words dripping from his tongue. He glanced at her wide-eyed, for a moment fearing she would react like any other lady, storming off in a huff and lamenting his crass behaviour. Then he remembered this was Arya Stark and that not an hour past she'd asked him if he'd fucked all the women he'd entertained as his potential bride before she arrived.

In spite of her bad mood, he heard her snort at the offer and felt her jump when he reached out and took her hand, realising she was falling behind because she couldn't see to climb the stairs. She flinched at his touch and almost immediately tried to jerk her hand out of his grip, but Gendry simply held tighter, refusing to release her.

"Stop wriggling before you make us both fall down the steps," he scolded her when she tugged so
hard she overbalanced herself and would've gone toppling back down if it weren't for his tight grip on her.

"Stop trying to tell me what to do," she retorted coldly, though she stopped trying to pull her hand from his.

"You've got a real problem with authority, don't you?" Gendry asked, his own temper flaring a little in response to her tone.

"Fuck off Baratheon," she snarled immediately, her voice loud and echoing in the dark corridor. Gendry knew that if he didn't do something they were going to fight. He could tell she was itching for one, and realised it must be a common occurrence for Arya Stark to offend and annoy others with her wild moods. Rather than responding verbally, Gendry did the only thing he could think of to keep her from saying anything else to further irk him. He shoved her sideways in the narrow corridor until she was pressed against the stone wall and he ducked his head in the dark, his lips crashing down on hers roughly and completely claiming her mouth.

She made a noise of surprised protest and then one of outrage when he slipped his tongue between her lips to tangle with her own, his weight pinning her to the wall even though she writhed like a hellcat, her hands coming up to claw at his bare chest thanks to the fact that she had his shirt. She raked them into his skin, no doubt drawing blood if the sting was any indication. Gendry ignored the pain and kissed her harder, leaning into her and forcing one of his knees between both of hers, pressing his throbbing, britches-clad cock against her stomach to keep her from being able to knee him, which she'd begun trying to do.

She seemed more intent of fighting him off than kissing him back, but Gendry didn't really mind. He just kept right on kissing her until she started fighting back with her tongue as much as the rest of her body. Wielding it like a sword she fought him for dominance of the kiss they shared and he felt himself grow impossibly harder. He was all too aware that she wore naught but his shirt and more than anything he wanted to hike her up his body, free his cock and bury it inside her.

Her wolf was growling beside them, though she'd yet to attack. Gendry didn't really care if the beast did. He would stand here and snog this wild woman all night long. When she tried to shove him away, Gendry snarled one of his hands into her loose, damp hair, using the grip to tilt her head and hold her there, right where he wanted her until he was good and done kissing her.
Arya Stark shoved futilely against the chest of the bull-headed idiot currently trying to choke her with his tongue. She couldn't believe his audacity. It was one thing, after all, for him to have stated that he rather liked her and he'd certainly suggested that he'd like to fuck her, but this was another thing entirely.

She was furious with him, damn it! That did not call for kissing. Had he lost his mind? The shoving seemed to be a waste of effort to Arya and she suspected that no matter what she might try he was going to continue kissing her until he decided he was done. He was so big that there wasn't all that much she could do to physically make him stop, though she did try biting his tongue. She regretted it immensely when he used his grip on her hair to hit her head none too gently on the wall he was pinning her to with his big body in punishment for the bite and probably for the scratches she was leaving all over his bare chest and shoulders.

Arya didn't quite know what to do, if she was being completely honest. For all that she disdained the idea very much of being a lady, she'd never kissed a boy in her youth the way Sansa and the other girls at Winterfell had. None of the boys had thought her attractive enough to risk trying it. To be given such an infuriating introduction into the world of physical intimacy by being soundly snogged in a corridor in Storm's End by Gendry Baratheon was a surprise and though she would never admit it, also rather nice.

She had no experience with kissing to compare the sensations to, but the feel of one of his thighs pressed insistently between both of her own drew her attention to the way her body was reacting to being touched by the handsome lord. His lips on hers were hard and passionate, his tongue massaging hers with sure strokes that told her all about his experience in the area. The feel of his muscled body beneath her hands was nice, though again, she would never admit such nonsense out loud. She also kind of liked the way his hands were tangled in her messy, curling brown hair, tugging on the strands just enough to annoy her without hurting her. It added to the overall sensation of being completely claimed by him.

It was an odd thought for Arya, the idea of any man laying claim to her, especially this way. She'd never expected it to feel like this. All the stories she'd ever heard had told terrible tales of wedding nights with rough bedding ceremonies and pierced maidenheads and drunken lords. Her sister has always sneered that no man would ever want to bed her. Would never willingly fuck her, except to see her wedded and bedded and then perhaps in an attempt to tame her wild spirit by tying her down with babes to tend. Not that the notion would be successful.

The idea that this Lord Baratheon had so willingly pinned her to the wall to kiss her this way made her head spin. Especially when she'd been gnashing her teeth and snapping at him in her fury. No one ever got close to her when she was furious unless they wanted to be introduced to her weapons. And yet, pinned there against the cold stone wall by Gendry Baratheon, Arya felt no need to draw either dagger from where they were belted to her waist. And for all that she was clawing him and fighting against him, she didn't really want him to stop.

Which seemed wise since he didn't seem to want to either. When they broke apart she wasn't the only one breathing hard and she bit her lip at the little sound that escaped her when he buried his lips against her throat, searing a line of hot kisses down the side of her neck, nipping at the skin and making her head spin faster. Arya knew her heart was pounding inside her chest and wondered if he could hear the way it raced.
She could feel the smile on his mouth as he continued to torment her flesh and she realised with a start that the nails she'd been dragging against his skin in an attempt to get him off her were now digging into him as she tried to pull him even closer. She realised she had arched into his touch and that he was eliciting little whimpering mewls from her with his ministrations.

And she hated him for it.

No one had ever done anything like this to her in her life and Arya felt her cheeks darken to scarlet in the dimly lit passage to know that with one kiss Gendry had managed to so effectively rattle her cage.

"Get off me," she demanded breathlessly, pushing both palms flat against his chest and pressing until he leaned back far enough to stare down at her. His blue eyes were wild with desire, dancing with how badly he wanted to have his way with her and Arya couldn't allow it. She might not be much of a lady, but she wouldn't disgrace herself or her family by surrendering her maidenhead anywhere but her marriage bed.

"Let go of me, Gendry," she said sternly, pushing him further away until his thigh slid free of hers and he was standing before her, no long touching her. Arya looked away from those blue eyes, biting her lip and tucking a stray curl behind her ear. She could tell he was waiting either for her to explode at him for what he'd done, or to beg him to continue - no doubt having experienced both with any of the many other young women he'd courted before her, but Arya did neither.

"Don't do that again," she said quietly, all too aware of the huskiness of her voice even as she slipped from his hold and away to the door of her chambers.

"You're just going to leave me out here after that?" he asked when she slipped into the room, holding the door long enough for Nymeria to join her.

"You started it, Baratheon," Arya began coldly, her cheeks still crimson with embarrassment over the sounds he'd drawn from her lips, the taste of him still on her tongue, "I'm sure you know how to finish it on your own."

He stared at her frustratedly until Arya closed the door to her chambers and locked it against him, making sure he wouldn't try to finish it with her. She leant against the door after that, trying to catch her breath and trying to push away the sensations he'd brought to life inside her. Arya didn't know how long she laid awake that night thinking about the feel of his lips and hands on her body.

~O~

When she woke the following morning it was to a crack of thunder outside her window and the pitter-patter of rain against stone. Arya opened her eyes slowly, unaccustomed to waking to the sound of rain. She was far more used to the soft silence of a summer snow and the oppressive heat that had crept inside her chamber made the oversized shirt of Gendry's she still wore, stick to her body in an uncomfortable way.

Nymeria barked at her from by the door when Arya groaned and rolled over and Arya realised the wolf needed to be let out to go about her business. Dragging herself from the bed, Arya stripped Gendry's shirt off her body and dug out a clean tunic and pair of riding tights. She chose a pretty one in a dark violet shade that Sansa had made for her. She really did need to write to her sister and request the newly wedded woman make her some more. They were simply too comfortable to wear anything else. Though she might need to ask Sansa to use a lighter fabric.

"Come on then. You overgrown cub," Arya rough-housed with Nymeria when the wolf began
bounding between her mistress and the door, clearly intent on being let out. Arya opened the door to
her chambers and followed the wolf out of the castle, laughing when Nymeria dashed past several
merchants and traders in the main courtyard going about their day. She'd been taught at Winterfell to
do her business outside the castle walls and despite the fact that many people stopped to watch her,
Arya followed her dire wolf beyond the castle walls and out towards the bay.

The rain pattered down relentlessly, soaking her clothing despite the protective cloak she'd donned
and Arya sighed over the idea of being always damp in this Gods forsaken kingdom. She already
longed for the cold dryness of the North. In spite of the raging storm, Arya made her way out
towards the cliffs plunging into Shipbreaker Bay. The thunderheads were heavy and dark, the
lightning crackled wildly, making her jump occasionally. Nymeria seemed to be enjoying the rain
much more than Arya was herself, romping over the rolling hills and barking at Arya.

"Are you done yet?" Arya asked the wolf, her mood rapidly deteriorating amid the downpour.

Nymeria gave no indication that she cared about Arya's bad mood. Arya found herself gravitating
towards the edge of the cliff, watching the way the wild waves crashed against the unrelenting stone
below. They sprayed and rolled in a turbulent maelstrom of wind and water. The sight awed Arya.
Having spent all her life amid the rolling hills and icy rivers of the North she was unaccustomed to
the sight of a stormy sea. As she looked down upon the crashing waves she gained a new
understanding for why it was called Shipbreaker Bay. She could only imagine the damage that could
be done by the pounding waves driving against the jagged rocks.

"Not thinking of pitching yourself over, are you?" a voice said from behind her, startling Arya and
almost making her lose her balance on the edge of the cliff. When an overly large hand clasped her
forearm tightly to steady her, Arya found herself grateful.

"Not today, Baratheon," Arya replied, not needing to look to know it was Gendry. She was already
in tune with the sound of his voice.

"What are you doing out here then?" he asked, seeming like he didn't believe her and like he didn't at
all want to let go of her, lest she do just that and plunge over the edge into the raging sea below.

"Waiting for Nymeria to go about her business and contemplating the fate of the many ships and
sailors caught in a storm like this," Arya answered honestly.

"You realise it's the middle of a storm and that you're soaked, don't you?" he asked and Arya
glanced at him for his tone, noting that he clearly hadn't been expecting that answer.

"You realise I'm not some simpering lass who cares over much about getting a bit wet in a storm,
don't you?" she countered.

The sight of him almost had her blushing when she recalled the way he'd kissed her the night before.
He looked impressive, cut against the dark of the storm with lightning flashing overhead. His dark hair
was plastered to his skin and the weight of the rain had pulled his shirt taut against his muscular form.
If she were prone to such things Arya imagined the sight might make her swoon. It didn't, of course,
she wasn't some simpering fool, but she wouldn't deny that she greatly appreciated the view.

"I realise that," Gendry nodded, a small smile quirking one side of his mouth up crookedly, "You
should come inside out of the storm though. You're like to get struck by lightning if you stay here,
and your Father is looking for you."

To scold her for her behaviour last night, no doubt, Arya thought, recalling her displeasure of the
previous evening when she had so rudely spouted venom about being forced into any kind of
marriage arrangement. She didn't at all fancy the idea of going to speak with him. He would undoubtedly lecture her on the need for her to make a good match and on the fact that Gendry Baratheon was perhaps her ideal match.

"Mayhaps I should pitch myself over then," Arya said, glancing towards the turbulent waters below, "Elseways I'll be stuck here in this sticky, oppressive heat with the likes of you forever."

"Mayhaps you should," Gendry agreed, clearly choosing not to take offence to her snottiness, "But you won't."

"What makes you think so?" Arya asked, noting that there wasn't even a hint of a doubt in his voice. He truly believed she wouldn't do it. She wouldn't, of course. At least not on a day like today. And certainly not with the intent of meeting the Stranger. But she wondered what made him so sure of that fact.

"You're not the type. You'll run me through before you try to do yourself in," Gendry answered honestly.

"And yet you still think it wise that we marry?" Arya asked him, trying to hide her smirk.

"What's life without a little excitement?" he asked, shrugging and returning the smirk.

If it weren't for the fact that she wasn't supposed to want anything to do with him and that she didn't want to give off the impression that she in any way condoned the idea of her family arranging her marriage with him, Arya found herself thinking she wouldn't mind Gendry Baratheon.

"I wouldn't know," Arya admitted honestly. She was always on the lookout for something new and exciting to try, "Are you going to let go of me?"

"Not while you're so close to the edge of the cliff. One strong gust will pitch a little thing like you over into the swirling death below," he informed her, using his grip on her to steer her away from the edge.

"Aw, I didn't know you cared" Arya sneered at him, unable to resist the chance to torment him.

"I suspect there's lots of things you don't know when it comes to me, Stark," he replied drily and Arya couldn't help it when a laugh escaped her at his expression.

"I suppose that's true. I thought you lot were all going on a raid in search of those bandits today?" she asked him, choosing not to comment of the fact that he linked his arm through hers and led her away from the cliffs, back towards the castle.

"Not in the middle of a storm. They'll be holed up somewhere. The weather will clear a bit later today. We'll ride out then in search of them," Gendry told her seriously.

"It storms like this every morning and afternoon, doesn't it?" Arya asked with a sigh.

"Most days," Gendry nodded, "But only so oppressively in the heat of the summer. Things should calm down in a few moons. Then we'll only have the afternoon storms."

"That means it's going to be disgustingly hot later, doesn't it?" Arya groaned, not at all liking the sound of the predicted weather.

"Most likely," Gendry said, and Arya caught the sympathetic look her gave her, "You wouldn't be used to it after the chills of the North."
"The idea of spending more than a week without snowfall is unnerving," Arya admitted, choosing for the time being to be civil. It wouldn't do, after all, for her to go about pushing his buttons and testing his limits with the intent of finding out if he could handle marrying her if they couldn't even get along.

He didn't say anything to that, clearly realising she would prefer the dry cold of the North to the oppressive heat this far South. There was little he could say to offer her comfort on the matter anyway.

"Will you be riding out with us then?" he asked as they made their way back inside the outer wall of Storm's End. Arya noted the way many of the smallfolk eyed them both in surprise to see them arm in arm and Arya subtly tried to pull her arm free of his. Gendry wasn't having any of it, choosing to take hold of her hand when she started to make a scene tugging her arm free. Arya scowled at him.

"I haven't decided if I can tolerate you for that long," she asked waspishly.

"You mean you haven't decided if you want to risk irking your mother any further after that outburst last night and don't know if you'll be in the mood for riding with us after your father lectures you on not being so obnoxious," Gendry corrected her, clearly seeing through her annoyance. He had the audacity to interlock their fingers too rather than simply hold her hand or releasing her. He squeezed hard enough that her hand was beginning to ache as she tried to wiggle it free of him, all to no avail.

"By this afternoon I might've made a break for Winterfell, for all I know," Arya informed him snidely.

"Be sure to warn me so I can hunt you down, alright?" he asked nonchalantly, and Arya found herself growing increasing frustrated with his ability to keep his head while she needled him with things.

"Not a chance. The point would be to avoid putting up with you any longer, not having you hunt me."

"Maybe, but I'd hunt you just the same," he told her.

"Why do I get nervous when you say that?" Arya asked him, mildly unnerved by the serious glance he gave her as he said it. He made it seem like no matter what she tried to do he was going to keep her here as his wife and there wasn't any place in all the Kingdoms where she would elude him.

"You're not used to the idea of anyone wanting you around with such certainty that they'd hunt you and find you every time you try to flee," Gendry told her, "I'm sure it will grow on you eventually. No matter where you run, I will find you Arya."

With that said he released her hand so he could wring out his cloak before relieving her of hers and wringing it out too. Arya stared at him, thunderstruck. How dare he tell her she wouldn't escape him? She might just have to prove him wrong.

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When she entered the Great Hall alongside Gendry, Arya felt the way everyone turned to look at the pair of them. She was still annoyed with him for his comments and had been dreading running into her mother and father, not feeling like enduring a lecture. She and Gendry were both still soaked and dripping puddles but Arya pretended not to notice. Instead she held her head high, ignoring the way Gendry's mother and sisters all glared at her.

All except Mya, who seemed to be summing up the situation with a shrewd stare.
"Good morning, Lady Arya," Mya greeted her and Arya thought about correcting her for using her title but chose not to bother.

"Good morning Mya," Arya replied, smiling at her warmly and ignoring the way Gendry shook his hair like a wolf, splashing her with the droplets that flew free, "You slept well, I trust?"

"I did," Mya answered, "And you?"

"Just fine, despite the storms," Arya answered, throwing a bread roll at one of her father's bannermen when he snickered. It hit him square in the face with a soft thwack and he began to laugh at her behaviour. Taking a hearty bite out of the roll rather than returning fire the way he might've were they still on the road. His name was Mycah and he'd come along for the ride at her insistence. He was a butcher by trade in Winterfell, just like his father, but they'd been friends for many years and she'd refused to travel so far without him.

Had they been at Winterfell he'd have thrown the roll back at her and challenged her to a sparring match.

"Oh, did they keep you awake?" Mya asked curiously, clearly choosing to continue the conversation despite the way Gendry's other sisters all looked appalled by Arya's behaviour.

"I'm used to the silence of snow," Arya admitted, "Good morning Father."

Ned Stark was watching her with a guarded expression and Arya could tell she was going to be lectured later.

"Arya," he nodded in greeting, "Is there a reason you've been out in the rain and are still dripping wet?"

"Nymeria needed to go out," Arya shrugged, "And it's storming out there."

"You didn't think to let her out on her own?"

"And risk having her steal food from some unknowing vendor or being shot at by some flighty fool?" Arya asked, appalled by the idea of allowing her beloved pet to roam free without her. Eventually she would of course, the way she did at Winterfell. But not when they were so new to Storm's End.

"You told me you'd trained her not to take food without your permission unless she hunted it down on her own in the woods,' Ned reminded her.

"She doesn't usually, but I can't speak to the idiocy of others in this place. Had they threatened her away from their wares she'd have taken something for spite."

"Just like her mistress then?" Mycah taunted and Arya was reaching for another bread roll to lob at him before her mother stopped her. Lady Catelyn came into the room looking perfectly poised the way a Lady ought and Arya wanted to roll her eyes.

"Arya Stark why is it that you are always, wet, muddy or improperly garbed?" Lady Catelyn demanded by way of greeting.

"Blame Robb," Arya replied easily, "He's the one who taught me to sneak out of my sewing classes to play with him, Jon and Theon. It was them who taught me to play in the mud."

Catelyn looked like she wanted to scold her further but she chose to bite her tongue.
"You're blaming your brothers for this?" Ned asked, mildly amused now despite his annoyance with her over last night.

"Who else's fault could it be? I don't suppose it was originally my own idea to sneak away from Septa Mordane's boring lesson to have real fun," Arya said.

"How could it be Robb's fault that you're currently dripping wet?"

"If you give me long enough I'm sure I'll think of the answer," Arya assured her father, who by now looked entirely amused.

"You should both find some dry clothes before you catch your death," Lady Baratheon injected into the conversation looking disapproving. Arya glanced towards Gendry who also happened to be dripping wet though no one had mentioned it before his mother, and Arya wanted to snarl over the fact that being female meant she should be scolded for her appearance when he wasn't.

Gendry met her gaze steadily before jerking his head indicatively in the direction of the chambers, climbing to his feet and clearly intending to do as his mother had suggested. Arya bit her lip on her protest, figuring it wouldn't do to sass Lady Baratheon. Gendry's comments had indicated he very much intended to marry her, no matter the tantrums she threw and Arya didn't fancy the idea of being stuck in Storm's End with Lady Baratheon disliking and disdaining her. So instead of protesting, she got to her feet and followed her intended husband out of the hall and up towards her chambers.

When she reached her chamber Arya realised she'd run into a dilemma. After so long travelling and having been out in the rain last night and against that morning, Arya was fresh out of tunics to wear. And since she'd cleverly given all of her dresses away that left her only with britches, shirts she snagged from her brothers and the leather breastplate she liked to wear. Arya found herself smiling as so donned them before hanging her tunics in front of the fireplace in the hopes of getting them all dry.

She didn't much fancy the idea of returning downstairs to continue with breakfast and making pleasantries but Arya knew she had little choice. Especially after she had behaved the previous night. She would simply have to grin and bear it until she could get away with pushing her luck again without having her mother murder her.
Raiding Party

Gendry Baratheon glanced up at the rapidly clearly sky, the warm summer wind blowing away the morning storm. His destrier was saddled and ready to ride out. His father had been blustering all morning about the raiding party they would lead out to hunt the bandits that had been terrorising the Stormlands. Gendry couldn't say he wasn't keen to find them. He needed to channel his energy to something other than all of the things he'd like to do to Arya Stark.

He'd only known her a short while but already he could feel himself growing attached to her. He liked her spirit and her fearless attitude. He liked that she knew when to push her luck and when not to. That morning he'd seen her hesitate when his mother had suggested they both find dry clothes and he knew she'd been furious about the fact that she'd been scolded for coming to breakfast sopping wet when he hadn't. He'd seen the way she bit her tongue on her argument and simply followed him out of the hall.

After they'd all broken their fast, Lord Stark had told Arya he wanted to speak with her and Gendry didn't doubt the little she-wolf was going to be in even more trouble for her outburst at dinner the previous evening. Gendry hadn't really minded having her lose her temper, if he was honest. She'd said her piece and left him knowing what in seven hells her issues were, allowing him the chance to find ways around them. Of course, the entire incident paled in comparison to the memory of her half-naked in his forge and of her pressed against him, snogging him wildly.

He found it hard to maintain any kind of sternness when he'd tasted her sweet lips and felt her react to his touch. He had to have her. Even more so than he'd originally anticipated. He would kill to have her if it came to it, and Gendry was already beginning to question his sanity regarding what he would do should anyone try to take her from him. He barely knew the little urchin, but he wanted her badly. Not just because he wanted to fuck her either. He wanted to marry her. As much as anyone not keen on being wed at all could want to marry someone, he wanted Arya. He wanted to make her his wife. He wanted to be the only man she moaned for the way she'd done last night as he'd kissed her neck.

He wanted to watch her grow heavy with his sons and he wanted every snarl, snap and bite she would throw at him along the way. She intended to test him and Gendry wouldn't have it any other way. He'd been surprised when she'd let him walk her back to the castle from the cliffs. Surprised she hadn't tried to pull away from him sooner and pleased when he'd caught her blushing at the sight of him.

If she was blushing it meant she was thinking about the things he'd done to her the previous night and Gendry liked the idea of being in her thoughts. He hadn't seen her since Lord Stark had commanded her away for a private discussion, but he could just imagine that she would be furious by the time that talk was over. In all honesty he wouldn't mind avoiding her until she'd calmed down over it, if he was honest. He was much more interested in riding out in search of hooligans than in seeing her throw another tantrum.

If he watched her throw another one so soon he feared he might shove her against the nearest flat surface and have his way with her. Last night's kiss had taught him that it was a most effective way to distract the little urchin from her foul mood and a safer channel for her violence than having her go for her weapons.

"Ready to go?" his father asked, coming up beside him and looking more excited than he'd seen any grown man look about anything in a long time.
"Ready," Gendry nodded, grinning at the man.

"Tired of the she-wolf yet?" Robert asked him in a low tone, clearly curious about how he was taking the little bitch.

"If I see her again before we ride out I'm going to fuck her," Gendry admitted bluntly, knowing that of all people in the seven kingdoms, his father would understand that urge.

"She's grown to be wilder than Lyanna ever was," his father nodded, grinning widely and looking amused by his statement.

"She's wilder than anyone I've ever met," Gendry agreed, "And it makes my cock twitch."

Robert laughed out loud at that, his protruding stomach jiggling with mirth as he roared with laughter.

"Mount up then and we'll get out of here. I won't have your cock souring Ned's visit here until it's good and ready to be used," Robert told him and Gendry found himself laughing along with his father.

"You think she'll agree to marrying me, Father?" Gendry asked, swinging astride his destrier and glancing over to watch his father do the same.

"I thought when she hurled that dagger that you were done for. I can't predict what this one will do. She's got more wolf-blood than any Stark I've ever known. She's as like to tear you limb from limb as she is to curl up with you and sleep. Keep an eye on her son; she'll run for it the second she gets the chance," his father warned him and Gendry nodded seriously.

"I already threatened her that there's nowhere she can run that I won't find her. I'll have her, you wait and see," Gendry vowed sinisterly.

His attention was drawn to Ned Stark as the man strode out of the castle and accepted the reins to his white stallion stoically. His jaw and fists were clenched tightly and Gendry could only assume things hadn't gone well with Arya.

"How'd you go at leashing that she-wolf of a daughter Ned?" Robert asked, clearly noticing the man's tense posture.

Before Lord Stark could answer there was a commotion from within the stable and Gendry glanced over to see an obviously furious Arya Stark stalking through the stable angrily. She shoved a too-slow stable-boy out of her way roughly when the lad tried to approach, offering her assistance. Nymeria trotted imposingly at her heels even as she threw open the door to her mare's stable and disappeared inside it.

She appeared a few moments later, gripping the mare's bridle and leading the great grey beast out of the stall. As soon as she'd cleared the stable, Gendry watched his little urchin fist her hands in the mare's mane and swing astride bareback. She didn't bother with a saddle, and the ease to the movement suggested she had no need for stirrups. Dressed in dark britches, an oversized white shirt and a leather vest she looked positively ravishing astride the tall grey mare.

Gendry's cocked filled and began to ache when he watched the way she kicked the mare into action, the horse rearing up on her hind legs in the middle of the courtyard, a wild whinny leaving the beast. Arya didn't look even a little bit scared or surprised at the mare's behaviour. She simply gripped tightly with her legs, hands still fisted in the mare's mane. The horse had begun to gallop even before her two front hooves
had touched the ground. She danced in place for a few death-defying moments and Gendry doubted he was the only one awestruck by Arya Stark.

The mare raced out of the courtyard with a clatter of hooves, her rider's long dark hair streaming behind her and a direwolf on her heels.

"She's making a break for Winterfell, milords! After her!" one of Lord Stark's men informed them seriously, sounding mildly panicked and Lord Stark glared after his daughter in fury over the notion.

"No she's not," Gendry heard himself say, watching the way she reined the mare towards the east, away from the North-bound King's Road, "She's just pissed off. Leave her be."

Ned Stark turned slowly towards him at that, clearly noting Gendry's relaxed posture astride his horse and his lack of concern over where Arya could be riding off too.

"What makes you so sure?" Ned wanted to know, narrowing his eyes. Gendry sensed the man was offering up a test of his own and he wondered how he would do.

"She turned east, for a start. And there's no way a woman like Arya makes a break for home bareback astride that mare. When she makes a break for it, the mare will be saddled and she'll be dressed for travelling North. She'll have a rucksack of food stashed somewhere too. She's not a fool. She won't ride so far without a saddle," Gendry shrugged, knowing the woman well enough already to know he spoke the truth. He didn't doubt that there would come a time when Arya would try to flee from Storm's End, but it wasn't going to be today.

"You'd be surprised at the insidious nature of my daughter, Gendry," Ned Stark told him quietly, "I wouldn't put it past her to ride back here shortly, retrieve those things and be on her way."

Gendry shrugged.

"If she does, I'll go after her."

"You're not worried about losing face as a lord to have your potential wife desert your castle?" Ned wanted to know, a gleam coming into his intelligent grey eyes at that.

"Not a bit," Gendry told him.

"You want to marry her?" Ned asked gruffly at that and Gendry nodded his head.

"Yep. You going to let me?" Gendry challenged quietly, making sure not to sound threatening, but making it clear he meant to. No matter what she did, he'd handle it.

"That's not up to me, son," Ned said, smiling wearily then, "She might need my permission to do so, but you've got to convince her first."

"Isn't it supposed to work the other way?" one of the stable boys who was listening in wanted to know.

"Not with Arya," the butcher Arya had thrown bread at that morning piped up, "The only way you'll tie her to you is to convince her it's in her best interest to marry you, Baratheon. If she ain't convinced and she has to go through with it, she'll slit your throat while you sleep."

~O~

Arya didn't know how long she'd been riding around the Stormlands by the time she decided to stop
at a stream to cool off. The humidity had been rapidly climbing, making her skin sticky with sweat. She felt like every breath she drew sought to fill her lungs with water. She yearned for the lung-burning cold of the Northern air, not this wet, sticky, horrible air of the South.

She wanted to go home. She'd been missing home since they'd left, but after the discussion with her father, Arya didn't think she could yearn for home any harder. He'd lectured her about her outburst, once again growing stern and serious with her in a way he so rarely did at Winterfell. It had always been her mother trying to discipline her, shouting at her and grousing at her over her manners and her behaviour.

Arya could still hear his voice in her head as she slipped from Visenya's back. She could still hear him telling her that she was going to be stuck here in this disgustingly hot kingdom as Gendry Baratheon's wife. That she had caused an unnecessary spectacle and that she'd acted very immaturity. That she was expected to live with the people in this kingdom harmoniously. That she'd be lucky if Gendry didn't lose interest in her, leaving her to be stuck with some far less handsome and much more annoying lordling.

Arya had kept her mouth shut about the fact that he hadn't seemed to care, though she had mentioned Gendry's words about intending to marry her, no matter the tantrums she threw. Arya had also informed her father that she was painfully aware now of the things Gendry had pointed out.

That she knew if she refused she would end up shipped to some fool who would try to beat her into submission. That she would wind up dead herself for murdering her husband. She'd even pointed out that Gendry knew she planned to test him. She been completely honest with her father. She'd told him the truth. She didn't want to get married in the slightest, but she was beginning to see she would have little choice. She knew her lady-mother would insist upon seeing her wed, and soon.

She'd told her father that while he couldn't see it yet, she was coming to an agreement with Gendry Baratheon. Arya no longer doubted that she would marry the man, unless he failed one of her tests. But she wanted to properly test him first. She didn't want to rush into marrying the big idiot in case he turned out to be worse than whatever else she might end up with. Arya had heard terrible stories about women in the past who'd fallen for a Lord's charm only to be horrified when they learned he was not what he seemed. Arya planned to avoid being among them.

Her father had of course disapproved of the idea of her continuing to disgrace herself and the Stark's by extension with her outrageous antics and the discussion had deteriorated from there. Arya knew he was upset with her. In all honesty she was upset with him too. She'd put a lot of faith in her father to protect her from needing to marry for many years to come and she was still devastated that he was insisting that she ought to marry now. She was also furious that he kept trying to tell her to pretend to be something she was not.

She couldn't simper like a proper lady. She couldn't feign interest in sewing and dresses and hats. She couldn't pretend she wanted to learn how to dance or play an instrument. That just wasn't her. She wanted so much more out of life than to birth sons and eat lemon cakes whilst discussing realm gossip. Arya wanted to ride into battle and slay enemy armies. She wanted to run a castle effectively, ensuring that the people under her lordship were well-protected and content within her kingdom. She wanted to be a man.

Not in the sense that she wanted a cock. Just in the sense that she craved the freedom men were allowed. She wanted to be able to come to breakfast dripping wet and not be scolded for it. She wanted to be able to wear her britches and tunic without receiving pointed glares and without being whispered about. She wanted to be able to act in certain ways that were supposedly forbidden to women. To say what she liked and act how she pleased without fear of some man judging her a
savage.

She just wanted to be free.

Arya had begun to wonder if being with Gendry would allow her that freedom. It certainly wouldn't if his mother had anything to say about it, but she wondered how Gendry would react to the notions. She hated herself a little for the fact that she'd begun to wonder about him at all. She was supposed to be unaffected by him, and yet she kept finding herself thinking of the way he'd kissed her. Arya didn't delude herself that she was beautiful like her sister or her mother. There were plenty of women in the Seven Kingdoms much more beautiful than her.

She was alright with that. From what she'd seen beauty was just another restriction for women. Pretty ladies weren't supposed to get their hands dirty. And yet, when Gendry had kissed her so roughly; when he'd looked at her with such lust-filled eyes, she'd felt beautiful. She hated him for that. She hated him for making her feel dainty and pretty and foolish. She hated him for making her wonder if he'd let her feel those things even whilst letting her be herself.

Arya was ashamed to say she found herself beginning to hope it would be so. She hoped he would want her. She hoped he would let her ride when she wanted to and swear if she felt like it. She hoped he wouldn't expect her to sew pretty things or wear silk dresses. Those things weren't for her. And yet she hoped that she might find in Gendry a man who was alright with that.

She was thinking about wading into a stream she'd found when Arya heard the first boisterous shout from away to her right. Nymeria flicked her ears in that direction and Arya decided to investigate. Maybe it was nothing. Or maybe it was the bandits she'd been hearing about since they arrived. Hitching Visenya to a nearby tree where the mare could graze and rest, Arya drew her weapons into her hands and snuck off towards the source of the noise.

The closer she drew, the more Arya realised she had in fact stumbled across the bandits. They had commandeered what looked to once have been an Inn, no doubt for the appeal of beds, ale and food. From their shouts she was able to discern that a scout had spotted the raiding party that Gendry, her father and Lord Baratheon were leading in search of them. Narrowing her eyes when she heard a shout to prepare to fight, Arya crept around the back of the Inn, rolling her eyes at the stupidity of these bandits that it was unguarded.

She wasn't fool enough to think she could sneak in there alone and slaughter them all, but she could certainly find a good vantage point to see how the ensuing battle would play out. Climbing up onto the thatched roof of the structure, Arya concealed herself behind a stone chimney where she could watch the fight. If the time came where she could become involved, she would. But for now she hid, hoping she wouldn't be mistaken for a lookout by the raiding party.

Arya rolled her eyes when the bandits within the building mounted an attack immediately, an archer creeping out of the building and firing in the direction of the Lords. Fools. If they'd been smart they could've played it up as being simple tavern going folk going about their business and the Lord might've gone on their way. By attacking first, they'd indicated who they were and guaranteed themselves a fight.

A volley of arrows reined down on the building from the army in return fire and Arya had to hide behind the chimney once more to avoid being hit. Being on horseback, Gendry's men had the advantage. They rode towards the Inn undaunted by the small volley of arrows fired at them, dodging them with ease. The bandits clearly were not marksmen. Arya watched in awe when she noticed Gendry swinging a Warhammer from one hand. Her father had drawn his sword and begun to charge the bandits, but it seemed less impressive than the huge war-hammer Gendry wielded.
He rode down a man who tried to run and Arya shuddered a little at the sickening crunch that could be heard when Gendry hit the bandit with his hammer, smashing open his skull and spilling blood and bone everywhere.

A savage cry of outrage drew her attention to the battle raging before the Inn and Arya narrowed her eyes on one of the men. Lost amid the chaos was a singular man with a crossbow, firing bolts at Gendry's men unchecked. When he turned the weapon on her father, Arya didn't even pause to consider her actions.

A dagger clenched in each fist, Arya took a running leap off the roof, right at the bowman, plummeting towards him and burying her daggers in his back.

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Gendry had no idea where she came from, only that she was suddenly there. One moment he'd been rein ing his destrier towards a bowman killing off his men and the next a savage cry of rage had drawn his gaze skywards. She was clearly crazy. That much was obvious. She took a running leap off the roof of the Inn without even a pause of hesitation or a thought for herself. Gendry had seen the bowman aiming at Lord Stark and he didn't doubt his she-wolf had acted to protect her sire.

She was an awesome sight to behold as she leapt into the battle. Steel glinted unforgivingly in both of her hands, her long braid of dark hair flying behind her wildly as she plummeted towards the bowman fearlessly. She landed hard, burying her daggers in the man's back and ending his lie swiftly. He took the brunt of her fall, but Gendry's heart stopped when she disappeared amid the fray, rolling through the battle as she landed awkwardly.

Steering his horse through the fight, Gendry ended lives left and right in search of his future wife. He'd lost sight of her in the chaos and he found himself fearful she'd been hurt. His hammer smashed through bodies wetly, destroying lives as he searched for her.

He almost died when he finally caught sight of her again. Daggers still clutched in her hands, his woman was a lethal weapon of destruction. Her knives flashed in the midday sun as she sliced and diced at a group of three bandits who's surrounded her. His own men were distracted with the others and the three rascals had clearly seen her as an easy target. Gendry suspected they regretted it when she cut their throats.

She was as mesmerizing as she was deadly. Daggers flashing, blood spraying, braid whipping furiously as she spun, slashed and kicked out at her enemies, Gendry realised she was far more than just an urchin of a woman who didn't act like a lady. She was an effective killer with those blades and it struck him almost painfully.

Spurring his stallion forwards, Gendry's hammer took the head off the last of her opponents before she could deliver a deadly blow. She glared up at him in annoyance when he took the kill from her. He wondered if he ought to be concerned by his bloodthirsty mistress but he chose not to be. She barely blinked at the fact that he'd just beheaded a man with a hammer.

When he held the weapon out to her, she took hold of it firmly and let him haul her up on his horse in front of him.

"You alright?" he asked her. He wanted to check her for wounds and make sure she was fine. In fact he wanted to fuss over her and roar off after all who'd in any way even contributed to her being hurt by being there for the battle. But he didn't do it.

"You stole my kill," she complained rather than answering him and Gendry crossed his eyes in
frustration. The woman was insane.

She was also bleeding. She had a nasty cut of the back of her right forearm and another across her left bicep; he was also fairly certain she'd twisted her ankle, but she wasn't about to admit it.

"I had my eye on him before you leapt off the roof," Gendry told her rather than chastising her recklessness.

"You knew I was about to stab him when you beheaded him," she argued hotly and Gendry suspected he might be in love. She didn't care. She'd watched him behead a man and she didn't care a bit. She wasn't fearful of him or concerned he might turn on her. She just wanted to fight over who had the right to kill the bastard.

"I'll let you take the next one," he promised, unable to hide his laughter at her bad mood. He spurred his horse after a fleeing group of bandits, noticing that Arya wasn't the slightest bit concerned that she would fall the long way to the ground from the back of his enormous steed.

He was still in the process of riding the men down when she flung one of those lethal daggers at the back of a retreating man. Gendry was impressed when he saw she'd thrown it at the back of his neck, severing the spine and causing the man to fall down dead instantly. And he almost had a heart attack when she suddenly wriggled in his grip before launching herself off the back of his horse once more.

"Seven Hells, woman!" he complained when she landed on the back of a fleeing man, her second dagger opening his throat almost gleefully.

"Shut up and get that one, would you?" she groused, nodding towards the third fleeing man who'd outrun her.

Gendry wanted to argue with her but he just spurred Spartan after the bandit and ended his pathetic little life. When the task was done he rode back towards his woman, finding her cleaning her blades on the filthy clothing of one of the slain. She looked completely at home amidst the gore and blood and Gendry felt his cock twitch again when she glanced at him with a bloodthirsty grin.

The rest of him men were disposing the last of the bandits and Gendry glanced around in search of his father. He rolled his eyes when he saw the man using his Warhammer like a club, rattling skulls. Ned Stark was cleaning his own blades and shaking his head good-naturedly at Robert.

Gendry dismounted when he noticed Arya wandering towards the Inn, clearly intent on going inside to make sure all the bandits had been taken care of. He followed after her quickly, hoping to the Gods that she wasn't going to be ambushed if she went inside.

"You hurt yourself leaping off that roof," he commented from behind her when he noticed her slight limp as she scanned the Inn and found the lower floor empty.

"Twisted my ankle a bit when I landed on that brute," she agreed and Gendry was surprised at her willingness to admit she was hurt.

"You'll know to plan you landing next time then, won't you?" he smirked at her, teasing her and he caught the way her eyes widened in surprise when he didn't chastise her recklessness or tell her not to do it again.

"He was aiming at my father," she shrugged, "I'd do it again without a second thought."

Gendry opened his mouth to reply, but she disappeared up the stairs of the Inn two at a time.
"Gendry!" she shouted suddenly from somewhere above him and Gendry felt his blood run cold. He wasn't the only one, judging by the way a stampede of booted feet could be heard as her father's men and several of his own men rushed into the Inn. Gendry was the first up the stairs and he raced to find his woman.

"Arya?" he called, searching for her and unable to find her.

"In here," she called quietly, and Gendry stomped towards the sound, her father on his heels.

His stomach turned at the sight before him when he entered the room.

Lying naked on the bed, bound and gagged, their eyes wide with terror, their bodies beaten, bruised and battered were three women. In a heartbeat he realised they were the Innkeeper's wife and daughters. The youngest one screamed at the sight of so many men pouring into the room, her eyes terrified.

"Stay back," Arya warned them, coming towards Gendry and her father with her hands held out to desist their entry into the room. When she was sure they would stay she went to the women.

"It's going to be ok," she murmured to the abused women softly, her voice taking on a tone he'd never heard from her before, "These are your lords. They're here to save you. I'm going to cut you free of these bonds, alright. Don't struggle."

She crooned to them as though they were little babes; as though she were trying to soothe a flighty steed. The Innkeeper's wife was the first she freed and the woman sagged against the bed in relief, pulling the gag from her mouth and coughing loudly. Arya freed the daughters quickly, all of them curling in on themselves to hide their nakedness from him and his men.

"Do you have any clothing?" Arya asked them, reaching out lightly to take the hand of the Innkeeper's wife.

"They burned everything, milady" the wife whispered hoarsely, "They came in the night. They killed my Charoli…. We have nothing. They burned our clothes when they tied us up."

"They're dead," Arya assured the fearful women, "We're here to help you. You're under the protection of your lords now. We'll see to it that you're all well taken care of."

Gendry felt his heart constrict in his chest at the tenderness in her tone. She'd surprised him. She sounded so comforting. So forgiving. So reassuring. Gendry might not know her well, but he'd already ascertained that Arya was a woman who valued independence and believed everyone should do whatever they could in order to survive. He'd been sure she would think these women weak for their tears and their brutalised forms.

"I need this," her voice was soft and Gendry blinked to find her in front of him, her fingers unfastening the ties on his cloak before she tugged it from his shoulders. Beside him, Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon were both already removing their own cloaks, which they handed to her hurriedly.

"Put these on until we can find you something better to wear," Arya crooned to the women, draping his cloak around the Innkeeper's wife, "What are you names?"

"Thank you milady. My name's Helga, milady, and these are my daughter, Bromilda and Bridy," the Innkeeper's wife, Helga, told her quietly. Gendry noticed the way her daughters seemed to be in shock and the way they all kept eyeing the gathered men in the corridor and the doorway with fear.

"Everything's going to be alright now Helga, we've slain the bandits. You're safe."
"My husband…" Helga whispered brokenly.

"He's been avenged, Helga," Arya assured her, giving her hand a gentle squeeze, "We'll see to it that you are fully cared for back at Storm's End."

She got up from the bed then and came towards him seriously.

"You need to have your men build a pier and burn the dead," she murmured to him, stopping directly in front of him, her head tilted back to hold his gaze seriously, "These women need care, and they're fearful of so many men after what's happened. The sight of so many dead will only upset the daughters even more."

"Right," Robert nodded, "Let's go lads, build a pier. We burn the dead. Gather any horses and supplies you can find. This Inn will be abandoned until it can be cleaned up and a new Innkeeper can be installed to run it."

"When you're ready, Helga," Arya said, turning away from him and back towards the battered women, "I'd like you to bring your daughters downstairs. We'll be on our way back to Storm's End soon. We haven't a Maester with us, but you will all be cared for properly once we arrive."

"What about the Inn?" Helga asked. She seemed to still have her wits about her, despite what she'd endured.

"The Inn will be taken over by someone of Lord Baratheon's appointment," Arya assured her.

"What will happen to us?" Helga asked, fearful to hear their livelihood would be given over to another.

"You're under your Lord's protection, Helga. You and your daughters will be cared for at the castle. I assume you're the cook here?"

"I am, though I prefer baking, if I'm honest milady," Helga admitted, nodding as she got to her feet. She clutched Gendry cloak about her naked body tightly.

"Then I'm sure we can see to it that we find you a little shop where you can bake your breads inside the castle walls. You needn't worry. We will protect you. You and your daughters will not go hungry or homeless. I can't bring back your husband, but everything else can be mended, I promise," Arya assured her.

Helga's lip trembled at the kindness in Arya's voice.

"And my girls? What if those… those…. What if my daughter's a pregnant now milday?" Helga asked fearfully.

"You will all be cared for Helga. I will personally see to it. If your daughters don't wish to become bakers like you, then we will find them something they would like to do. If they are with child, a Maester will oversee their care for their pregnancy and the realm will provide for them. What has happened here to the three of you was a failing on your Lord's behalf and you will be fully compensated for that."

All three women burst into tears then, Helga falling against Arya brokenly, sobbing softly.

"Thank you milady," she managed between sobs, "Thank you."
Ned Stark looked on as the bodies of the bandits burned on their pier. His attention kept jumping to his daughter. He'd been surprised to find her in their midst during the battle, though somehow unsurprised that she would find her way into any battle. She had a little blood seeping from a cut on her shoulder, and she'd wrapped a strip of binding cloth around another cut on her wrist.

She limped slightly as she moved through the men, leading three saddled horses the bandits had left behind. The women she'd found in the Inn were huddled by the door, still clutching cloaks to themselves and looking fearful of so many soldiers after their ordeal. When she reached the women, Arya held the horses still and assisted the traumatised wife and daughters in mounting.

They were still sobbing softly every time they laid eyes on her and Ned watched the way his rough-and-tumble daughter expressed a compassion he'd never witnessed in her before. She stopped to straighten the oversized cloak hanging about Bridy's shoulders, making sure her modesty was kept covered. Bridy cried harder at that. When all three women were aboard their horses and looking fearful, Arya asked the least threatening of the gathered men - a squire named Jon – to keep an eye on them and make sure their horses behaved until the party was ready to ride for Storm's End.

Ned would admit he was pleasantly surprised to see his daughter expressing the type of compassion he hadn't believed her capable of. He'd seen her express that kind of tenderness in the past with animals. Both Nymeria and Visenya were often plied with a love and affection she showed with no one else. To see her so protective and careful with these brutalised women was a surprise.

He watched idly as his daughter made her way towards the young Lord that Ned hoped to see her wed. Gendry Baratheon watched her even more closely than Ned did himself. He'd been the one to insist she bind the cut on her wrist.

"I think you should send a small envoy of men around the local farms and villages," Arya told the young Lord without preamble and Ned smiled at her frank nature, "These fools had to have stolen these horses from somewhere. I imagine there are several farmers missing supplies, food and livestock. Send an envoy and bring any who have been victimised by these bandits enough gold to replace whatever has been lost. If there has been damage done to their homes or farms, have your envoys report it and send some workers out to help them mend the damage."

Ned was shocked at her words. Not because he believed Arya heartless or incapable, but because as he watched her, he realised something. All this time he'd been chastising her and grousing at her since they'd left Winterfell, Ned had forgotten something very important. Arya Stark might disdain dresses and a woman's wiles. She might despise sewing and dancing, but she wasn't some savage. She was a capable young woman and as he watched her now Ned realised she would make a formidable Lady Baratheon. Not because she would simper and gossip and drink tea with the other ladies of the Realm, but because she took the responsibility of her Kingdom seriously.

She wasn't even married yet and already she was concerned with the well-being of the small-folk of the Stormlands.

Gendry didn't hesitate to take her advice, waving over several of his men and instructing them to do as she'd suggested. He handed over the sack of gold tied to his belt, telling the envoys to express their Lord's deepest apologies for not doing more until now to help them deal with the problem the bandits had become. He instructed them to give a handful of gold pieces to all in the area, not just to those who'd been ransacked.
Ned knew then that this was the man to marry his daughter.

It was no secret to him that when he had married Cat it had taken him a good long while before he started putting stock in the advice she offered about running Winterfell. He'd been a proud man who hadn't liked being told by some woman new to the North how his kingdom should be run. And he'd paid the price in the fights he'd had with Cat about it and through the mistakes he'd made when he ignored her counsel.

It took a certain kind of man to willingly sacrifice some of his pride to take the advice of a woman. And Gendry Baratheon was that kind of man. He clearly didn't feel like his rule was being threatened by having Arya suggest what he ought to do to handle the situation. He didn't bat an eye over the fact that she'd thought of it before him.

That told Ned two things. The man respected his daughter enough to trust in her counsel. And he was a big enough man to let her call the shots sometimes. Ned knew it had taken him years before he'd raised himself up enough to take Cat's advice on anything. Gendry had known Arya for a whole day and he was happy to take her counsel. Ned also noticed that his daughter was clearly pleased that he'd taken her advice and employed it immediately.

Ned realised then that the lad truly didn't care that Arya wasn't ladylike or in need of his protection. He'd barely batted an eye when Arya had killed that assassin yesterday and he'd look intrigued rather than appalled when she carved the gory sigils into the dead man's flesh. When she spouted such rudeness yesterday, Gendry hadn't look offended or disgusted with her behaviour. He'd looked thoughtful. He was also in tune with her habits already, knowing better than to assume she was making a run for it when she'd rode out in a fury.

When everything had been taken care of, Ned noticed his daughter climbing aboard Gendry's horse and wrinkled his brow.

"Where's your horse, Arya?" he asked her seriously.

"About a league that way," she pointed beyond the Inn, "Hitched to a tree by the stream there."

"And you're taking my horse instead?" Gendry asked, looking amused at the sight of the small woman aboard his huge horse.

"Can't walk that far with a twisted ankle," Arya shrugged at him. "So take me to her."

Ned's eyebrows climbed towards his hairline at that. His daughter was a proud woman, one who didn't like admitting weakness or injury. And if she really couldn't limp that far, she would ordinarily have taken one of the other horses to get Visenya. The fact that she'd climbed aboard Gendry's and asked him to take her was all the answer Ned needed.

Arya had clearly made her decision. She might not much like Gendry yet, but she had realised she was better off with him than with any other Lord in the Seven Kingdoms. And if Ned had to hazard a guess, he'd say the lad was growing on her.

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"I'm not letting you ride all the way back to Storm's End bareback," Gendry warned the little urchin in his hold as she began to squirm to get on her own horse.

"Didn't we already have this discussion about you bossing me?" Arya asked him mildly, though she didn't sound entirely annoyed yet.
"We did," Gendry agreed, "But that was before you twisted your ankle and got cut in a fight."

"They won't stop me from riding," Arya protested, glaring at him over her shoulder. He'd made her sit in front of him in the saddle so that he could keep her from falling.

"You're not doing it. You've hurt your wrist. You won't be able to hold on properly. And then I'll feel bad if you fall off," Gendry tried reasoning with her before realising his mistake.

"I can ride just fine!" she snarled. "It's just a stupid cut. I'm not some pathetic wimp who can't ride with a little cut!"

Gendry sighed when she began squirming harder in his hold. It was doing dangerous things to his restraint and having her in his hold was already making his cock ache. Riding with a hard cock was not an easy feat.

"Arya," he said sternly, making her squeak when he seized her upper arms and used the grip to lift her high in the air, turning her to face him astride the horse. She blinked in shock at being manhandled and then began to look pissy.

"Don't you use that tone with me, Baratheon," she warned, pointing her finger at him accusingly. "I can ride my own damn horse and you can't tell me otherwise."

"Woman, shut it!" Gendry replied, giving her a little shake for good measure, "Just shut your mouth for five seconds would you? I'm really trying here, Stark. You leapt into the middle of a battle and you got hurt and it goes against every instinct I have to just shrug like it's nothing because I know you're okay. You might be the toughest women I've encountered, but you are still human. And you're still female. It's hard enough keeping from ordering you to be locked in my bedchamber where I can make sure you're always fine without you being difficult."

"What?" she growled, her eyes narrowing.

"I'm not done talking," he told her, narrowing his eyes in return, "Every instinct I've got is telling me to protect you and fuss over you like you're a proper hightborn lady, and I'm squashing it down because I know you don't need my protection. But it's not easy. So could you, for once, just pretend you do? Let me think I'm being protective and useful by having you ride back with me so that I can stop worrying you'll do something crazy and get hurt again."

"But I can ride fine on my own," she protested, looking baffled. "I don't need protecting."

"I know," Gendry sighed, leaning into her until his forehead rested against hers. She tensed at the touch, but she didn't pull away and Gendry closed his eyes, reaching for patience. He desperately wanted to lose his temper with her for being so reckless during the fight and he wanted to lock her in his bedchamber where he could see to it that the most harm to come to her would be when he fucked her into the next seven-day. And it was taking so much from him to keep from it that he was tired.

"Trust me, Arya, I know," he continued when she stayed silent, "I know you can ride fine on your own. I know that by your standards it's just a little scratch on your arm. I know you don't need my help or my protection."

"Then why...?" she began, sounding utterly confused by what he wanted and Gendry couldn't help but chuckle even as he brought his hand up cupping her small cheek tenderly.

"Because I need to feel like you do," he told her.

He opened his eyes to look at her when she didn't say anything else. She was frowning at him as
though she couldn't believe her ears.

"Do you know what you're asking of me?" she asked him in a low voice and Gendry was surprised by her question. She told him the answer before he could guess. "You're asking me to look weak in front of them, Baratheon. You're asking me to pretend I'm some fragile highborn lady who needs to be supervised because of a silly little cut and a twisted ankle. Do you know how my father's men, my friends, will laugh at me if they think I'm so silly? Do you know how hard I have to work to be taken seriously by them about not being a whiny little woman? Do you know how long it took to convince them I did belong on horseback beside them instead of in some sun room sewing tapestries?"

Gendry held her gaze, realising he was asking too much of her too soon.

"Do you know what you're asking of me that you won't let me take care of you?" he asked her rather than answering, "It makes me look less a Lord, less capable of caring for my Kingdom if my future wife won't even let me care for her."

Gendry recognised the stubborn flash in her eyes the moment he saw it and he knew they were at an impasse. One that he suspected was going to be lost to him.

"I already let you bring me to get Visenya rather than walking myself or taking one of the other horses," she pointed out. "My ankle's not that bad. I'd have been fine to walk here. Or to take another horse. And I climbed up on yours with you instead…. Isn't that enough?"

Gendry realised then that what she'd said back at the Inn had been a lie. She could've walked. She'd sacrificed a little bit of her pride and let him and his men think she needed his help to retrieve her horse. She'd already done what he was asking of her and he hadn't even realised. Gendry supposed that was arrogance on his part that he'd assumed she couldn't actually do it without him. He'd actually believed that if she could've done it, she would've.

A smile pulled the left corner of his mouth up crookedly when he realised she'd already let him think she needed him. Sitting up so his forehead no longer rested against hers, Gendry reined Spartan over to Visenya. The mare squealed in offense when Spartan nosed at her, stamping her hoof indignantly and Gendry laughed at how much the mare was like her mistress.

Ignoring the horse's offense, Gendry reined his stallion until they stood side by side. Arya looked at him, baffled when he gripped her waist and lifted her until she was standing on Spartan's back in front of him. He held her steady until she scrambled over to Visenya's back before spurring Spartan forwards to unhitch Visenya's reins and toss them to Arya.

"I'll race you back to the others," she offered, accepting the reins and righting them so she could ride.

"You'll lose," Gendry grinned at her, pleased that she was willing to play with him like that.

"I never lose," she assured him, kicking Visenya into a gallop. Gendry laughed as Spartan leapt after them without instruction, unable to keep from it when Arya glanced at him over her shoulder and stuck out her tongue, her eyes glittering with happiness and fun.

As he raced after her, Nymeria on their heels, Gendry realised he was going to fall hard for the wolf-blooded woman in his life.

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When they reached Storm's End Arya took matters into her own hands, ushering Helga, Bridy and Bromilda inside the towering structure just as the first crack of afternoon lightning rent the humid air. The sight of the raiding party returning had drawn several of the small folk close and Arya noticed
the way the three women reacted fearfully.

"Clear a path," she demanded, assisting the women with their cloaks before she spied a young boy who surely must be one of Gendry younger brother's. "You boy, run and fetch the Maester, tell him to meet us in the Great Hall."

Many of Gendry's sisters had come out to see what the commotion was about and several of them covered their mouths in horror and the sight of the bruised and battered women she was escorting inside. Recalling the name of one of them, Arya called her over.

"It's Elaria, isn't it?" she asked of the girl. She couldn't be more the three and ten but she nodded seriously. "These women need clothes and all three of them need a good long bath. Have all the handmaidens that can be spared draw them each a bath and find them some clothing."

"Of course, Lady Arya," Elaria nodded immediately, rounding up some of her sisters to help her.

"Arya, where have you….?" Arya suddenly heard her Lady Mother's voice stutter to a stop. "What can I do?"

"Mother, the Maester is on the way, and Elaria's in charge of seeing to the drawing of baths and the location of clothing for these women. I'm sure they've not had much to eat in the past days, could you speak to the cook about something they'll be able to stomach? The Maester will have recommendations," Arya said, unaware of the way she'd begun to make sense out of chaos. "Lady Baratheon, please speak to the Maester about ensuring he has the proper stocks of moon tea and milk of the poppy. Helga, Bromilda and Bridy are in need of both."

Helga had begun to sob again, clutching the hand Ayra had allowed her to hold to steady her. Arya watched the way Mya came rushing forward when she saw what was going on, taking Bridy's hand reassuringly when the girl almost stumbled. Gendry's second sister, Reesa ushered Bromilda into the castle.

Arya could hear the gathered crowd whispering speculatively, some of them in horror. She left the announcement of the bandit's vanquish to Gendry, knowing she needn't explain to any of the gathered women that the three souls with her had been brutally raped and beaten. That much had been made clear when she'd told Lady Baratheon to ensure there was some moon tea on hand for them.

"Arya, you're bleeding," Lady Catleyn fussed when the women were safely in the hands of the Maester.

"What?" Arya asked, turning towards her mother seriously, blinking in surprise to find her there. She'd been so focused on making sure the Innkeeper's family received the care they needed that she hadn't seen her mother come up to stand beside her.

"I said you're bleeding," Catleyn told her, swiping her finger over the cut on Arya's bicep.

"It's nothing," Arya brushed off. "Just a scratch I got in the fight."

"You fought the bandits?" Mya asked her, coming up on the other side.

"I leapt off the roof of the Inn and killed a man aiming his crossbow at Father," Arya answered. "Some of the other's thought that, being a woman, I would be an easy target. Something they regretted when I slit their throats."

Arya noticed idly that most of the women of the Baratheon family had gathered in the hall, shuffling
"What happened to these women, Lady Stark?" Lady Baratheon asked her, coming over and looking dubious.

"I found them inside the Inn. They are the wife and daughters of the late Innkeeper for the Foaming Mug Inn. They were bound and gagged, tied naked to the beds in the upstairs rooms of the Inn where the bandits were holed up," Arya answered truthfully. "Their names are Helga, Bromilda and Bridy."

Some of Gendry's sisters began to weep in horror over what the three women had survived.

"Helga is a baker by trade. I told her we would find her a shop where she can live and bake, within the protection of the castle walls. If her daughters don't wish to bake, there are plenty of other things they can do," Arya went on, relaying the promises she had made.

"Where am I going to fit another baker in this city?" Lady Baratheon grumbled, looking annoyed with Arya for promising them anything.

"If there is nowhere available, I will oversee the construction of a new dwelling for them," Arya replied frostily, her voice taking on a cold edge. "This kingdom owes them much more than that. They have been brutally raped and beaten within an inch of their lives because of the failures within your kingdom, Lady Baratheon. If you truly have no use or place for them here, they will travel to Winterfell with the Stark host where they will be properly cared for."

"Easy, Arya," her mother said, smoothing a hand over her hair to distract her from the way she'd began to vibrate with rage at the idea that Lady Baratheon didn't think the kingdom should have to help the women. Beside her, Nymeria let out a low menacing growl that had Lady Baratheon paling considerably.

Unwilling to cause a scene again so soon, Arya turned away from the woman and stalked out of the hall with Nymeria at her side.
Do You Think You're Strong Enough

A seven-day later found Gendry in his forge, hammering at the delicate gauntlets he was making for Arya. He'd been sneakily taking note of the size of her hands over the past days since she'd arrived in his kingdom and he was pleased with how the gauntlets were shaping up. Beyond the forge a wild storm raged overhead. The kingdom had been abuzz with the activities that preluded every storm season. Storms were a common part of living in the Stormlands, but the time had come for the reinforcement of buildings and the extra precautions that needed to be taken in order for buildings and homes to survive the oncoming summer.

He'd finally managed to steal a few minutes to himself and he could think of no better use for his time than to be in his forge, working out his frustrations with life by wielding his hammer and creating something useful. Arya had been driving him mad since her arrival. He desired her fiercely; something that was made all the more frustrating given that she couldn't seem decide if she liked him or hated him. Just that morning he'd asked her to come along with him to oversee the rebuild of a farmhouse that had been burned by the bandits.

At first she'd seemed pleased and she'd even pitched in, helping out with the building despite the way the mason's seemed baffled by her assistance. Yet when he'd suggested they let the men do it while she helped him and some of the village children to round up the sheep out of the afternoon storm she'd seemed to take offense. Not to the idea of chasing sheep. She'd enjoyed that, he could tell. He suspected the children of the village had too. Laughing with her and playing. She'd even instigated a game of tag when the sheep had been dealt with.

Gendry didn't know what to make of her. He knew she was a valuable asset to him and that he wanted her for his wife more than ever. Even though she drove him nuts. He'd caught her swimming in Shipbreaker Bay earlier that afternoon. She'd gone down there dressed in a butchered dress she must've snagged from the castle laundry. At first he hadn't believed it was her until he'd seen Nymeria barking from the beach. The fishmongers along the bay had seemed intrigued by her, though fearful of Nymeria.

The children there too had been more than willing to play with her and she had somehow talked all twelve of them into swimming in the unusually calm bay with her for the better part of the day. Gendry had been surprised by that. He'd been shocked to see her dressed in so little, and to see her playing with a group of kids. It was unusual behaviour for a lady. For a girl at all really. His sisters never went swimming in the bay. They preferred to stay in the castle and do their sewing.

Gendry himself had been tempted to join the woman in the water, for it had been a disgustingly humid day in the prelude to the storm currently raging overhead. He'd refrained from doing so. It had been too intriguing to watch her swim and play with the fishmonger's kids.

"You ok with that?" his brother Edric had asked him, coming up beside Gendry on the battlements and squinting at Arya in the distance.

"Looks like fun," Gendry had shrugged at his brother, knowing from the lad's tone that he disapproved. Edric felt that women were supposed to maintain certain sensibilities. Sensibilities Arya certainly did not keep to. Edric felt women were for fucking and making babes and that was it. He might respect their mother and sisters, but he also thought them to be a nuisance. It was clear he disapproved of Arya too.

"You don't care that your wife is in a butchered dress playing with a bunch of kids in the bay? Mother's horrified with her behaviour; I heard her complaining to Father about it," Edric had told him.
before walking away.

Gendry didn't doubt it. His mother had been mildly impressed with how Arya had handled the mess with the Innkeeper's wife, but now the woman was put out that the three victims were so fond of Arya. In fact, everywhere he went the small folk of his kingdom had been whispering their thoughts about Arya. The children all adored her because she wasn't afraid to play with them and get a bit dirty. They liked that she didn't just treat them like they didn't matter or didn't exist the way so many highborn ladies did. Even some of his younger siblings had begun singing her praises.

The townfolk too had been whispering about her. Not all of them were pleased with her. Some of them, particularly the older men, went on about how improper her behaviour was. Some of the women lamented the freedom she had, many of them clearly wishing they could be as brave as his little she-wolf. Others who had encountered her in some way were beginning to like her. He could tell. They liked that she treated them like people rather than like servants. They liked that she was learning all their names. She bought bread from Helga at her new shop every morning on her way out of the castle with Nymeria and she'd asked Bridy to be one of her handmaidens when it had been discovered the girl was with child.

If he was being honest, Gendry was surprised by how nice Arya Stark could be. She could also be as cold as a frost maiden and as vicious as a viper but she was surprisingly nice when she wasn't raging about something. And his people had noticed. Gendry had noticed too. She'd asked him to spar with her in the yard the day before yesterday when they'd had a free minute that didn't need to be spent overseeing something.

Gendry had been only too keen. She'd done something that morning to antagonise him, though Gendry couldn't recall now what it had been, and he'd been more than happy to take a few whacks at her with a wooden sword. Many of the folk in the yard had stopped to watch their future Lord and Lady do battle, some of them even cheering him and Arya on. His mother had looked on disapprovingly at that, but Gendry had ignored her.

It was no secret she was still smarting over the idea that she'd spent twenty years trying to hold this kingdom together and only just managing it. Her people weren't overly fond of her because of the way she'd been forced to handle things and Gendry knew she was put out that they were taking to Arya so willingly. Especially when she was nothing like the highborn Lady his mother wanted him to marry.

"Are you still working on those?" Arya's voice startled him and Gendry almost dropped his hammer on his foot when he jumped. He spun towards her quickly, hammer still raised and he tried not to gulp when he caught sight of her.

She was still dressed in the butchered remains of what had once been a blue cotton dress; the one she'd worn swimming. And it was still soaking wet, though whether that was from the sea or the rain, Gendry couldn't tell.

"What have I told you about running around all wet?" Gendry grumbled at her, unable to keep his eyes off her long bare legs where they stuck out the bottom of her dress.

"Don't even think about trying to manhandle me out of this," she cautioned, holding her hands up immediately as though to fend him off, "I'm naked underneath and there's enough talk getting around about us already."

Gendry cock went hard at the very idea.

"You'll catch your death running about in wet clothes," he told her.
"Don't be ridiculous, after how hot it was until the storm started there's no way I'll be getting sick," Arya told him and Gendry had to clench his fist to restrain himself when she sauntered closer. She was barefoot despite the metal shavings and splinters all over the floor, and she didn't seem to care that she was testing his sanity.

"You're going to get metal splinters in your feet," he found himself fussing, unable to resist the urge to lay down his hammer and scoop her up before she could do just that.

"You just wanted an excuse to touch me," she accused with a grin and Gendry was surprised when she didn't squirm to be let down. Instead she rested her elbows on his shoulders and tangled her damp hands into his dark hair. Gendry grinned.

"Maybe I did, but if anyone asks, it's because I'm protecting you from pain," he told her. He could feel the damp of her clothing seeping against his but he couldn't say he cared. Not when she looked so pleased about being held by him.

"Whatever you need them to believe," she laughed with him and Gendry wondered at her unusually good mood.

"Did you have fun swimming all day?" he asked her, carrying her towards a nearby bench when it became evident she didn't want metal in her feet any more than he did and didn't protest to be put down.

"It was fun. Have you swum in the bay?" she asked, her fingers still toying with the dark curls in his hair as though they fascinated her.

"Plenty of times. Though never with the fishmonger's kids. They seemed to enjoy themselves," he commented.

"I think they did too. They were nice. I told them to come by the castle tomorrow after the storms clear. The youngest girl, Ailie has a nasty wound on her hand from a fish hook that needs a Maester's attention."

Gendry marvelled at that. His mother was going to complain about having the Maester so busy with Arya's new friends every day.

"Your mother was looking for you earlier. She said there's been a raven from your sister. She's with child," Gendry informed her.

Arya paused in running her hands through his hair at that.

"She is?" Arya asked, "That will make her happy. Sansa's wanted babes of her own since we were little girls. Perhaps it will make her feel better about being married to a cripple too."

"She was unhappy to wed Willas?" Gendry asked, surprised to hear that. He'd assumed from everything he'd been told that she'd been very good about the whole thing.

"She would never admit to it," Arya told him, and Gendry was surprised when she hooked her feet around the back of his thighs after he sat her on his display bench, refusing to let him go back to hammering.

"What makes you think she was unhappy then?" Gendry asked, wondering how she knew.

"I grew up with her, listening to all the tales about how she would marry a gallant high lord or knight, someone handsome and regal to brag to all her friends about. She'll never admit aloud that
she's disappointed he's crippled, but if she'd been offered the choice she'd have preferred to marry Loras Tyrell to Willas."

"Just because of his leg?" Gendry asked, "He's still a fine lord despite the injury."

"Of course he is," Arya told him, "But Sansa doesn't value a man for his ability to smoothly run a kingdom or tame beasts. She values them for their looks and for the great feats they achieve. She's rather shallow, to be honest. Having babes will distract her from her husband by being able to show off her children."

Gendry nodded thoughtfully.

"And you?" he asked, "Do you care if your husband can achieve great feats on a battlefield?"

She eyed him speculatively for a long minute in silence.

"You've already achieved great battle feats," she shrugged finally and Gendry felt the air leave his chest in a rush.

"Did you just call me your husband?" he wanted to know, a small smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Have you changed you mind about wanting to marry me?" she asked him, holding his gaze steadily. Gendry caught the flicker of self-doubt in her grey eyes as she said it and he realised there was far more to Arya Stark than he'd expected.

"No, I'm just surprised to hear you say it," he admitted, "I thought you still wanted me to pass all your tests."

"You'll never pass all my tests Gendry," she laughed suddenly.

"And you've decided to marry me anyway?" Gendry asked, hating how hopeful he sounded.

"Don't let it go to your head," she cautioned, "As you pointed out I have to marry someone and I've been here a week without trying to kill you. That's probably as good as I can hope for."

"Gee thanks, Stark," Gendry scoffed, mildly offended by her words, "You really know how to make a man feel special."

"Since that was probably the nicest thing I've ever said to a man, you'd better hope it made you feel special," she retorted and Gendry suspected she was being serious.

Before he could think better of it or stop to consider the consequences of his actions, Gendry bent down and pressed his lips to hers hungrily. He'd been wanting to kiss her again since that first night when she'd arrived and the urge to do so could no longer be repressed. He smirked against her lips when she opened to him immediately, her tongue flicking out to tangle with his. Her hands tangled back into his hair once more and Gendry fought the urge to have her right there in the forge.

When he drew a needy little whimper from her, Gendry almost came undone. Scooping her back up off the bench and into his arms, he groped blindly for the door of the forge, closing it with a bang before he pressed her against it. When she wrapped those long legs of hers around his waist, her ankles locking at the small of his back, Gendry realised she might've been wanting to kiss him almost as much as he'd wanted to kiss her. Just as she had last time, she clawed at him, though whether it was in protest or in a silent command for more he couldn't be sure.
Her breathing was ragged when he broke away from her lips, kissing along the length of her jaw before nuzzling into her neck. Subconsciously he was aware that he was grinding his throbbing cock against the apex of her thighs, but if she minded she didn't say so. Gods, but her body felt so good against his. She mewed when he found a sensitive spot just below her ear and tormented it with his lips and tongue. Dimly he was aware that one of his hands had travelled to her arse, gripping the bare flesh tightly where her butchered dress had ridden up.

She hadn't been lying about being naked underneath.

She jumped when his hand skimmed over the slick flesh of her cunt and Gendry pulled back from kissing her neck to meet her wide-eyed gaze. She looked startled at the touch but she voiced no objections when he did it again. When she bit her bottom lip on another needy mewl Gendry felt a feral smile curl across his face. She wanted it as much as he did, she just didn't know how to say so without sounding like a whore.

Burrowing one long finger into her tight passage Gendry almost groaned at the tight wet heat of her body gripping him. Her legs tightened around his hips and she made a little noise of distress. Gendry grinned when he realised she didn't know what to do with the things he was making her feel. He liked that. He liked that he was the first man laying a desiring hand on his wife.

Leaning into her, Gendry captured her lips again, kissing her soundly as he thrust his finger in and out of her. She was so tight that he knew she'd never had another man touch her. He also knew that he was going to have to be careful with her. Despite how much he wanted to fuck her, Gendry would refrain from bedding her until the night he wedded her. And when he did he was going to have to remember that he needed to take his time with her. She might be the toughest woman he knew but she was a tiny little thing.

She was so tight that Gendry's cock throbbed painfully and he hadn't even sheathed it inside her. When the time came that he would, Gendry feared she might snap it off.

"Argh!" she gasped, clutching at him needily and Gendry realised she was going insane with the new and alien sensations he was inspiring inside her.

"Shh," he hushed her, loving the noises he could draw from her but not wanting to besmirch her honour by having anyone know what he was doing to her until she was his wife. He nibbled her bottom lip hungrily, reveling in the feel of her pulling his hair and dragging her talons against his skin.

When she made another little noise of disquiet Gendry kissed her again, tangling his tongue with hers whilst slowly adding another finger to her tight little cunt. She went taut the minute he'd buried the second digit to the knuckle, her whole body bowing against his and Gendry felt the way her pelvic muscles began to flutter and spasm. Unable to resist the urge to do so, he curled his fingers inside her whilst grinding his thumb against the hard bud of nerves at the top of her slit.

He swallowed the scream she emitted, grateful when he heard thunder booming overhead to drown out the sound more effectively as she came hard. Leaving her to cling to him Gendry buried his free hand against his aching cock, burrowing it inside his britches and stroking the flesh until he felt his hand grow sticky. He leaned against her, breathing hard and Gendry realised idly that she was trembling with the release he'd inflicted upon her.

"What did you do to me?" she whispered as he lowered her to the ground. Gendry smirked, unable to form sentences to answer her yet. Instead he brought the fingers he'd had inside her cunt to his mouth, licking them clean of her release and groaning at the taste of her on his tongue. She tasted sweet and tangy. Salty from the sea she'd been swimming in most of the day.
When he opened his eyes she looked startled by his behaviour and Gendry laughed when she slowly took his other hand, still sticky with his own come. She brought it to her face slowly, her pink tongue poking out to taste the result and Gendry laughed when she made a disgusted face.

"Tastes awful," she said, spitting on the floor like no highborn lady ever would before wiping at her mouth in disgust. Gendry laughed harder at that.

"It's an acquired taste," he agreed, "It's not so bad when you have to work for it."

"It's disgusting," she informed him, looked utterly revolted and Gendry couldn't help but lean into her, kissing her lips again. She jerked away from him after a moment.

"You taste terrible now," she informed him, clearly tasting herself on his tongue and not liking it.

"Shut up and kiss me woman," Gendry told her, ignoring her feeble shove to keep him from kissing her. Wiping both hands on his britches to clean them Gendry tangled them in her messy dark hair once more, securing her mouth to his and kissing her until he had to come up for air.

Gods but he would never tire of kissing her. She began to squirm in his hold, clearly not liking the taste of herself but Gendry didn't stop kissing her until she bit his tongue in annoyance.

"Ow," he growled at her, jerking back to glare at her.

"Don't kiss me when your mouth tastes like my cunt, Baratheon," she snapped, looking angry and revolted.

"You love it," Gendry told her knowingly, suspecting she would have to get used to it. Because he certainly loved the taste of her and planned to sample her as often as he could get away with.

"You're an idiot," she told him, "Now get off me so I can go and pitch myself off the cliffs to avoid telling father I'll marry you."

"Never," he said, clutching her tighter, "You're mine, Stark."

"Not yet, I'm not," she challenged, "Now, what are you making? Who are these for?"

She shoved away from him and Gendry suspected she was a little embarrassed after letting him finger her. She didn't quite know how to act around him and he revelled in the sight of her so flustered.

"Pair of gauntlets," he told her evasively as he had done the last time she had asked him.

"You were working on these the last time I came in here too," she pointed out, as though surprised he was still working on them.

"I haven't had much of a chance to get in here, to be honest," Gendry answered, "Been busy with preparations for storm season."

"Does storm season mean it gets worse than this," she asked, waving her hand towards the outside world when the door to his forge was blown open now that he wasn't pressing her into it. Nymeria came trotting inside as soon as it did, looking perturbed about being left out in the rain.

"Storm season means that sometimes storms like this one will rage all day, for days at a time."

"How awful," she sighed, looking disgusted with the notion, "I miss the snow. There's nothing nicer than a summer snow in Winterfell."
"You miss it, don't you? Winterfell?" he asked her, watching the way she began to toy with one of the sword hilt's he'd been working on.

"I do," she admitted, "I miss my brothers. Sansa and I never really got along as children, but the boys always made up for it. It's strange going about my day without seeing them and teasing them. I miss sparring with Bran and Rickon in the yard. I miss discussing war tactics with Robb and Jon. I miss the smell of the castle after a snowfall. I miss the cold air burning in my lungs until it makes me cough if I run too hard. Not like here. Every breath I draw here feels like I've taken a liberal drink of water."

"The humidity isn't always this bad. It's just because it's coming up to the height of summer. In a month or two it will cool off again. The days are pleasant then, warm enough that you want to do things but not so warm that you break a sweat," Gendry assured her, watching the way she looked mildly nervous in his presence.

It intrigued him to see her look almost shy.

"I hate the heat," she complained, moving on from the sword hilt to toy with a breastplate he'd been working on for his father, "Is this for you?"

Gendry scoffed, "My gut's not that big yet, I hope?"

"It's for your father, isn't it?" she smirked, holding it up in front of herself. Gendry chuckled at the sight. When she held the shoulder-tops against her own small frame the plate reached mid-thigh on her.

"When he stopped drinking and whoring so much, he realised he'd outgrown the last one I made him. I told him he wouldn't get a new one unless he planned to keep the weight off," Gendry admitted.

"I'd heard he had a liking for drink," Arya admitted, "Though since our arrival I've not seen him drink as much as I'd expected."

"Having Ned here helps," Gendry admitted, "Father never got over the fact that he fell in love with the idea of marrying your Aunt Lyanna. When she chose to become the second wife of King Rhaegar, my father's rage and bitterness got the better of him. Since writing to your father about bringing you here he's actually cut back on the drinking and the whoring a lot."

"Hasn't made your mother any happier," she grumbled and Gendry smiled at her.

"It has actually."

"Gods she must've been a bitter old hag before then," Arya blurted out before glancing at him in concern when she realised she'd just insulted his mother.

"For a long time she's run this kingdom on her own. Father wasn't even really a figure-head. He was just an embarrassment to her. He was always drunk and he always dishonoured her by diddling every whore he could get his hands on, even in front of her. When I was young I didn't realise how hard it was for her, running the kingdom alone. Father wasted so much of the gold on wine and whores that she had to cut allowances that should've been afforded to the people. She had to tax them hard to keep the kingdom afloat. For a woman who'd never had any training or even any interest in running a kingdom, she did what she could."

"I didn't realise," Arya admitted and Gendry wondered if she would look at her differently the next time she saw his mother.
"Yes. On top of that she had to live with the embarrassment and horror of my father's bastards popping out all over the place. It hasn't been easy on her."

"No, I don't imagine it was," Arya said quietly, laying down the breastplate and climbing onto the bench so she could reach a shield he'd crafted, "I imagine it would've been a horrible time for her actually. I can't imagine the horror. I've heard tales of your father's bitterness over my Aunt's epic tale of love with King Rhaegar. I just never considered that some other poor highborn woman would be saddled with him. For a woman with no interest in running a kingdom, she's done a fair job of it."

"You sound…. As though you admire her a little?" Gendry pointed out, noticing that she did indeed suddenly sound like she now had a healthy respect for his mother, "I'm a little surprised by it. I know she's not easy to live with and I didn't expect to hear you sound like you thought she'd done a good job."

"I didn't realise how hard it might've been for her," Arya shrugged, glancing over at him while still standing on his work bench, "Not everyone is made for or interested in the tasks life throws at them. Prior to this conversation I'd been under the impression that she picked up some of the slack where she had to while your father stumbled his way through the rest. For a woman with no interest or knowledge regarding how to run a kingdom, she's done admirably."

"But you'd have done better," Gendry pointed out, not afraid to admit it was true.

"Perhaps, but I have an interest in it. I have spent years paying more attention to my brother's lessons on leadership and running a kingdom than I did to learning the useless words to silly love songs. I don't imagine your mother was ever a woman like me. She was like Sansa once, I suspect. The type of woman who dreamed of marrying a handsome Lord and bearing him strapping sons. I imagine when she was told she was to marry your father she thought her dreams were coming true. If he was as handsome in his youth as you are, I imagine she'd have been thrilled."

Gendry felt a prickle of fondness for her when she nonchalantly, almost distractedly, called him handsome. "To then learn that he was a bitter, faithless drunk who dishonoured her at every turn and who was going to let his name and his kingdom fall into ruin, she'd have been devastated… I can't imagine how she's clung to sanity as well as she has. I'd have killed the man years ago if half the rumours I've heard of him are true."

"That's the second time I've seen you defend other women for their weaknesses," Gendry said quietly, "I admit, when we rescued Helga and her daughters I was surprised by your compassion."

"Why?" Arya asked, twirling the shield she was playing with, "You thought I was an insensitive bitch?"

"I thought you were of the opinion that in a situation like they were in, they should've done more to help themselves. I imagine that had you been put in that situation you'd have killed a good number of them before they managed to bind and gag you, let alone rape you," Gendry pointed out, knowing she would've fought tooth and nail and probably lost her life before she'd ended up like Helga and her daughters, "In all honesty I thought you would be more judgemental of their inability to fight back."

Arya held his gaze at that, lowering the shield. "I know I seem that way," she told him quietly, "I don't mean to. I do think that everyone should do something to help themselves, no matter the situation. But I'm not stupid. Not everyone is a soldier,
Gendry. I know that among the women of the Seven Kingdoms I'm the exception. I don't mean that in any way that's conceited…. I just…. If I was in that situation I would've died before it came to what Helga and her daughters endured. But I know not everyone is like that. Some people need to be protected. Some people need others to save them. Some people lead and some people follow. That is the way of the world. I don't mind being strong where others are weak."

"You don't shy away from the responsibility. That's why you were so angry about what happened to those women," Gendry nodded, watching her seriously as she climbed back down off the bench.

"I take my title seriously," Arya told him, "I know it doesn't seem like it with the way I've always demanded people not address me as a Lady but I'm beginning to see I was wrong to do that. Not because I don't still disdain the title but because I was doing it for the wrong reasons. I don't like being called 'my lady' because until recently I had always defined being a lady by my mother's definition and by my sister's definition. As being something pretty and simpering and in need of protection. I defined it as being the type of woman who sews and dances and relies on her husband to protect her. The type of woman like Sansa, excited over the idea of bearing children for her husband, even if he is a man she wouldn't have chosen were she given the chance to choose whomever she wanted."

Gendry paused in his shaping of the metal he was making to really look at her then.

"I realise now that I was wrong to think that's all it meant to be a Lady of high birth and I've realised what a fool I've been to so casually discard my title," Arya continued, "Being a highborn Lady is so much more than flowers and dresses and expectations. Being a lady means that when I command someone to do something, they do it. Out of fear or loyalty, either way, they do it. It means that where others are weak, my strength is demanded. When Helga and her girls were weak, it was my place to be strong. To get them out of that Inn despite their fear of so many men. It was my place to ensure they got the care they needed. In the past I've fought countless times with my mother about how I wanted the responsibility of running a castle without the tedium of having a husband to be taken seriously."

Gendry wondered if she was going to tell him she'd changed her mind about marrying him after all.

"And now you don't?" he asked when she paused.

"Now I think being a lady is about so much more than having to have a husband. Those women relied on me Gendry. Not on you or my father or yours. On me. And because of who I am, because I'm a Lady of the realm, people acted to help me when I demanded it of them. Being a Lady is about making sure that the people under my rule, under my care, are happy and safe. I see that now. I mean, I knew it in the past, but I'd always been told that the care of the kingdom would fall to my husband. I guess I just never paid attention before to all those little things that my Mother does that make Winterfell and the North a harmonious kingdom. I didn't see the things your mother has had to do to hold this kingdom together. It's not about wearing a stupid dress and simpering at the right lords. It's about taking responsibility for the lives of people who can't speak up for themselves with fear of retribution."

Gendry nodded his head seriously. They were things he'd always known for himself, and yet to have her say them; to hear her express them so simply, made Gendry really realise the responsibility that was being heaped on his shoulders. One day soon all the decisions of the Stormlands Kingdom would fall to him. Every person it in would be his responsibility to keep safe. And on that day Gendry would need a strong and capable wife at his side to help him make decisions and to tell him when he was being a fool.

And the only woman he wanted to even consider for the job was the scantily clad, still sodden little
urchin sitting before him and looking at him with such earnest.

"Does this mean you're ready to marry me, Stark?" he asked, grinning though he was completely serious.

"Yes," she answered truthfully. Gendry kind of liked that she didn't smile at him over the notion or blush about it like a simpering little twit might have. He liked at she was utterly certain and undoubtedly serious about the idea, "Just tell me one thing, Baratheon?"

"What?" he asked, curious over what she wanted to know.

"Do you think you're strong enough for this?" she asked in a low voice, her solemn grey eyes fixed on his face as though she was on tenterhooks awaiting his answer.

"Do I look weak to you?" he asked, waving a hand at his powerfully built body.

"I'm not talking about physical strength Gendry," she shook her head slightly, "Being my husband isn't going to be easy. It's going to be really hard. So hard that you're going to think seriously about killing me. So hard that you're going to want to quit. I'm going to test every limit you have. Your patience will be sliced apart. Your honour will most likely take several hits on a daily basis. I'm not the type of woman who will just sit in your castle and do as I'm told. I'm not the type of woman who will take it lightly if you ride into battle and fuck some whore."

"I know that," Gendry answered her seriously.

"Do you?" she asked him, and Gendry sensed from her not anger, but earnestness. She truly wanted to know that he knew it. That he could handle it.

"I know it, Arya," he assured her.

"But are you sure? I need you to really be sure. I'm not easy to be with. I won't be easy to tolerate as a wife. I will challenge every decision you make if I think it's the wrong one. I will embarrass you in front of your people and other Lords and Ladies of the realm. It won't be done out of maliciousness or spite, but it will happen. This is who I am. I'm not going to wear a dress unless it's a really special occasion. If I feel like it I am going to swim in the bay, or ride off without an escort to go hunting or exploring on my own. I will say things that will make other highborn ladies cringe in horror and glare at me for my behaviour. Other lords will doubt your ability to even control your own wife at times. Can you handle that?"

"I…." Gendry began, frowning a little and looking away from her mesmerizing gaze, "I can handle it."

"If you can't this will fall apart Gendry. If you tell me now that you want to marry me because you don't think you can run this kingdom without someone like me, I will take you at your word. And I will hold you to it. If you say now that it's fine that I don't like wearing dresses or that I'll ride into battle alongside you if I deem it necessary and then later you lose your formidable temper with me over it, I will rip this marriage and this kingdom apart. Is that clear? You have to be one hundred percent certain that I'm the woman you want to marry. Don't tell me I am if you think I'm not. I won't be some pretty thing on your arm for the other lords to admire or to charm the other ladies. If that's what you need, then you should find a woman prettier and bustier than me. Unless you're sure I'm what you need, don't marry me."

Gendry lifted his blue eyes back to meet hers and he wondered suddenly if she was as scared as he was in that moment.
"Are you scared?" he asked her.

"Yes, I am," she admitted and her honesty struck a chord with Gendry that he hadn't realised he had. "I'm terrified. Marriage scares me. Being trapped in this place with you if I'm not what you want frightens me. I'm afraid that if I stay, I'll fall in love with you and I can't do it if you're going to turn out to be like everyone else, telling me to wear dresses and have manners and act like a fool. So don't do that to me, Baratheon. If you make me your wife, you better be damn sure I'm exactly what you want or I'll rip us both apart until there's nothing left. I don't say that with any kind of bravado or to make you think I'm trying to push you around. I mean it seriously. If you tell me now that you want to marry me, and later you realise you actually wanted a dutiful wife who only wants to bear your sons and shine your knob, we won't survive. I'll burn your castle to the ground with you in it and I'll flee the Seven Kingdoms forever."

Gendry knew she meant it and that she was utterly serious. He knew that this was his one chance to walk away from her. To leave her behind and marry a fool who would do as he told her, not as she pleased. This was his one chance to have a wife who wouldn't embarrass him or make him look any less a man by acting like an urchin.

And Gendry knew without a doubt that he was going to let that chance ride right on by him without batting an eye. In that moment he knew he wanted her. Completely knew. Not just because he'd never been so scared and so aroused in all his life, but because she was for real. She wasn't afraid to get serious with him. She wasn't afraid to discuss the heavy details with him. She wasn't afraid to admit that if she stayed, she would fall for him as hard as he already knew he was falling for her.

She wasn't going to shy away from him when things got tough. If she stayed Arya would be the most valuable asset in his life. She would tell him when he was making a cunt of himself. She would challenge him and push him in ways he couldn't even begin to imagine. And she would help him grow from the man he was to the Lord he needed to be. She would never shy away from shouldering responsibility within his kingdom. She was the type of woman he wanted at his back. The type who would kill for him if he needed it. Seven Hells, she already had killed for him. The very first day she'd arrived she'd showed him she had his back and would protect him from any foe she could.

Gendry was man enough that such a fact didn't emasculate him. It empowered him. He didn't need her protection, just as she didn't need his. But he wanted it. He wanted the protection of having her pull him into line if he stepped out. He wanted the security of knowing that if he rode off into battle and got himself killed, she would care for his kingdom with as much dedication as he would himself. He craved the fact that she would be the fight of his life at every turn and she'd make it worth every cursed minute.

He knew that if he married her, she would be his for life. Body and soul. Heart and mind. She would bleed for him. Kill for him. Even die for him. He knew in that moment that if he married her, she'd never look at another man. He'd never suffer the indignity of finding her in the arms of another. He also knew that if he married her, he'd never want to look for another woman. He'd never craved any woman like he craved her and the idea of belonging only to her until his dying breath was one that appealed to him in ways he couldn't express.

"I want you Arya Stark," he told her, holding her stern gaze and letting her see from his expression that he was completely sure, "I want you. No one else. Warts and all."

"Warts?" she asked, wrinkling her nose and looking horrified, "I don't have warts!"

Gendry began to laugh. A deep, full-bellied laugh bubbled up from inside him and it came out in a roar of mirth that made her jump.
"Good to know," he told her, laughing as he moved across the forge and lifted her against his chest, "But I meant that no matter what you throw at me, I'll handle it. As long as you know you have to do the same. I have a horrible temper, and I brood in my forge when I'm thinking something through. That alright?"

She nodded her head, her hands tangled in the curls at the nape of his neck.

"Then there's just one more thing I need from you before we can announce our betrothal," Gendry told her, carrying her out of his forge before setting her down so she could walk on her own, knowing she wouldn't let him carry her for long.

"What's that?" she asked curiously.

"Let me show you."
Falling Like the Rain

Arya let Gendry lead her inside Storm's End, curious about what it was he needed from her and why it meant she had to come to his bedchamber. She'd been surprised by how quickly he'd agreed to wanting to marry her when she'd put it to him so bluntly. She hadn't expected it. She'd expected he would request time to really think about it all and that he would most likely decline the notion once he'd considered it carefully.

"Is this you reverting back to the part where you tell me you'll marry me until I let you bed me and then you send me on my way?" she asked, smirking as she recalled accusing him of just that on her first night in his castle.

"No. This is the part where you have to pass one of my tests," he answered, "Close the door, would you?"

Arya narrowed her eyes at him before doing as she was asked, closing the heavy wooden door to his chambers and noting that it was much bigger and nicer than where she was currently staying. She knew it would probably be a problem that she'd done so when she caught sight of a few of his sister's handmaidens rushing away giggling over the idea of Arya being alone with Gendry in his chambers.

"What are you doing?" Arya asked when she turned towards him and saw him over by his chests, digging out his battle armour.

"Wait and see," he answered, slowly pulling on every piece of his armour. Arya watched his back in fascination as he put on each heavy metal plate, before he finally went for the crescendo piece of his collection. He turned to her then, pulling the enormous antlered helmet onto his head. Arya was shocked he could even manage to do so inside his chamber without having it scrape the stone ceiling. It was the biggest helmet she'd ever seen, the intricately detailed stag's antlers that made up the Baratheon house sigil extending above his already impressive height for several feet. With the helmet on, he wasn't a man. He was a demon. Something out of an old war tale. In full battle armour he was the size of a bull and at least ten feet tall. Arya wondered how he could even hold his head up with such a heavy and weighted helmet.

He turned to look at her and suddenly Arya realised what his test for her was. He'd been into battle in this armour countless times and Arya didn't doubt he'd struck true fear into the hearts of many a man. In fact she'd bet more than a few of them pissed themselves and fled their company. And he didn't want a wife who feared him.

Arya could honestly say she didn't. Not because he wasn't hulking and terrifying in the suit. He was. If she saw him across a battlefield and didn't know him, she would be afraid. But she knew him. She knew that no matter how angry she might make him he would never use his obvious strength advantage against her to harm her. She knew that no matter how terrifying he might look, she was safe in his presence.

And so she truthfully told him what she thought before he could even ask her.

"When we're married," Arya began seriously, eyeing him from head to foot and feeling her whole body throb with desire, "At some stage, I'm going to fuck you in that armour Gendry Baratheon."

"You're not afraid of me?" he asked her, eyeing her like she might be mental.

"I'm afraid I might fuck you in it before we're married if you don't take it off fast enough," Arya told
him, her body thrumming with need the way it had when he'd fingered her in his forge.

He reacted like any hot-blooded male. He jerked the helmet off his head, tossed it carelessly onto the bed and reached for her hungrily. Arya leapt into his hold, ignoring the bite of the cold steel against her flesh as she recalled suddenly that she still only wore the butchered dress she'd snagged from the laundry and hacked up so she'd have something to swim in. Tangling her hands into his dark hair, Arya kissed him fiercely, biting back a moan when his tongue swept into her mouth.

Gods, she wanted him. Arya could honestly say she'd never much craved men in the past. She'd had a crush on Mycah when she'd been younger, but she'd never really imagined wanting to kiss anyone or fuck anyone until she'd met Gendry. He snogged her wildly, clearly overcome with her response to seeing him in his armour. Dropping down to sit on the end of his bed, Arya found herself straddling his lap, her hands knotted in his hair while his hands roamed her chest.

She whimpered when he cupped her pert breasts through her dress, making her whole body thrum even harder with how much she wanted him. She wanted him to put his hands under her skirt again. She wanted to feel his long fingers gliding into her cunt until the aching tingle there stopped throbbing. Arya had never known anything like it, but after what he'd done to her in the forge, she wanted him to do it again and again until she couldn't stand it anymore.

Just as she thought he might grant her wish a heavy fist pounded on his chamber door and Arya froze in his hold. Gendry froze beneath her, jerking back to stare at her with wide eyes.

"You coming to the feast Gendry?" Edric shouted through the door and Arya was eternally grateful he didn't open it.

"I'll be there in a bit," Gendry called, his voice husky with desire. Arya quivered when she felt his fingers gliding up the outside of her thighs beneath the skirts of her swimming-dress as though he meant to continue ravishing her.

"Want me to wait?" Edric called back again.

"No you go on. I'm filthy from working the forge. Got to wash," Gendry answered, his blue eyes fixed on Arya's panicked face. She could tell he was intent on ravishing her again before he was going anywhere.

"Alright, I'll meet you there," Edric answered before Arya heard the thud of his steps as he walked away.

She whimpered in horrified delight when Gendry's hand burrowed under her dress and he impaled her on two of his fingers. The invasion stretched deliciously at her flesh and he shushed her noises with another searing kiss when she couldn't hold back the moan he drew from her. Arya hated him a little for making her feel so out of control and needy but she kind of loved the way he gave her what she wanted. He tormented her one handed, pulling back to watch her face as he stroked the achy throb between her legs until she felt like she was going to explode.

When he fumbled with his armour until he could reach his cock, Arya opened her eyes, trying to see what he was doing, trying to learn what he liked. When she tentatively reached for his hand Gendry opened his eyes to smile at her. She didn't really know what to do, but she followed his lead, wrapping her small hand around his large cock. When she glanced at him worriedly Gendry wrapped his hand around her own, showing her how to grip him and slowly work her hand up and down over him.

His head dropped back and a string of curse fell from his lips when she did it. Arya bit her lip on a
moan when he began moving his fingers inside her in time to her movements. She pumped her hand up and down slowly at first, mewling involuntarily at the way he curled his fingers inside her cunt that sent flames of pleasure scorching through her body.

"Gendry," she whimpered as the panic set in when something in her coiled tightly, ready to snap free. She needed… Something.

He grinned at her ferally for the sound of his name on her lips and Arya gripped his cock tighter, needing something to hold onto when she felt something inside her spasm.

"Argh!" she cried out, her sounds muffled when he pulled her mouth to his, his tongue diving into her mouth and prolonging the ecstasy that flooded through her. Mindless with what he'd done to her, Arya worked her palm over his cock until he pulled away from her kiss with a curse and she felt something warm and sticky spurt into her hand.

She was breathing hard when he withdrew his fingers from her passage and Arya whimpered at the strange, throbbing emptiness of his loss.

"You'll be the death of me," he told her in a husky voice, flopping back on his bed and pulling her down on top of him. Arya laughed.

"Probably," she agreed.

"I need to fuck you," Gendry said then, tilting his head to hold her gaze even though she was sprawled across his broad chest, "Which I can't do until I marry you."

"I'll tell Father," she nodded, feeling strangely content. She wondered if it would be noticed if she and Gendry didn't come to the feast and instead just stayed in his chamber away from the world.

"How long do you think it will take them to prepare everything and invite everyone?" Gendry asked seriously.

"Probably more than a month," Arya groaned.

"Too long," Gendry complained.

"Knowing my mother the only thing left to do will be to send out invitations. She's been set on this marriage since before we arrived. Everything will be prepared already."

"I hope you're right," Gendry told her, his hands stroking down her back in a way that threatened to lull Arya into slumber.

"We should get dressed for the feast," she told him, though she really didn't want to.

"We could stay here," Gendry suggested and Arya laughed at the way his mind jumped to the same idea hers had.

"We could, but I think people would notice our absence, what with a being the guests of honour in a way," she told him, pushing her hands against his broad chest and levering herself up until she was looking down at him.

"It's hardly fair that you can look at me with those eyes and make me want to fuck you all the more," Gendry grumbled when she found a slow smirk slipping across her face.

"It's hardly fair that you look this handsome and formidable in armour. Imagine how I'll swoon when
you're out of it," Arya retorted and Gendry laughed at that.

"I have trouble imagining you swooning about anything," he said.

"If you're really lucky, maybe it will happen. One day."

She was backing across the room towards the door while he began pulling off his armour when there was another, heavier knock on the door followed by the sound of the handle jiggling. Arya panicked, jack-rabbiting across the room until she was hidden behind the door.

"You coming to the feast, son?" Robert Baratheon asked of Gendry when he burst into the room.

"Got to wash," Gendry said, his eyes dancing between his father and where Arya was hidden behind the door.

"What are you doing in your armour?" Robert wanted to know, walking a few paces into the room and giving Arya the chance she needed to escape unnoticed.

"Been working on a new technique," Gendry answered, thinking fast, "I wanted to see if I could incorporate it into this piece of if I'd need to make a new one."

Arya smirked at Gendry from behind Robert's back before she ducked out of the room, slipping away down the hall and closing herself inside her own chambers securely. Nymeria was already there, lounging in front of the fireplace. Arya greeted the wolf happily, grinning when she saw that Bridy had clearly been in her chambers recently. The bathtub was full of still-steaming water just waiting for Arya to climb in so she could bathe. Locking her door quickly, Arya stripped out of her swimming dress.

She sighed at the feeling of the warm water caressing her cool skin after so long spent in wet clothes. It stung just a little between her legs, but Arya didn't mind. It only sought to remind her what she'd just let Gendry Baratheon do to her and Arya wasn't afraid to admit to herself that she liked it. A lot. She kind of hated him for making her feel so out of control but she wouldn't deny that she liked the strange sense of freedom and release he allowed her in that moment.

Arya opened her eyes slowly, biting her lip in trepidation at the idea of needing to speak to her father. Of needing to admit that he'd been right about Gendry probably being the only man in the entire realm that she wouldn't murder if she had to marry. Arya wouldn't lie, she still didn't want to get married. She didn't want to be stuck in this place with it's suppressive heat and it's endless storms. She didn't want to tolerate the constantly disapproving looks from Lady Mina and her daughters. She didn't want to be so far from Winterfell and her family.

But she had accepted that she had no real choice. She could refuse Gendry and end up saddled with some other horrible lord for a husband or she could flee the Seven Kingdoms. Neither option held appeal. Arya was beginning to understand that in order for her to put her title and her goals into practice she needed a husband and she blushed a little when she realised that if it had to be anyone, she wanted it to be Gendry. She'd spent much of her time since arriving in Storm's End in his company and he was growing on her.

She would admit she liked him.

She had grown to rather like the way his intense gaze so often fixed on her made her a little nervous. She liked when he got that look in his eyes that made her feel like she was beautiful and not a horseface. She'd really liked that he had been more than willing to spar with her when she asked him to. Since she'd arrived she'd taken to sparring often with Mya, teaching the older girl some battle
tactics and picking up a few too. They trained every day and in Mya, Arya suspected she'd found a fast friend.

It was an uncommon occurrence in her life. Arya had never really had female friends. All the girls at Winterfell had preferred Sansa's company because so few of them liked the things Arya liked. And when Mya had been unavailable to spar with her a few days past, Arya had resorted to asking Gendry. Most everyone else had been off doing things to prepare for Storm season and she'd found Gendry atop the battlements, affixing a new long-range crossbow as part of the castle's defences.

When she'd spotted him she almost hadn't bothered asking him. They'd had a fight that morning when she'd pushed him too hard with one of her tests and he'd shouted at her about being an insolent little savage. She'd almost decided against bothering with him, but then he'd caught her staring. And she couldn't very well walk away letting him think she'd been spying on him or worse, admiring him.

So she'd swallowed her pride and asked him to spar with her. She'd half expected him to say no, and when he'd agreed Arya hadn't been able to hold back her grin. Sparring with him had been interesting to say the very least. He wasn't as quick as she was, but he was so strong that each blow rattled her considerably. She suspected he'd taken it easy on her too, not wanting to brain her by accident if she couldn't hold off one of his blows with her own sparring sword.

She'd admit it had been fun to fight him.

In fact, there were a lot of things about Gendry that Arya would begrudgingly admit she was fond of. She kind of liked the way when he was distracted he would take up the nearest object and bang it lightly against a flat surface in a replication of banging his hammer inside his forge. She'd caught him at it the other day when they'd sat through a hearing of all the current small-folk complaints that needed addressing.

After the seventh farmer in a row complained about needing better facilities to store their produce, she could tell his mind had begun to wander. Her own had admittedly done the same, else she wouldn't have been paying more attention to him than to the farmer, but that wasn't the point. She'd been unable to hide her mild fascination when he'd pulled out an awl from one of his pockets and begun tapping it rhythmically against the arm of his chair.

After noticing it then, she'd begun noticing him doing it often. At dinner last night she'd caught him doing it with his fork, bouncing the back of the tined end against the tabletop while he listened to his father and hers telling some story of their days as soldiers. She'd also noticed he had a tendency to fiddle with any tool he came across and Arya could tell he had a passion for smithing not just weapons and armour, but everything.

She sighed heavily again when she realised telling her parents she'd marry him would most likely be the biggest blow her pride would ever take. After spending so long fighting tooth and nail against the entire concept, she felt almost stupid for agreeing to marry the big brute. But there was nothing for it. She had to be married and that meant she had to marry Gendry, otherwise she'd kill her husband inside a week. She'd known him a week and not once had she been struck by the urge to kill him. She'd thought about maiming him once or twice, and had whacked him a few times for good measure.

But she hadn't thought about killing him. And that was a rare thing indeed for Arya Stark.

She wondered how he would feel about her wanting to keep her name. She understood that marrying him would make her Lady Baratheon of Storm's End, but she didn't know how to be anything other than Arya Stark. Resigning herself to the whole mess, Arya slumped deeper into the tub and began using the soaps Bridy had left out for her to bathe her skin and clean her hair. She didn't really need
to after she'd spent so long in the sea, but she did it anyway.

When she sat up again, wiping the soap and water from her eyes, Arya realised she wasn't alone.

"Did you hear me Arya?" her mother asked her from the edge of the tub.

"No," she answered, "I didn't even hear you come in. I thought I locked the door."

"I asked where you've been all day," Lady Catelyn asked her, frowning at her.

"I went with Gendry to see to the reconstruction of a barn today, and helped some children chase sheep. And it was so hot when we got back that I went swimming in the bay most of the afternoon," Arya answered honestly, batting her mother's hands away as she climbed out of the bath and the woman tried to help her dry her hair.

"Yes, I know about the swimming," Cat answered in a voice that suggested she disapproved, "The whole castle is buzzing about your swimming attire. Lady Baratheon was very disapproving."

"I know," Arya sighed heavily, "She dislikes me immensely, but there's little to be done for it now. I'm never going to be what she wants in a good-daughter."

"You could try to be," Catelyn replied, going to Arya's trunk and searching for something for Arya to wear to the feast. Arya knew there wasn't much in there and nothing that her mother would consider suitable. All of her tunics were currently being washed and the seamstress still hadn't finished with the dresses Catelyn has asked her to make.

"Mother," Arya began, sensing an oncoming lecture and not at all wanting to ruin her surprising cheerful day, "Please don't lecture me today. I know there are many things I could do to make Lady Mina like me better, but we both know that trying would only mislead her. I'm not a prim and proper lass like you or Sansa or her. I'm rough around the edges. I wear britches more often than skirts. I swear too much. I'm too wild for the likes of her. But this is how I am."

"I just..." Catelyn began before stopping and looking over at Arya seriously, "I just want to see you make a good match, Arya. I want you to be happy. I know you don't want to marry..."

"Mother," Arya held up her hand, stopping Catelyn. Her mother looked surprised when Arya didn't raise her voice or sound annoyed, "I know I have to marry, Mother. I know there's nothing to be done for it. I could make more of a fuss about marrying Gendry, ruin the chance and wind up with some other lord who I don't doubt I'll murder. Or I could flee the Seven Kingdoms. And neither of those options are acceptable because for all the fuss I've made, I am a Lady of the realm.... I don't want to be away from Winterfell, and I miss Jon and the others, but there is nothing for it."

"What are you saying?" Catelyn asked, looking entirely shocked.

"I'm saying it's fine Mother. I'll stay. I'll marry Gendry," Arya told her, shrugging her shoulder before sighing heavily.

She squawked in surprise when Lady Catelyn flung herself at Arya, clutching her in a tight embrace despite Arya still being naked.

"Mother, are you crying?" Arya asked suspiciously when she felt the way her mother's body trembled and heard the choked sound of her breathing. She was. Arya could tell.

"I never thought.... I'd hear you say.... You'd marry anyone..." Catelyn gasped between sobs.
"I'm not exactly thrilled about it," Arya told her dryly and she was surprised when Lady Catelyn laughed.

"What made you change your mind?" she asked when she pulled back from her and Arya bit her lip, looking away before going to the chest of her clothes.

"I realised that being in charge of a Kingdom matters more to me than remaining unwed does," Arya said seriously, "I want this Mother. I'd prefer to be running Winterfell, but I'll settle for Storm's End. I like the people here. I hate the heat, but I like the people. I have the chance to do more as Lady Baratheon married to Gendry than I will in any other castle in any other kingdom…. He listens to me when I offer my opinions… and he doesn't mind that I wear britches and use weapons."

"I have to tell you father," Catelyn announced and Arya didn't think she'd ever seen her mother look so excited about anything.

"I'd like to tell him myself, Mother," Arya told her truthfully. She and her father had always had a special bond and she wanted to talk to him about this before she committed to the idea completely.

"I'll get him," Catelyn promised, "And I'll find you something to wear. You literally have nothing to wear in this chest."

"Not a dress," Arya begged, watching her mother leave the room in as close to a run as the woman ever got when she wasn't being chased by something.

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When Lady Catelyn returned several long minutes later, Arya was dismayed to see her mother had obviously roused on the seamstress and rustled up a dress for Arya to wear to the feast. Arya could hardly believe her eyes when she saw the dress her mother brought in for her to wear.

Obviously made with the intention of catering to her disliking for the humidity and heat of the south, the seamstress had designed her a dress that would keep her cool, suit the style she already opted for, and yet make her appear feminine and ladylike at the same time. It bore a full-length flowy skirt but the midsection was another story entirely. Strips of fabric had been placed to criss-cross over her stomach and ribs, leaving several triangles of flesh, including her belly-button, bare. There were small pockets of fabric at the front to hide her pert breasts from view, though they were little more than triangles of silk.

"You had them make this for me?" Arya asked of her mother seriously, shocked beyond belief when she had the finished product wrapped correctly around her slim frame.

"I know it's much hotter here than at Winterfell, and I knew you wouldn't appreciate the full, stifling gowns I like. Being hotter means less fabric is needed. I asked them to model the style off the type of thing you already like to wear. When the seamstress noticed the way you liked having your arms free she suggested this. And it's not as though you don't have a lovely, lean figure to wear it nicely. The cutouts of fabric make it sensual and make your minimal curves more pronounced and feminine," her mother explained softly, "Knowing your distaste for dresses, I wanted to have something made that you might actually wear more than once. What do you think of it?"

"I don't like the skirt," Arya admitted, fiddling with the flowing fabric, "You know I hate skirts because they're hard to run in and easy to trip over."

"I know," Catelyn nodded, "I mentioned that to the seamstress, but with the cutouts you have to have a full skirt, otherwise you'll look like a whore. She made some others that are shorter, modelled off
the tunics Sansa designed for you."

Arya stared at her reflection in the mirror, unsure she could believe her eyes. The fabric was a deep shade of violet that complimented her olive skin nicely and the cutouts drew her eyes to the minimal curves of her body. She knew she wasn't busty like Sansa and some of the other ladies. Even Mya had more curves that Arya did. She still had some, but they were understated. Her breasts were small, but her wide hips made up for it. Her waist dipped in enough that she still looked like a woman, despite being so skinny and muscled. Arya kind of hated that in this particular dress she thought she looked rather beautiful. Aside from her dislike for their restrictive nature and the expectation that ladies wear them, one of the reasons Arya disliked dresses was that so few of them made her feel anything other than stupid.

She was surprised that this one didn't. In fact, this one made her kind of want to see Gendry's reaction to it. Arya hated herself a little for that too.

"Is Father on his way?" Arya asked, unable to bring herself to tell her mother she liked the dress.

"He's outside," Lady Catelyn told her.

Arya wondered for a moment why her mother wasn't fussing with her loose long hair, insisting she style it. The curls were wild after the day she'd spent in the sea, long and loose and slightly tousled. Ordinarily her mother would be trying to braid it in intricate styles, but she didn't today.

"I'll send him in…. You look beautiful Arya," her mother told her and Arya felt her cheeks darken at the compliment she'd never truthfully received from anyone before.

"Thank you Mother," she whispered.

When Ned came through the door he stopped dead at the sight of her, his mouth falling open in shock to see her wearing such a dress.

"Hello Father," Arya greeted him, unable to hide her smile at his reaction.

"You..." He began, seeming like he didn't quite know what to say.

"Don't make me any more uncomfortable than I already feel, please," Arya asked him softly, her cheeks warming as she blushed again.

"You're beautiful," he told her honestly, despite her request, "You mother said you wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes," Arya answered, moving over to sit at the table inside her chamber and inviting him to join her, "I wanted to ask what you think of Gendry."

He looked surprised for a moment and Arya realised her father had perhaps been expecting her to tell him she wanted to go home.

"I think he's a better man than most and that he's the best thing you could hope for in a husband," Ned answered her truthfully, "He's got a decent head on his shoulders and when he's Lord, he won't steer you wrong."

"You like him?" Arya surmised.

"I do," Ned nodded, "Any other man I've ever known would've lost his temper with your antics and thrown you out of his castle by now. But that boy looks at you like he thinks it's funny and like he
wants to see what else you'll throw at him."

"Is this your honest opinion?" Arya asked him seriously. "If we weren't here for the purpose of my betrothal to him, what would you think of him?"

Ned looked thoughtful for a moment.

"I wouldn't have a differing opinion. As a man he'll make a fine Lord. He's not a fool like Robert either. Doesn't drink much, and from what I've seen the only woman he pays any attention to is you. Robert told me he was surprised by that since Gendry apparently didn't have much time or attention to give the other ladies he had here as suitors. Honestly Arya even if we weren't here hoping to see you wed, I'd like the man."

Arya could tell he wanted to know why she was asking.

"What do you think of him? That's the more important question," Ned said finally when Arya began gnawing on her lip nervously.

"I like him," Arya admitted, her cheeks turning pink again, "He listens to my suggestions and he doesn't scold me or look disapproving when I do something unladylike."

"Will you marry him then?" her father asked seriously.

Arya nodded, unable to say out loud that she would. He pride wouldn't let her go that far.

"I thought you might," Ned smiled slowly, "When you climbed up on his horse after the bandit battle and asked him to take you to get your horse I thought he might be growing on you."

"Do you think he's been genuine so far?" Arya asked, "Do you think if I stay here, if I marry him, he'll stay the same? That he'll tolerate my behaviour."

"Have you asked him?" Ned asked rather than offering her his opinion straight away.

"Yes," Arya admitted, "I told him he needed to be sure he was strong enough to handle being my husband…. I told him that this is who I am, that if he doesn't want to be laughed at or thought ill of, he shouldn't marry me. That if he wants someone to smile and look pretty in his castle I'm not the woman to marry."

"What did he say to that?" Ned asked, taking her hand when Arya began to twisting the skirt of her dress nervously.

"That he wants to marry me. Warts and all," Arya said, repeating what Gendry had said to her.

"He meant it, Arya," her father told her, tilting her chin so she'd meet his gaze when Arya continued to fidget, "That boy has been intrigued by you since the minute he laid eyes on you. When you killed that assassin his first instinct wasn't to chide you for it, but to thank you for it. I saw the look on his face when you lost your temper about marriage and every other time since then when you've deviated from the usual behaviour of a high-born lady. His underlords and his mother and almost everyone else looks disapproving and Gendry just looks at you like he wants to see what else you've got. He's not going to be the type to lock you in this castle and use you like brood mare. If I had to guess I'd say he's falling in love with you with every passing day."

Arya nodded slowly, feeling a little better to know that her father thought the same things about Gendry that she did.
"If I stay…" Arya began, biting her lip, "If I marry him…"

"You'll always be welcome at Winterfell and if you need us we're a horse ride away. A long horse ride, but you get the idea," Ned grinned at her.

"What will I do every day without Mother grousing at me?" Arya asked in a small voice, meeting his gaze fearfully, "What will I do without Bran and Rickon and Robb and Jon to pick fights with? Who will I talk to without you?"

Arya hated herself for her weakness when her body lip trembled tellingly and her father's eyes softened at the sight of her fear.

"What if I can't do it? What if I can't be Lady Baratheon of Storm's End? What if he decides he wanted a simpering fool after all?"

"You can do it Arya," her father assured her, pulling her into a firm hug, "I've already seen you do it. When you dealt with that situation at the Inn with Helga and those girls you showed us all exactly what type of Lady Baratheon you'll be. The type of fierce she-wolf who will do everything and anything necessary to protect her charges. As for your brothers, they're only a raven away. It might do Rickon good to get out of Winterfell for a time before your mother can start getting ideas of seeing him married too. And you'll always have your Mother and me. Anytime you need us you send for us or you come home to Winterfell."

Arya couldn't hold back the little sob that wrenched from her chest as he told her those things. Her heart already ached with missing her family even while she stood there in her father's arms.
Perfect Imperfections

Gendry looked up in surprise when the door to the hall opened from the chambers. He had no idea where the Starks had been until that moment. His father had told him Ned had been at the feast before Lady Catelyn had called him away for something. He had assumed that meant they had some private matter to discuss and he found himself surprised by the sight of the Lord and Lady strolling into the Great Hall of Storm's End hand in hand like they were star-struck lovers rather than husband and wife of many long years.

Ned Stark was smiling an easier smile than Gendry had seen him smile before and Lady Catelyn looked relaxed and far less tense than she'd been since she arrived. For a moment he wondered if the private matter they were attending was a good fuck, but when he caught sight of movement behind them, Gendry realised that wasn't the case. He could hardly believe his eyes when he spotted the beautiful maiden following Lord and Lady Stark into the Great Hall and for a long moment Gendry thought this must be some trick; a dream he was having that he would waken from at any moment.

The sight of Arya Stark dressed not just in a formal dress as was befitting a Lady of high birth, but wearing one with such sensual cut-outs made his cock fill and ache more than he thought possible. She barely looked the same girl he'd come to know since her arrival. It was one thing to see her in those fitted tunics she favoured with britches. It was entirely another to lay eyes on little cut-outs of her midriff while she wore such a dress.

He was sure he might've dribbled ale on himself at the sight of her when his jaw went slack in surprise.

Gendry could tell that for all that she walked with her shoulders thrown back, her spine stiff and straight, her chin lifted defiantly, that she was nervous. He could only tell because he caught her hands fidgeting with her skirt and caught the flash in her grey eyes that he'd come to know meant she was feeling uncomfortable or self-conscious. For all that his lady was fierce and proud, she had a shy side she tried hard to hide.

He'd never wanted to fuck her more and Gendry knew that had he not already decided to marry her, he'd have done so then. She looked phenomenal in her dress. He would admit he rather liked it when she wore britches and her tunics, adopting her own style that she was comfortable in, but there was something about seeing her in that dress that just made him want her all the more.

When he realised her eyes were fixed on his face, gauging his reaction, Gendry grinned at her. She blushed pink at the sight and he felt a little chuckle bubble up inside him, unable to restrain it. She was embarrassed and nervous in her dress and she probably thought he was laughing at her. Knowing her, she'd most likely stomp on his foot in punishment for laughing but he couldn't help it. Even the sight of her perked him up.

Gendry would admit he had it bad for the little urchin. She was everything he'd asked for and more, and he never wanted to let her go. She was intoxicating. Her mere presence made him feel better. Until she'd arrived he'd been sitting at the table, bored, listening to his father discussing the oncoming storm season with some of the northerners, many of them surprised by the amount of extra precautions that had to be seen to in order to survive the season. Mycah had been describing what had to be done in Winterfell during winter to reinforce some of the structures in preparation for heavy blankets of snow and Gendry had been trying to focus. His mind had been wandering to what Arya had said to him in his chambers, of course.

The butcher stopped talking when it became clear Gendry's attention, and indeed that of the entire
hall had shifted to Arya as she made her entrance.

"What I wouldn't give to be you, Baratheon," Mycah muttered when he caught sight of Arya.

The girl had stopped when Nymeria had bounded towards her, her hands digging into the wolf’s fur, clearly pleased to have a distraction from being the centre of attention for the first time in a long time. Gendry's mind immediately jumped to the memory of her hands on his own body and he wanted to groan when his aching cock twitched in his britches. She glanced up after a few minutes of rough-housing with the wolf and Gendry could tell her companion had made her feel better.

He felt Lord Stark's eyes on him, but for the life of him Gendry couldn't look away from his intended wife.

When Arya moved around the hall, coming to a stop before sliding into the vacant seat beside his own, Gendry tracked her every move with his eyes. She glanced at him sideways when she was seated and Gendry found himself staring at the strips of flesh she had on display. His hands itched with the urge to touch her skin and find out if it was as warm and silky as it looked. As though she could sense the itching, she reached out slowly and slipped her small hand inside his own large one, intertwining her fingers intimately with his.

"You look amazing," he told her honestly, finding his voice when his mother cleared her throat, clearly realising he was mesmerized.

"Thank you," Arya replied, smiling sweetly though her eyes narrowed a little.

"You look like a girl," Mycah complained, ribbing her good-naturedly and poking gentle fun at her change in behaviour.

"This will probably come as a shock to you, stupid, but I am a girl," Arya retorted, sticking her tongue out at her friend and making everyone at the table laugh with her words.

"Who would've thought?" Mycah teased and Gendry chuckled when Arya threw her dinner roll at the lad. It was clear to him they'd been friends a long time and that he often tormented her. If he had to guess he'd even say the butcher probably fancied Arya but knew better than to think he had a chance at her affections. She was a high-born lady after all, and Ladies didn't marry butchers.

"You're staring," Arya accused him when the others recovered enough from their shock to go back to their conversations and merriment as the feast began.

"Can't help it," Gendry admitted truthfully, shrugging at her. His thumb was drawing intricate patterns on the back of the hand he held, unable to keep from twitching with the urge to touch her.

Arya rolled her eyes doubtfully and Gendry realised then that his little she-wolf didn't think she was pretty enough to be stared at and admired by men. He supposed her sister and her mother were to blame for that. He'd heard Sansa Stark was undeniably beautiful, but Gendry had never had much interest in red-heads. To be honest he'd not had much interest in any female except Arya.

"I told them," she told him, changing the subject and lowering her voice to speak to him quietly.

"Your parents?" he confirmed, "What did they say?"

"They're all for it – not that I expected otherwise. Mother cried," Arya told him, blushing again and looking embarrassed.

Gendry felt the smile on his face grow from a small grin to a full-blown smile of triumph.
"Don't even think about it," Arya warned Gendry two weeks later when she was sparring in the yard with him. The preparations for the wedding were in full swing and though Lady Mina still seemed frosty, Arya knew the entire realm seemed somewhat relieved. Mother had written to Aunt Lyanna, King Rhaegar and Queen Elia, requesting the permission to have Arya and Gendry wed and they'd been granted the right to do so.

Mother was utterly thrilled and Robert had taken to toasting everyone at every chance he got, clearly pleased with the match.

"Or you'll what, Stark?" Gendry goaded her, circling her and swatting at her sides with his wooden practice sword.

"Stab you," she replied, doing just that and catching him by surprise when she drove the point of the sword toward his stomach rather than swinging it wildly. He grunted before whacking her hard with the long edge of his stick. Arya hissed as the wound smarted, twisting wildly when the young lord snatched hold of her arm and twirled her until her back was pressed to his front, one of his strapping arms folded over her chest like a steel band while he brought the blade of his practice sword to rest against her throat.

Arya narrowed her eyes, struggling feebly against his restraining hold to little avail. She grunted with effort when she managed to wriggle her arm around to shove the point of her sword backwards against his stomach.

"If this were a real fight I'd have just poked a hole in your belly," Arya told him when he didn't release her despite the stab she'd given him.

"True, but if it were a real fight you'd be missing an arm and I'd have slit your throat," he replied. Some of the smallfolk were cheering them on as they battled but Arya ignored them.

"Are you going to let me go?" she asked when he kept hold of her.

"Never," he promised in a husky murmur, pressing his mouth to her ear. Arya shuddered in his hold, hating him when – despite the heat – she felt a prickle of goosepimples across her skin.

She opened her mouth, intending to tell him to stop goofing around so they could get back to sparring and she nearly choked on her tongue when he nuzzled his face into her neck right there in front of everyone and kissed her skin hungrily.

"You make it hard to focus on fighting," he informed her between kisses while Arya began to squirm.

"You make it hard for me to not be laughed at," she retorted, unsure why she felt annoyed by his intimate actions in front of everyone but feeling it nonetheless.

"You worry too much what everyone thinks," Gendry told her quietly, nipping her skin and making Arya close her eyes against the feelings of desire that washed over her.

"You realise who you're talking to, don't you Baratheon? When have I ever cared what others think of me?"

"You care that they don't misconstrue you for a simpering airheaded swot, so you worry too much about projecting yourself as being tough and ready for anything. And I won't have it," he replied, nibbling her earlobe sensually and making her all the more furious with his words and his continued
embarrassment of her.

"Excuse me?" she demanded, fighting in his hold until he let her loose. Arya spun to glare at him hatefully. How dare he think he could tell her he wouldn't have her making sure people knew she was to be taken seriously and not stupid?

"If I want to kiss parts of you, I'll bloody well do it, Stark. And if you don't like it, you'd better learn to," he insisted, narrowing his eyes at her and blocking her attack when she swung at him with her sword again.

"Now you're trying to tell me what to do?" she asked, beating at him as her fury grew.

"Oh, you've got a problem with that?" he challenged and Arya saw red. She swiped at him, whacking at him and snarling when he blocked each of her attacks. He drove her slowly back towards the far wall of the courtyard for all that she was on the offensive and Arya snarled like a wolf when he batted her sword out of her hands. Arya bared her teeth at him before swiping up another weapon from the box on the way, grinning evilly when she noticed it was a wooden Warhammer.

"What do you think you're going to do with that?" he asked her, taunting her now, "You can't hold onto your sword, how do you expect to keep hold of a Warhammer against someone my size?"

Hefting the heavy object with both hands, Arya swung at him. It was a different weight and feel of weapon to the sword she usually used and she cursed when she nearly overbalanced as he stepped back, easily avoiding the blow. Panting with exertion, Arya feigned defeat for a moment until he stepped in closer as though he meant to torment her or kiss her again.

"What? You've had enough now?" he asked, "You're going to do what I tell you?"

Arya realised he'd thought she couldn't lift the heavy hammer again when she back-swung it at high. He clearly wasn't expecting it, because he didn't move to dodge the blow and Arya's arm ached and her heart hammered in her chest when the heavy head of the hammer connected solidly with Gendry's jaw. The sound of the blow echoed in the yard and Arya's eyes went wide.

She dropped the hammer in horror, staring at him fearfully while he blinked stupidly from the blow.

"Fuck!" he cursed loudly, snarling angrily and glaring at her as he stumbled back a bit.

"Shit," Arya cursed in return, "I didn't think I'd actually hit you… shit… are you alright?" Arya stepped closer to him, leaning up to take hold of his chin and turn his head so she could see the damage she'd done. There was already a lump forming and an angry red mark where she'd hammered him.

"Bloody hell, that's going to bruise. I just hammered you in the face! Are you okay? I'm sorry," Arya babble, her heart racing. Her hands were shaking in shock over having actually hit him. She'd swung as hard as she could with her hammer and Arya knew she'd hit him with all of her strength.

"Shit, Stark," he cursed again, reaching for his rapidly swelling cheek and sounding pissed. Arya bit her lip. She felt awful. She'd wanted to hurt him for telling her what to do but she hadn't actually wanted to brain him. Beginning to panic, Arya did the only thing she could think of.

Reaching her arms up around the back of his neck, Arya climbed his strapping form until she could reach his face before peppering light kisses all over the wound she'd inflicted upon him. It was the only thing she could think of, recalling that whenever she was hurt as a child her mother had kissed her bruises and in that moment Arya reverted to the idea of kissing it better. She trailed a line of
kisses all the way along his jawline where she'd clocked him, pressing feather-light against the swollen section before feathering more of them over his cheek and along his neck beneath his jaw.

She felt one of his arms, the one holding his practice sword, curl beneath her arse to help hold her in place.

"I'm sorry; I'm sorry; I'm sorry," Arya chanted between kisses, peppering them all over his face.

Gendry began to laugh after a moment of surprise, holding her to him.

"I didn't mean to hit you so hard. Or in the face," she told him, pulling back to meet his vibrant blue eyes for a moment before leaning in to kiss his jaw again. She felt terrible about what she'd done. What kind of wife would she make if she went about hitting her husband in the face with a hammer?

"That sucked," he told her, still laughing as she peppered more kisses over his skin, "But that might be the cutest reaction I've ever had to someone succeeding at clocking me one."

"I'm sorry," Arya repeated again, "I didn't mean to. Are you alright?"

"That hurt," she told him guiltily again when they came up for air.

"Yes you did," he disagreed with her, "Or you wouldn't have done it. You just thought I'd move. What are you going to do in a battle if you hit someone in the face? You can't just go kissing it better with just anyone?"

"I'm not marrying just anyone," she protested, realising suddenly that she'd wrapped her legs around his waist, her ankles locked against the small of his back. Her hands were tangled in his black hair and she was clinging to his chest where she could reach his face.

"That hurt," he told her, pressing her back into the wall he'd back her up against during the fight and laying his forehead against hers. Arya blushed guiltily.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I didn't actually want to brutalise you."

"You did so," he corrected her, his eyes closed, "Maybe not in the face, but you wanted to hurt me for goading you."

"You were trying to tell me what to do," Arya protested, recalling suddenly what he'd been saying before she clocked him.

"And then you went and did what I told you you'd have to let me do anyway," he smirked, opening his blue eyes to look at her, "You got a problem with me kissing you in public Stark?"

"Yes," she admitted, feeling her cheeks heat to know the small folk around them were cheering for the way he had her pressed into the wall.

"Why?" Gendry asked, working his jaw a little as he pulled back, Arya still clinging to his chest.

"Everyone can see," Arya mumbled, "They'll know."

"They'll know what?" he asked, "That I want you? Because I think they already know that, seeing as
"They'll know I..." Arya bit her lip, looking away from him as her cheeks darkened even more. She felt guilty and embarrassed over the idea that he was growing on her. They still fought often. In fact they were almost always arguing about something. Just yesterday she'd lost her temper with him and kicked him when he'd said something to annoy her. Arya knew it was partially due to the heat of this wretched castle and mostly due to the fact that soon guests would begin arriving to see them wed. It was a big deal throughout the kingdoms and Arya was dreading saying the words and wearing a nice dress in front of so many people.

She didn't like the idea of everyone knowing she was beginning to like the big brute currently holding her. She didn't like that he could make her feel all funny inside when he'd give her that hot look. She didn't like that everyone was making such a fuss about their marriage. After all the fighting she'd done on the subject of marriage at all, everyone was taking great delight in laughing at her for liking Gendry enough to wed him.

She'd didn't even like him that much. He was growing on her, slowly, but she mostly still wanted to maim him whenever he did something to irk her.

"They'll know you want to let me fuck you until you can't see straight," he smirked at her, touching the rapidly swelling lump on his jaw.

"I do not," Arya lied.

"Then why are you marrying me?" he wanted to know, still smirking and looking entirely too smug for his own good.

"Because you're the least offensive option," Arya snapped at him coldly before she could think better of it, squirming in his hold to be let down. Gendry lost is smile at her words.

"Fuck you, Stark," he told her, and Arya was surprised when he dropped her suddenly sending her plummeting to the ground. Arya glared at him, furious with him. Before she could stalk off, Gendry threw the wooden sword he'd been holding into the box of practice equipment and stomped away, leaving her in the yard glaring after him.

Furious, Arya stalked away in the other direction, heading for the battlements of the high towers. She was annoyed with herself over what she'd blurted out, even if it was partially the truth. The main reason she was marrying Baratheon was entirely because he was the least offensive option for a husband. That she kind of liked the big, bull-headed idiot was simply a bonus. The fact was that the only reason she was marrying right now at all was because she had to. Sure, he might be growing on her and she might be warming up to the idea of staying in this disgustingly hot castle with its suppressive storms and his disapprovingly mother. But that didn't mean she really wanted to get married.

She'd only known the man three weeks. She didn't want to marry. She simply had to if she wanted any chance of marrying someone decent who would let her get away with being so unladylike. She might, in another life, have warmed up to him on her own without their parents pushing them towards each other and without tradition and propriety dictating that she must be wed by a certain age or she would lose standing as a marriageable woman. But she hadn't warmed up to him so much that she would simply choose to marry him of her own accord if there weren't other pressures contributing to the decision to do so.

Arya stalked the battlements for a long time, Nymeria on her heels as Arya muttered to herself about stubborn, bull-headed men and about weddings, family, and the entire rotten mess. She kicked at the
stones of the wall with her boots, looking out over Shipbreaker Bay. The midday sun overhead beat down on her stiflingly and Arya wished there was a cool Northern breeze blowing.

Her sister was supposed to be arriving later in the evening with Willas and the Tyrell representatives, all of them invited as the good-family of Sansa. Bran, Rickon and Jon were supposed to arriving on the morrow as well, alongside an extensive host from Winterfell. Robb was staying in Winterfell, for there must always be a Stark in Winterfell. Arya wondered how Sansa's pregnancy might be progressing and what Meera would think of all this.

As she sat there atop the high towers of Storm's End watching the waves crash against the rocks in Shipbreaker Bay, slowly letting go of her fury with her betrothed, Arya's mid turned towards the future. Until recently she'd thought only about living in the moment. For Arya it had always been enough to be able to spar with her brothers and discuss the matters of Winterfell and the other goings on with the Seven Kingdoms. Beneath King Rhaegar's rule the kingdoms were prospering and there had been little call for war or battles.

Arya herself had thought mostly of riding, going hunting in the Godswood and simply enjoying her freedom. She supposed though, that the time had come to put such whimsies aside. After all, much had changed in the past moons. Her siblings had all been wedded except for Rickon and Jon, of course. He sister and two of her good-sisters were with child and expecting the next generation of Starks.

As she sat there watching the gulls fly, Arya realised that all too soon her future might look much like theirs. She'd not spent much time since the announcement of her upcoming wedding actually thinking about the part where she would be bearing Gendry's sons and daughters. She wasn't ready. She didn't want to be a mother yet. Arya still longed for the thrill of battle and the freedom of being unimpeded by such distractions as babes.

She imagined there would come a time when the idea of bearing Gendry's children would please and even excite her, but it wasn't today.

"We're really staying here, Nym," Arya told the dire wolf when Nymeria padded over to her when she sighed heavily, "Here in this sticky heat with it's never ending storms."

Nymeria sighed too, leaning against Arya's chest when she pulled the wolf into a hug, her arms tight around the enormous carnivore. Arya thought about fetching her horse and riding into the godswod of Storm's End. She thought about riding away to Winterfell. She thought about pitching herself into the wild sea from the cliffs just beyond the castle. Stretching out on the cool stone of the high tower, Arya shielded her eyes with her arm from the sun and laid there simply thinking about the turns her life had taken.

The crack of thunder overhead sometime later roused her and Arya groaned as she sat up. She'd spent too long laying on the stones beneath the sun. She'd stripped out of her shirt, laying there in only the binding strip of cloth she wore around her pert breasts to keep them out of the way and the tan britches she so often favoured. Her boots had been discarded too and Arya sighed in annoyance when she noticed that she'd gotten the tops of her feet sunburnt. She'd placed her shirt over her face, so she hoped she wouldn't have a line across it from her arm. Her taut stomach, chest and arms were also pink from the sun.

Grumbling to herself about the fact that she'd come up to the tower to escape the frustration of dealing with her mother, and her father and her soon-to-be husband, Arya sighed over the feel of the tender skin. Lightning rent the air over her head and Arya spent another moment simply leaning on the battlements and watching the heavy black thunder heads rolling it with the oncoming storm.
The wind was picking up, making the sea of the bay wild with white caps, the waves crashing heavily and swirling against the stones. Looking out the other way, over the castle and the Storm Lands, Arya could see a host of people hurrying towards the castle. She expected it must be the Tyrells, Sansa among them. Arya rolled the eyes. The last thing she felt like doing was smiling and being nice to her sister.

She sighed again, realising that her earlier fight with Gendry needed to be resolved. He was probably still furious with her after what she'd said, and after she'd clobbered him with that wooden hammer. She hoped he wouldn't have a large lump and a bruise on his face from it. She couldn't stand the idea of her sister's lecture and disapproving looks to know she'd been beating up her husband. Arya didn't even want to have to try and explain what had happened in the training yard. Mother would scold her. Sansa would lecture her on the proper way to treat one's husband. Lady Mina would be horrified and Mya would probably clock Arya for hitting Gendry so hard.

Arya smiled a little as she thought of Gendry's bastard born sister. She'd made fast friends with Mya. She wondered how Mya was. The woman had left for the Reach last seven day, intent on seeing her mother before the wedding. Arya had wanted to go with her, but mother hadn't allowed it, saying there was too much Arya was needed for regarding the wedding. Arya had been proving all week why it was that she wasn't needed, but Mya was already gone, so she supposed it was a wasted effort.

"Come on Nym," Arya sighed, ruffling Nymeria's fur, "Time to swallow my pride and apologise to Gendry for what I said."

She knew that this time it was on her to make it up to him. She'd whacked him in the face and then told him she was only marrying him because she had to and he was the least offensive choice. She knew it was unkind and also a lie. She didn't at all look forward to the idea of needing to apologise, but she would do so. It hadn't been fair to him, he just made her so mad!

Hurrying through the castle, Arya went out of her way to avoid even the possibility of running into her mother, Lady Mina, or any of Gendry's sisters. The younger ones were turning out to be alright, but the older girls weren't sold on Arya's brand of fun just yet. They would undoubtedly tell her mother where she was and what she was doing and Arya didn't want to deal with that mess.

She didn't even have to think about where she might find Gendry. She imagined that much like he did after every time they had a fight, he would have retreated to his forge where he would be tirelessly working out his frustration with her by creating some new weapon. He'd finally finished the gauntlets he'd been working on and had moved on to making bracers and a chest plate the last time she'd been in there.

Crossing the courtyard to the small forge quickly, Arya grinned politely at the smallfolk who greeted her. She hurried, hoping to avoid being spotted by her mother. She could hear the sound of the heralds announcing the Tyrell's approach and she knew everyone would soon flood out of the castle to greet them. She didn't want to get caught up in that mess, and she didn't want to greet them in her scruffy training gear, which she'd yet to change out of.

Inside the forge, Arya could hear Gendry hammering furiously, the rapidity of the hammer-strikes telling he was still worked up. His explosive temper was often outletted through his smithing, but Arya knew it would take more than that this time to calm him down. Especially if he was still mad hours later. He didn't look up when she entered, his back to the door. Arya felt a little flutter inside her herself as she noticed he was shirtless. His skin was coated with sweat and a fine layer of soot and grime from the heat and the work he was doing. He had sooty smudges marring his broad back where he must've scratched occasionally.
She watched, feeling mildly mesmerized as he lifted his hammer, bringing it down hard on the anvil where she could see he was crafting what looked like war-horse armour. The large plate of metal looked like it was made to protect the horse's chest. She realised with a jolt that she could stand and watch him work at his craft all day without growing tired of doing so. There was something about the way he moved, about the bunch and release of his powerful muscles as he crafted each hunk of metal into something useful and often beautiful, that Arya admired and might even be beginning to adore.

She closed the heavy forge door slowly, leaning back against it to bump it into the frame properly, knowing it needed a little shove to click into place. Gendry paused, his hammer raised, before glancing over his shoulder at the sound. Arya knew he was still angry when he narrowed his eyes at her before he went right back to hammering. Sighing heavily, Arya slid the deadbolt of the door into place, making sure no one would be able to interrupt them.

She leaned there a while longer against the door, suspecting he was too furious to talk to her yet and so giving him a moment to adjust to the fact that he would have to.

"What do you want?" he asked in a rough voice without pausing in his work or looking at her. Arya could tell he was still mad because he didn't address her by any name. When he was annoyed or goading he tended to call her Stark and when he was cheerful he called her Arya. A seven-day ago he'd called her Beautiful as an address, and Arya knew that he'd been extremely happy with her that particular moment. Not being called anything meant he was too angry to even think her name.

"The Tyrell host is arriving," Arya told him evenly. He was too mad to care that he was being rude by not making a move to welcome them. Arya could tell that he was when he didn't even shrug.

"That's all you have to fucking say to me?" he demanded, tossing down his hammer with a loud thud when he turned on her. Arya stayed silent as she stared at him. He'd turned fully to face her and Arya cringed a little at the sight of his left cheek along his jaw. It was swollen and dark blue with bruising. It wasn't horrific, but it was obvious he'd been hit with something heavy.

Arya pushed away from the door bravely, stepping towards him purposely as she crossed the forge. His blue eyes sparkled with fury as he watched her, narrowed to slits. His fists were clenched.

"You're jaw is bruised," she told him as she walked, and he looked even angrier. Arya knew he was waiting for her apology. She knew she needed to give him one. But she knew he'd doubt she meant it, no matter how sincere she might be.

She didn't say anything else. She just stalked closer and closer until she was right in front of him. He didn't back down from her and he looked more and more pissed at her silence when she refused to apologise. Arya ignored his anger, despite the risk of his wrath. Instead she reached up towards him. He jerked back like she was a venomous snake, recoiling in disgust and Arya narrowed her eyes at him.

"Don't touch me," he warned, still too mad to call her by name.

"Shut up," Arya replied, narrowing her eyes at him before she leapt at him, latching onto his neck with both hands and swinging her legs up to wrap around him. She hissed when he gripped her shoulders in a vice-like grip, her sunburn smarting and the joints aching. He was too angry to be gentle with her, as he was trying his hardest to pry her off him. Arya fought him, ignoring the pain that shot through her chest and down her arms, knowing she'd probably have bruises in the shape of his hands.

"Get the fuck off me, Stark," he snarled, "Get off me and get the hell out of my forge before I brain
you with *my* hammer."

Arya ignored his threat too, though she could tell from the hateful glitter in his blue eyes that he meant it. She struggled until she managed to reach his jaw, peppering it with kisses where she'd hit him. He growled with fury, not at all loosening his grip on her or ceasing as he tried to remove her from his person. Arya knotted her hands in his hair, pulling it harshly to keep her lips to his jaw. Her legs squeezed his waist tightly, her elbows locked behind his neck as she plied his face with kisses of the lightest, gentlest nature she could muster. She peppered them over his left cheek beneath his eye and down along the length of his square jaw.

She nuzzled her face in under his jaw carefully, forcing him to tilt his head back enough with her hands in his hair until she could kiss the sensitive skin where his jaw met his neck.

"Stark," he warned through gritted teeth though Arya could tell he was surprised by her actions. He loosened his grip little by little as Arya laid kiss after kiss to his swollen and bruised skin.

"I'm sorry for what I did," she murmured to him when she kissed the length of his jaw towards his ear, "And I'm sorry for what I said… I didn't mean it."

She released him after that, unhooking her legs and letting go with her arms to drop to the ground before him. She turned away then, heading back for the door. She really needed to get back to her chambers so she could bathe hurriedly and change before meeting her sister.

"Damn it Stark!" Gendry snarled from behind her when she went to the door and tried to unbolt it. He followed her. Arya turned to face him when his hand pressed to the door by her face, refusing to let her open it. He glared down at her furiously as Arya held his gaze, his free hand fisting in the white fabric of her training shirt and leaving sooty fingerprints on it.

"I'm sorry," Arya repeated.

"You meant it," he shook his head at her, still glaring at her.

"I lied," Arya disagreed, swallowing a little of her pride to admit to that fact, "I'm not *only* marrying you because you're the least offensive option."

"But it's a factor," he pointed out.

"As though it isn't for you?" Arya challenged, "You don't want to be married either, remember? I'm just the only woman you met with who wasn't a simpering fool."

He narrowed his eyes at her for that and Arya held his gaze, silently daring him to call her a liar.

"That's not the only reason I'm marrying you," he said finally.

"And it's not the only reason I'm marrying you," Arya replied evenly, holding his gaze.

"Why are you so incapable of admitting that unless I'm ready to clobber you with something?" he wanted to know.

"Because I don't like admitting to having any kinds of feelings beyond hunger and anger," Arya admitted, "I don't like being girly and pathetic for liking you even after throwing such a tantrum about being wed."

"You're an idiot," he told her.
Before she could open her mouth to protest or pick another fight, he cupped her cheek, tilting her head to receive the furious kiss he pressed to her lips.
Braving the Storms

Gendry nipped her lips punishingly, his tongue tangle with hers, his hands clutching at her. She made him angrier than anything else ever had and he sometimes wanted to pitch her from the cliffs into the bay, but he couldn't deny he craved her like nothing else. His jaw was aching from the blow she'd dealt him earlier that day, and he was still pissed about her harsh words. Pressing her into the door, Gendry poured the remaining fury into the way he manhandled her body hungrily.

No one else had the singular ability to make him so angry and so aroused at the same time.

He couldn't name the ways it pleased him that even in the face of his fury, she didn't flinch. He knew he'd hurt her when she'd tried to climb him and he'd tried to pry her off. He'd gripped her much too tight for something so small, but she hadn't made a sound of protest. She hadn't backed down from his anger and she hadn't fallen for his threats. He'd meant them. If he hadn't been so shocked to find her peppering his face with those little butterfly kisses, he'd have thrown her to the floor and come after her with his hammer – he'd been so mad.

And Arya hadn't batted an eye. Instead she'd climbed him like a tree, latching on tighter than a tick and she'd showered him in affection in her strange little way. When she'd done it after she'd hit him earlier, he'd thought it was cute and sweet. He'd seen her shock and instant contrition at clobbering him and he'd expected profuse mutterings of apology. He hadn't expected her affection and her child-like idea of kissing him better. He hadn't been able to hold back his laugh of delight.

The action made him feel strangely cared for and he knew she'd not really meant to hit him quiet so hard. She'd only meant to swing at him and maybe clip him if he was slow. He knew that. Gendry didn't want to examine too closely the way it turned him on to know she cared enough to kiss him better when he was hurt. The fact that she would do so again when he was ready to kill her made it all the more potent an aphrodisiac for him.

He pulled her closer, pressing into her harder, kissing her with the last of his anger as it drained out of him in favour of the lust coursing through him for the feisty woman in his hold. Snagging one arm around her waist, Gendry dragged her up his body. He broke away from her lips, meaning to kiss her neck but before he had the chance she showered more of those feather soft kisses over the left side of his face where it throbbed numbly. The urge to grind his throbbing cock against her was too hard to resist and he heard the little whimper she gave as he rubbed himself against her cunt through the tan britches she wore.

She didn't stop kissing his face so lightly, despite the sensations and Gendry was alarmed by how strange it made him feel. Every time she did it made him feel like she adored him and that only made him want to fuck her all the more.

"This bloody wedding can't come fast enough," he groaned, resting his forehead on the top of her shoulder and enjoying the feel of the light kisses she traced along the line of his jaw.

"I'm sorry," she whispered again between butterfly kisses and Gendry felt the corner of his mouth curl into a crooked smile.

"Me too," he murmured back to her. "Did I hurt you?"

Her lack of response told him that he had and she didn't want to lie to him but that she believed she deserved it and so shouldn't make him feel bad about it. Gendry brought his hands to the ties on her shirt, undoing them to pry open the shirt she wore and see what damaged he'd done. He winced
when he lifted his head and caught sight if the red marks on her flesh where he'd gripped her so tight.

"Those will bruise, you know," he told her quietly. She hadn't stopped kissing his face the entire time and so Gendry did the only think he could think of. He returned the favour, showering little pecks across the top of her shoulders and around on each upper arm where he'd grabbed her. She shivered at the feel of his mouth against her skin and Gendry fought the urge to relieve her of the strip of fabric she bound her breasts with.

Skimming his hands lightly over the taut skin of her abdomen, Gendry marvelled at how warm and silky she felt under his hands.

"Is this… sunburn?" he asked, pulling his face back from her kisses when he noticed the pink tinge to her skin.

"Mmm," she hummed affirmatively, "I was up on the tower battlements all afternoon and it was really hot so I took my shirt off."

"What were you doing up there?" he asked, baffled by her announcement as he pulled back to meet her gaze.

"Thinking about what a bull-headed idiot you are," she told him, "And about how I wanted to avoid my mother and all the wedding preparations. And how it's been so long since I've seen anyone from home other than my mother and father and their company that I'm beginning to look forward to seeing Sansa."

"You spent the whole afternoon after our fight up there?" Gendry asked.

"You spent it in here," Arya defended.

"Yeah, but there's stuff to do in here. Up there the only thing to do is think."

Arya nodded, reaching up to trail her fingers over the swollen spot on his jaw. It was tender, though he'd had worse bumps in fights with his brothers. Contrition flashed in her eyes as she studied the bump. Beyond the forge Gendry could hear the storm beginning to rage. He knew it would be a doozy after the stifling heat all day and he wondered if anyone would notice if the two of them just stayed in his forge all evening.

The feel of her skin beneath his hands as he trailed them over her stomach and around her back made him wish all the more that they were already married so he could fuck her three ways from Sunday. He was leaving sooty fingerprints all over her, but if she minded she didn't say so. Gendry liked leaving his fingerprints on her. Not in the bruises he knew she would have on her arms, but he like the way the shape of his hand fit her cheek and the way they marked her flesh and her clothing, telling everywhere he'd laid a finger on his little she-wolf.

Leaning in to kiss his way along her collarbone, Gendry grinned when she rolled her hips a little, rubbing herself against his hard cock needily. He liked that though she didn't voice it, she had other ways of showing him she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Just as he was thinking of getting his hands inside her britches, a heavy fist began to pound on the door Arya leaned against. She tensed in his hold, jerking in surprise at the intrusion. Gendry tensed as well, glaring hatefully at the door and thinking cruel thoughts about whoever was on the other side.

"What?" he growled through it without opening the door as Arya began retying her shirt, covering herself quickly.

"Open up!" Gendry heard his father's voice boom back through and Gendry glanced at Arya for a
moment. She stepped away from the door, ducking under his arm while Gendry fiddled with the lock before he jerked the door open.

"What?" he asked again, in no mood for being civil even with his father.

"Where the hell have you been? Have you seen Arya? The Tyrells are here and you two are supposed to greet them," his father stepped through the door, stopping suddenly when he spotted Arya, covered in Gendry sooty fingerprints.

Gendry watched the amused grin slip across his father's face and watched the way Arya blushed but didn't look away.

"You two better wash up. Cat's going barmy about Arya not being around to greet her sister," Robert told them both, smirking at Gendry knowingly. Arya bit her lip guiltily then, glancing down at herself and spotting the amount of black smudges all over her from touching him and struggling against him earlier.

"Seven Hells!" Robert exclaimed suddenly and Gendry flinched when the man reached out and gripped his chin, turning his head so that he could examine the bruise, "Who clocked you?"

"Arya," Gendry replied, glancing at the little she-wolf and laughing just a little at her expression.

"It was an accident!" she protested.

"Liar," he retorted, grinning at her.

"Hells, what did she hit you with son?" Robert asked, chuckling at Arya's indignant expression.

"One of the practice Warhammers," Gendry told him, "I wasn't expecting it."

"I can see that, seeing as you got hit. I haven't seen anyone clobber you with a hammer since you were twelve," his father commented, "Nice work Lady Arya."

"Thanks?" Arya said, looking baffled.

"Now, you two get on and wash up for dinner before Cat has kittens about Arya's absence," Robert told them, "I'll stall them all."

Gendry didn't even want to think about what the man meant to do to possibly stall them from noticing Arya and Gendry's absence. Offering Arya his hand, Gendry grinned when she slipped her hand inside it and let him lead her out into the storm. She hurried under the heavy downpour, rushing for the entrance towards the bedchambers.

"What are you doing?" she asked when he pulled her towards his chambers behind him.

"Bathing you," he told her, grinning at her ferally, and tugging her closer to him when she stumbled through the door of his chambers with him.

"You can't," she shook her head at him, pressing her hands to his chest to fend off his kisses when he tried to reach for her.

"Why not?" he protested, eyeing her soaked form hungrily.

Arya smirked at him in return.

"Because I suspect the first time we're naked together, we'll fuck. And if we start now we won't stop.
We'll miss the feast, Mother will go wild and everyone will barge in on us. We'll be shamed and shunned for our lack of restraint and no one will ever respect me as Lady Baratheon."

Gendry knew it was probably true, but by the Smith he wanted her! Before he could voice a protest or try to talk her into joining him in his bath despite all that, she went up on her toes, kissed his bruised cheek five times, pecked him on the lips and dashed away out the door.

"You'll never get all that soot off by yourself," he called after her, laughing when she stopped at the end of the corridor, turned back and made a face at him before she disappeared.

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Arya washed as fast as she could, scrubbing wildly at her hair before going to work on the number of sooty fingerprints Gendry had left all over her. She knew they were going to be in trouble for being late. She could already hear her mother and Sansa lecturing her about it. She could just imagine the scolding she would get. Especially for making them look bad and for being disrespectful by not being there to greet the others of the Tyrell host including Lady Olena, the matriarch of the Tryells.

Sansa would be furious about it.

As soon as she thought she was clean enough, Arya leapt out of the bath, dripping water everywhere. Nymeria barked at her when she dashed across her chambers dripping and naked, standing before her trunk and trying to find something she could possibly wear. Arya eyed the number of dresses the seamstress had fashioned for her. She didn't at all fancy the idea of wearing any of them, not even the one with the cut-outs that she actually rather liked.

But Arya suspected it might be going a bit too far to have neglected to greet the arriving host, and to arrive late for the feast, only to turn up in britches. She fingered the fabric of the tunics Sansa had stitched for her, knowing they made a nice substitute for needing a full-skirted dress. A dress was too much. Besides, she'd decided she wasn't going to let the fact that she'd given in on the idea of marriage effect the rest of her notions, including that dress wearing was a silly waste of fabric and time, designed only to make women delicate and helpless. She firmly believed it was only a practice in place to make women less capable of fighting, running away and otherwise being useful. She was sure it was a conspiracy of men's to keep them docile and to make men feel needed.

Turning up her nose at the dresses, despite the number of rather nice and easy-to-wear options the seamstress had fixed for her, Arya donned a comfortable pair of tan britches and the red tunic Sansa had stitched for her. Surely they wouldn't object to it. Sansa had made it, for a start, and it still looked sort of like a dress. It was long, reaching to her knees and a little beyond, with slits up the side for easy of movement. It was also fitted to hug her feminine curves and plunged at the neckline towards her cleavage.

Arya saw no problem with wearing it.

With her hair still dripping, Arya resorted to finding something to dry it, wringing the excess water out of the long dark mass and onto the floor. Dragging a square of cloth over it repeatedly, Arya refrained from scrubbing at it, not wanting to tangle it any worse than she'd already done in the tub. The last thing she needed was to be scolded for having fuzzy hair. As though the humidity didn't already make it curl up at the ends in an unruly mess.

When it was mostly dry, Arya found one of the combs Lady Catelyn insisted she use, snarling it through the tangles until her hair hung in a wavy curtain down her back. She found a becoming pin Mother had gifted to her on her last name day that she'd never worn before but that Mother had
insisted she bring. Sweeping the hair that fell into her face off to one side, Arya used the pin to clip it back from her face, arranging it so it didn’t lie too flat and make her head look strange but didn’t look wildly outlandish either.

As soon as she was done, Arya spun towards the door stomping her feet into her boots and dashing for the exit. When she jerked the door open, Arya gave a startled shriek to find Gendry in the hall leaning against the wall of the corridor right outside her door. Dressed in a smart-looking black leather tunic and dark britches with his cloak about his shoulders, he looked entirely too handsome for someone like Arya. At least in Arya’s opinion.

She'd spent a good deal of time since her arrival simply looking at Gendry. There could be no doubt that he was handsome by anyone standards. Arya wondered why he was bothering with a woman like her. She was hardly a beauty. Someone as handsome as Gendry ought to have a pretty woman like one of her Targaryen cousins for a wife, not a rough and tumble mess like her.

"You look nice," he told her, grinning when she simply stared at him for a moment.

"You too," Arya admitted, nodding indicatively at him, "Hells, that bruise is blue without all the soot covering it up!"

She stepped into the corridor, reaching towards the swollen spot on his jaw where a deep bluish-purple bruise had bloomed. He allowed her to brush her fingers over the lump gently, still grinning at her. Arya felt his large hands slide over the fabric of her tunic and around her waist to rest against her back. Despite feeling bad about the mark she’d left on him and about injuring, Arya couldn’t say she entirely regretted it. She kind of liked peppering kisses all over his face and it was nice to have an excuse to do so.

Going up on her toes, Arya pulled him down a bit, noticing the way he smiled when she pressed lots of little kisses all over his jaw.

"If you keep doing that we're going to miss the feast," Gendry warned her, his hands gripping her waist hungrily.

"Shit, we're so late!" she exclaimed, grinning at him despite the trouble she knew they’d be in.

"You've still got soot smudged on your face, too," he told her, wiping at her cheek lightly after licking his thumb. Arya rolled her eyes, allowing him to wipe it away, "Now come, my lady, your sister and the Tyrells await."

Arya laughed when he tucked her arm through the crook of his elbow, escorting her through the corridors towards the Great Hall. They paused just outside the door when Arya heard the sound of Robert telling sound terrible war story at the top of his voice, enthralling the entire hall with some tale of battle.

"And then, I swung my hammer, like this," he demonstrated and Arya glanced at Gendry, giggling, "And knocked his head clean off, didn't I Ned? Smashed like a watermelon, it did. Brian went everywhere, splattered my boots…"

He looked up as Arya let Gendry escort her into the hall and Arya bit her lip on another giggle when Lord Baratheon shot her a subtle wink while all the women at the table looked mildly ill over the story.

"Arya?" Sansa's voice asked suddenly, sounding entirely surprised and Arya glanced in the direction of her sister.
She felt a smile slip across her face at the familiar sight of her sister and Arya realised that until that very moment – despite all their differences – she’d missed her sister.

"Hello Sansa," Arya grinned, watching her sister blink at her as though she couldn't believe her eyes. Unhooking her arm from Gendry's Arya hurried across the hall to her sister, watching the elder girl get to her feet. Her dress was fitted and showed off the slight bump of the babe that filled her belly.

Arya pulled Sansa into a warm hug, surprising her sister with her show of affection. Sansa hugged her stiffly for a moment.

"I hardly recognised you," Sansa said, pulling back to hold Arya's at arm's length, studying her carefully.

"It's just a hair-pin, sweet sister," Arya waved her hand dismissively, "And maybe a sunburn. How are you? Congratulations on your pregnancy!"

Arya pressed her hands around the little bulge of Sansa's pregnant belly, feeling Sansa jump a little in shock.

"Thank you," Sansa replied automatically, her manners remaining intact despite her obvious surprise, "I've been well. And you?"

"I'm alright," Arya shrugged, grinning, "I've missed you."

Sansa looked gobsmacked at Arya's proclamation.

"Seven hells, Gendry, what happened to your face?" Edric asked from down the table and Arya glanced in his direction to see Gendry had taken a seat by his brother. The bruise on his jaw caught the light.

"Arya clobbered me with a Warhammer," Gendry told his brother, smirking down the table at Arya.

"She what?" Lady Catelyn, asked, looking horrified and turning accusing eyes on Arya.

"It was an accident," Arya protested, holding up her hands defensively, "He goaded me Mother. It's hardly my fault he didn't see me back-swing the hammer after I missed him the first time."

"She actually hit you?" Gendry's eight year old brother Roland asked, looking gleeful.

"Yep," Gendry nodded, still watching Arya.

"I think you might be my hero," Roland turned to her, grinning. Arya laughed at the boy. He was young yet, but he had all the charm of his father and his brother and the grin to match. Arya grinned back at him.

"You let her strike you?" Lady Olena asked from further down the table.

"We were sparring," Gendry shrugged, "She got the better of me."

Arya watched the way the Tyrells looked baffled by his words, knowing that while the Baratheons had been slowly growing used to the weird condoning attitude Gendry held regarding Arya's behaviour, to others it was confounding.

"You were sparring with your husband?" Sansa asked her, sounding shocked by the notion though not looking all that surprised that Arya would do so.
"I usually spar with his sister, Mya, but she's away at the Eyrie at the moment, and I had to spar with someone," Arya shrugged. Sansa looked utterly baffled, glancing at her own husband, who seemed just as confused by the blasé attitude of Gendry and Arya.

"Let me get this straight," Lady Mina said, "You were sparring with Lady Arya with weaponry and she struck you across the face with a Warhammer."

"That's right," Gendry nodded.

"Seven Hells," Ned muttered, tipping his head back whilst shaking it slowly. Arya suspected he might be asking the Old Gods for strength.

"You hit your husband in the face with a Warhammer?" Sansa repeated, looking horrified as she stared at Arya.

"He's not my husband yet," Arya pointed out.

"Soon enough, Stark," Gendry told her from down the table and Arya stuck her tongue out at him before she could think better of it.

"He let you hit him? Without a care?" Sansa demanded.

"Well, he cursed a bit," Arya replied, glancing at Gendry.

"It bloody hurt," Gendry told her, "Hadn't been hit with one in too long. I'd forgotten how much it hurts."

"Have you gone mad?" Sansa asked, peering into Arya's eyes.

"Not at all. Maybe you should sit down Sansa, you look a little dizzy. I don't want you upsetting yourself and unsettling my little niece or nephew," Arya told her sister, taking hold of her arm when Sansa looked like she might faint from shock at the absurdity she was witnessing. Arya steered the girl back into her chair beside Willas.

"Hello Willas, how are you?" she asked when her sister was settled, clapping her good-brother on the shoulder and leaning it to brush her cheek to his, knowing it would be too much trouble to have him stand when he only had one good leg.

"I'm well, Arya. And you? Sunburned I see?" he asked and Arya smiled, She rather liked her good-brother, if she was honest. He was a decent enough man, and though he held certain ideals about women like most men in the Seven Kingdoms, he'd not said any word to Arya's knowledge about Arya's peculiar liking for britches over dresses, and weaponry over sewing.

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"Yes, I was in the sun earlier today for longer than I intended. I'll be fine," Arya told him, squeezing his shoulder lightly before she rounded the table to join Gendry, sitting in the vacant seat beside him.

She paused as she lowered herself into her seat to tilt Gendry's jaw a little a press a soft kiss to the bruise once more, causing him to grin and several people – Sansa in particular – to gasp in surprise at her open show of affection for the man. She kind of liked the way he reached over and took her hand in his lightly. When Arya met her mother's gaze across the table she could tell Lady Catelyn didn't know if she should scold Arya's tardiness, lack of a dress and her unruly behaviour throughout the day or if she should be singing thanks to the Seven.

Arya grinned at the woman in response to her scrutiny and Lady Catelyn shook her head.
"We'd both like to apologise for our tardiness this evening," Gendry was saying politely, addressing the Tyrell host, "We ought to have been at the gates to meet you but Lady Arya and I were both otherwise engaged in matters pertaining to our betrothal. Our humblest apologies, Lord and Lady Tyrell."

"Matters pertaining to your betrothal?" Arya heard her father mutter from the seat to her left, clearly not believing that for a second.

"Making up after a row is an important matter, Father," Arya whispered to him, smirking a little when Ned laughed.

"I must say, I was most surprised when we received invitation to a wedding involving you, Lady Arya," Lady Olena said conversationally though Arya caught the sly gleam in the old crone's eyes. Arya had been subjected to Lady Olena when she'd attended Highgarden for Sansa's wedding and she knew the old woman was far sharper than many gave her credit for.

"Indeed, Lady Olena, I confess I was very much surprised to find it was the case myself. I had begun to imagine I might live out my days a disgraced spinster, gallivanting the wilds of the North and Winterfell," Arya replied smoothly, showing her teeth, "I had begun to believe that all men would be so foolish as to believe I could be tamed. To learn otherwise was rather a shock."

Lady Olena looked surprised for a moment, while many among the Tyrell and indeed, the Baratheon, hosts all looked like they didn't know if they should be embarrassed for her or for themselves. Then Lady Olena threw her head back and began to laugh.

"Does this mean you don't think me a fool, Stark?" Gendry grinned at her sideways, still holding her hands.

"Now, let's not push things, Gendry," Arya suggested chidingly, grinning in return and making Lady Olena laugh even more.

"Well, you'll never be bored, in any event Lord Gendry," Willas was trying to hide his smile and failing miserably.

"Indeed, I'll have my hands full for all of my days," Gendry replied in a drawl laced with double entendre and innuendo. Arya just knew from the way her betrothed leered at her that he was thinking crass thoughts. She hated herself a little bit for the way her body responded to the taunt with a resounding cry of approval.

The rest of the men, excluding Ned, had begun to chuckle a little when Arya had the decency to blush and swat Gendry's arm for the comment.

"Mother?" Arya heard Sansa asked questioningly, clearly concerned over the change in Arya's behaviour and over the turn of events that had landed Arya with Gendry.

"Now look what you've done Baratheon," Arya chided again, "You've gone and upset my sweet sister, and in her condition too! Shame on you!"

"My apologies, Lady Sansa," Gendry offered immediately, though Arya could tell from the gleam in his eyes that he was far from sincere.

"Don't be alarmed Sansa," Ned offered his daughter a wry smile when Lady Catelyn seemed too shocked to speak, "Your sister has reached an understanding regarding marriage and men. At least this man."
Ned nodded at Gendry indicatively.

"I assure you I'm in perfect health Sansa," Arya told her sister, "Now, tell me about the woes of childbearing. Is it everything I've dreaded all my life?"

Gendry snorted from beside her at her question while Arya hid her smile at the way Sansa's mouth opened and closed in shock for a few minutes.

"It's been wonderful, actually," Sansa said finally, clearly deciding the topic would be the safest she could pursue at that moment. Arya expected that later, when the feast was over and Sansa could get her alone, she would be drilled with questions.

"Come now, sweet sister, you and I both know pregnancy is no easy thing. Meera tells me she's been having terrible trouble keeping anything down. Have you been keeping yourself well nourished?" Arya wanted to know, guiding the conversation to calmer waters and smiling to herself when the men turned their attention to more battle tale – Lord Robert picking up his battle tale once more – while the women indulged in talk of babes and childbearing.

"I've begun having trouble keeping my breakfast down," Sansa admitted, her hands smoothing over her swollen middle carefully, "And I so often need the privy that it ought to be criminal, but things have been smooth otherwise."

"Nothing of the horrors Meera has been handling then?" Arya asked, knowing her good-sister had been suffering terribly with near-constant nausea and some pain. Her back ached constantly and she often developed a fever that came and went within hours.

"Thank the Seven, no," Sansa replied, "Poor Meera has been suffering terribly."

"No doubt Brandon's doing," Lady Catelyn injected into the conversation, "That boy was nothing but trouble every minute I carried him. Any son of his will be the same."

"Oh, you had trouble with Brandon, Lady Catelyn?" Margery Tyrell asked.

"Oh yes. Bran was a terror, never would let me have even a moment's peace. Which wasn't helped at all by having Arya for a toddler at the time," Lady Catelyn.

"Roland gave me trouble too," Lady Mina said primly, "As did many of my boys. The girls I seemed to carry with ease, but my boys were all trouble. I always knew by the third moon if I was having a son or a daughter."

"Boys are always more trouble than girls," Lady Olena insisted wisely, "Grow too fast, want to kick too hard and get into mischief before they're in the world yet."

The other experienced mothers nodded seriously.

"Lady Margery, how have your prospects of marriage faired recently?" Arya asked, "I've heard little from you since your time at Winterfell."

"It's been arranged that I will be courted by Prince Aegon to see if we're a match," Margery replied, beaming with pride. Arya felt a smile of her own crawl across her face at the idea.

"I think you'd make a fine Princess Targaryen, Lady Margery," Arya told the young woman honestly. In the recent moons Arya had been provided the chance – what with all the Stark weddings – to get to know many of her age-mates from different Houses of the Seven Kingdoms. While Arya had not at all approved of Margery as a match for Robb, she did approve of Margery being matched
to Prince Aegon.

The prince was Arya's good-cousin, through Aunt Lyanna though he'd been born to Lady Eilia and Arya had hit things off with him immediately. He was cocky and commanding in the way only a prince could be, yet he'd been more than willing to seek out fun and a good time. When he grew bored, he often cracked hilarious jokes, proving that he was every bit as charming and charismatic as his father, King Rhaegar.

"Thank you, Lady Arya," Margery replied, looking mildly surprised by her comment. Sansa looked surprised as well, clearly having been suffering under the belief that Arya disliked Margery almost as much as she disliked Lady Larissa Lannister. Which was not at all the case.

"Not at all, you and Prince Aegon would make a very fine match, I think."

Arya watched the way her mother eyed her like Arya had lost her mind and Arya realised that for the first time in a long time, it was as a result not of Arya's misbehaviour, but of pride at the way she was maturing into a fine young lady. One capable of saying what she believed and not having that be at odds with cooperation amongst the Seven Kingdoms. Arya didn't doubt Lady Catelyn was surprised to learn it, but Arya had known, on some level that she was capable of doing so. It wasn't as though she despised all the ladies of the realm. She had simply disdained their notions of what was and wasn't ladylike and hadn't enjoyed earning their disapproval for her wild ways.

The rest of the feast continued much in the same vein, the men sharing battle talk and discussing war tactics and the state of the Seven Kingdoms while the women shared insights on child raising that Sansa listened to intently. For the first time in her memory, Arya found herself able to flit between both topics of conversation with the men and the women, without feeling the need to prove herself as not being a lady. She also found herself unable to resist sneaking little kisses onto Gendry's jaw when she though no one was watching her.

Every time she did it, Gendry would give her hand a squeeze and press a kiss to the back of it. She caught the knowing glance her father threw in her direction every time she did it, but Arya pretended not to care. As the evening wore on the bruise marring Gendry jaw and cheek grew darker, deepening in colour from a sharp blue that almost matched his eyes into a horrible shade of purplish-black. She didn't doubt it would be aching, though Gendry showed no signs of being outwardly effected by the pain. She suspected he was hiding how much it ached to keep from looking weak in front of the men and Arya felt her heart squeeze a little inside her chest at the very idea.

"Do I want to know how you got these?" Ned asked her quietly, much later in the evening when the ale and wine had loosened everyone's tongues and put everyone in a fine mood. Arya glanced at the finger he brushed over the hand shaped bruise developing on her upper arm closest to him where Gendry had gripped her, trying to shove her off him in the forge.

"I was rather insistent with demonstrating my contrition after fighting with Gendry earlier, when he didn't particularly want me trying to kiss him better," Arya admitted in a low voice, leaning into her father a bit.

"Are you alright?" Ned asked, frowning a little.

"I more than deserved it," Arya nodded, "And had I wanted to avoid that, I could simply have heeded his warning and backed off when he told me to."

"He manhandled you?" Ned asked, a rumbled in his voice though he was speaking with her quietly while Robert entertained them all with some other war story – this one featuring several of his bannermen and a merry chase after a band of ruffians that had been terrorising their cavalry.
"I was manhandling him, actually," Arya replied, "He was just trying to keep me off him because he was upset with me when I said something mean after hitting him. It's all sorted out now."

Ned narrowed his eyes, glancing between Arya and Gendry, noting the way their hands were still intertwined, Gendry thumb stroking the back of her hand distractedly while he spoke with Willas at length about raising hounds.

"You're not going to try and stab him in his sleep?" Ned wanted to know, clearly deciding against making noise to protect her honour or defend her. Arya was grateful, knowing it was a result of him trusting her to take care of herself.

"Not this time," Arya said, "I didn't mean to hit him so hard. He wasn't expecting the blow and we'd been arguing before I clobbered him. When I said something to make it worse we had a row, but it's past now."

Ned looked at her for a long time, his grey eyes assessing her carefully.

"You're happy here, with him?" he asked softly, though she didn't think he really sought an answer.

"I miss Winterfell," Arya replied, "I miss Bran and Rickon. I miss Robb and Jon. I miss the summer snows of the North… but Storm's End is growing on me."

Ned raised his eyebrows slowly, darting a glance at Gendry carefully.

"Him too," Arya sighed, admitting that Gendry was indeed growing on her. Like a fungus. She wasn't entirely thrilled about it, but she had no idea how to stop it.

"Your sister is shocked by your change of heart. I think most of the realm are."

"I know," Arya sighed, "Though they had to realise I would marry eventually."

"I think they envisioned you being dragged in chains to the alter," Ned replied, grinning.

"I did too, to be completely honest," Arya admitted, smiling ruefully, "But as you pointed out; there is little sense in fighting the inevitable. I imagine that had I clobbered anyone else across the face with a training hammer I'd have been beaten and thrown from the castle walls."

"What did he do?" Ned asked.

"Kissed me," Arya replied, smiling wider, "And cursed a lot. And then I said something to ruin the moment completely and he told me to shove it before stomping off to his forge to brood."

"Does that a lot with you around," Ned pointed out.

"I know," Arya sighed, "Aren't you pleased I won't be your headache for much longer, Father?"

"You'll always be my headache," Ned said, "Only I'll be half a realm away, worrying what mischief you're getting into and whether the gossips are telling truths or lies about you."

"I've been on my best behaviour," Arya protested.

"Yes, that's what worries me," Ned replied drily, "I'm only used to being on the lookout for bad behaviour and mischief from you. This well behaved version of you is making me uneasy."

"It's not like I'm donning dresses and simpering pretty nothings, Father," Arya laughed as she rolled her eyes.
"No, but you're sneaking kisses and being nice to the other ladies of the realm without insulting their intelligence and insisting anyone who thinks you ought to be a proper lady is stupid."

"I'd hate to be a one-trick show," Arya grinned at him and Ned groaned.

"Just don't do anything wild, at least for the rest of the night," he told her, trying to be stern but ruining the effect when he couldn't completely hide his smile.

"So I shouldn't flick food at Sansa for old time's sake?" Arya asked innocently.

"Are you getting into mischief again?" Gendry asked from her other side.

"Me?" Arya grinned innocently at him and Gendry immediately narrowed his eyes suspiciously at her.

"Don't give me that look, Stark, if you flick food at anyone I'm rubbing pie in your hair," he warned her.

"You wouldn't dare embarrass me like that," Arya retorted.

"You want to wager on that, Beautiful?" he asked, smiling widely at the very idea. Arya knew he would do it. He had before. He always made good on his threats if she wagered with him.

"You're no fun," Arya declared, "How am I supposed to remind Sansa that I'm her favourite sister if I'm not embarrassing her?"

"You mean beyond her and the Tyrells arriving on the day you whack me across the face with something?" Gendry asked and Ned laughed.

"That seems more embarrassing for you than for Sansa," Arya mused, grinning wickedly.

"You're trouble, Arya Stark," Gendry informed her before pressing another kiss to the back of her hand, "Now shut up and dance with me in front of all these people like a proper lady."

"Didn't we agree I'm not a proper lady and never will be?" Arya asked him mildly, not at all liking the idea of dancing but knowing he was going to make her. Several others were already up and dancing, even Willas and Sansa, though it was more of a shuffle than a proper dance.

"Then get up and dance with me like a whore, you little urchin," Gendry smirked at her, getting to his feet and lifting her out of her seat when she stubbornly refused to stand.

"You don't want me to dance," she protested, "I'm awful at it. I always ran away from Septa Mordane when she tried to make me learn."

"Woman, I've seen you spar," Gendry reminded her, "I know for a fact you have all the grace of a spindle-legged doe when you need to. Now dance with me."

He tugged on her arm, dragging her towards the other dances. Arya felt her cheeks grow hot with embarrassment when, from the back of the hall, she heard some of her friends crowing their delight and scorn over seeing her dance. She wanted to throw another bread roll at Mycah but it would have to wait. Resigning herself to the task, Arya let Gendry draw her into a dance, his hands warm against hers. It really was much too hot for dancing, despite the storm raging beyond the castle.

Arya grasped his hand tightly, her other hand laid against one of his strapping arms while he held her waist, guiding her around the dancefloor. Despite his size, he was rather graceful when he danced, as
he was when they sparred and Arya realised that she could grow to like dancing with Gendry. In fact she suspected she could grow to enjoy a lot of things if Gendry was involved.

She caught Sansa gaping at her, open-mouthed when Gendry whirled them by where she leaned into Willas carefully, supporting him as much as he did her thanks to his bad leg.

"You're enjoying this far too much," she accused Gendry when he smirked down at her, dropping her hands to take her waist in both hands as he lifted her, giving a little turn with her in his grip.

"You're beautiful," he told her in response and Arya rolled her eyes.

"You're crazy," Arya retorted, pecking his bruise face on her way back to the ground.

"Shut up, would you?" he smirked at her in response, "How long do you think before I can sneak away with you without us being noticed missing?"

"When you say things like this, it makes me think marrying you might not be so bad after all," Arya taunted, smirking at him, "But I hope the answer is soon. Just as soon as Father gets Mother dancing we'll be free. He always distracts her when they dance and she forgets about keeping an eye on me."

"Think he'll hurry?" Gendry murmured, looking hopeful and Arya felt a devious smirk cross her face.

"I hope so," she admitted.
The Calm

Chapter Notes

So, I started writing this back in March of 2015. Hence, the many divergences from canon (either books or TV show). Please forgive the exclusion of the fan-theory turned canon about Jon's heritage being ignored in this fic.

Also, those of you who've seen up to S8E4.... who else is not okay right now?

*sniffles*

The days preceding the wedding raced by in a blur for Arya. Bran, Rickon and Jon arrived from Winterfell, a large host of Northmen in tow, come to celebrate her wedding. Every house of the Seven Kingdoms seemed to send representatives and things had gotten so crowded that Arya couldn't find a moment's peace within the castle walls.

Mother roused after her constantly, making sure several times that her dress would fit her and that everything else would be just so. It had become Arya's task to ensure the women of her age were all seen to and she wasn't thrilled about. Good practice, Father had called it. He'd reminded her that, after the wedding, everyone would go on home to their own castles and their own lives, only coming together for other weddings and events, or in times of war.

It was a rare thing indeed to get so many people gathered together as they were at Storm's End. Father insisted that she mend fences with women she had sneered at in the past and though she'd been reluctant to do so, Arya reminded herself constantly that if she didn't, things would be awkward with them at later dates. She was to be Lady Baratheon of Storm's End and as such she had a number of responsibilities.

She was also finding that everything she had to do was more tolerable with Gendry involved. She enjoyed seeing her sister's confused expression every time she did something lady-like and mature. She also rather liked the way her mother had taken to looking at her with growing pride, rather than always scolding her for things. Not that she would ever admit it, of course.

"So, is it true?" Jon asked her, leaning against the battlements high up on the castle's wall where he'd insisted he must be allowed time to speak with his favourite sibling in peace.

"Is what true?" Arya asked him, eyeing him fondly.

"Is it true that you've fallen in love with him? That the wild little beast I so recall from our youth has been tamed?"

Arya stared at him, affronted.

"Someone said that?"

"Everyone's saying that. They are all shocked by your ability to play nicely when they've heard so many horrid things about you in the past. Many of them hadn't met you, of course, but nonetheless, you have surprised many of us. I almost didn't recognise you when you greeted us at the gates on Gendry's arm."
"I look the same as ever," Arya rolled her eyes at him.

"No you don't, sweet sister," Jon told her fondly, throwing an arm around her shoulders and ruffling her dark hair affectionately. "You carry yourself differently now. You have always been bold, confident, willing to stand up for what you believe in, and willing to put anyone who challenges you in their place. But for all that, you also had a look of harsh defiance to you. A sharpness that spoke of your fury over the way the world perceived your behaviour. When you met us at the gate, you no longer had that bitter cast to you."

Arya raised her eyebrows at him.

"You think I am going soft?" she asked him.

"No," Jon shook his head. "I think that you've always felt you have to prove something. That you braced yourself for the judgement of others, anticipating it before you received it and steeling yourself against it. You no longer brace for it. You are simply content to do as you please without feeling like you have to prove to everyone that you are allowed. Having seen the way you and Gendry act together, and having heard the tales of the way you interact, I think it's because you know he approves of what you do and so you don't care what everyone else thinks."

"I don't care what anyone thinks," Arya rolled her eyes. "At least, not when it comes to their notions about me being lady."

"No, you don't," Jon agreed, giving her a small smile. "But you've always cared entirely too much what everyone thought about you being mistaken for one. You always corrected people who used your title. You scoffed at gossip and dresses, and usually couldn't even stand to be in the company of other women lest you be lumped in with them as a silly little twit giggling about boys or sewing or who was seen sneaking out of Theon's rooms."

Arya blinked at him, supposing that was true.

"Instead, you tagged after me and Robb. You snuck out of your dancing lessons to listen to our lessons about running a castle and riding into battle and how to shoot a bow. You got muddy and dirty. You went riding by yourself. The only people you numbered as friends were boys."

"Do you have a point?" Arya interrupted.

"Well, let's just say that I watched you actually speak civilly to Sansa this morning for nigh on a half hour about the state of her pregnancy and the gossips all married women tell betrothed women. I also watched you flit back and forth to the conversation me and Edric were having with Gendry about the likelihood of another Greyjoy uprising and whether there would be war with the Lannisters after Larissa sent an assassin after Gendry to frame you. And for the first time in my memory, you brushed off Bran's sly comment about how silly girls talked about silly wedding details and went right on arguing with Gendry about the merits of sending Lannister a beheaded lion's corpse without paying his teasing any mind, all before going back to the discussion the women were having about pregnancy."

"And you think that means Gendry has somehow tamed me?" she asked, raising her eyebrows at him in challenge.

"I think he settles you," Jon said quietly. "He makes you feel comfortable in being exactly who you are, whether that means talking babies or war tactics. I haven't see you get muddy even once since I arrived."
"You've only been here two days," Arya laughed. "But I won't deny that Gendry's acceptance of my boyish-habits in addition to the odd girlish one do make me feel more… comfortable, I suppose. That, and I discovered - once I stopped screeching about how wretched marriage surely must be - that I want to shoulder my responsibility as a woman of high birth within the Seven Kingdoms. I'm ready to accept all the responsibility of being a noble, and I'm ready for the changes I can make for the good of those small folk who haven't the power, the coin or the alliances to make those changes alone. I saved the lives of three women and changed them for the better – something I was only able to do as a circumstance of my birth.

"And when I did that, I realised that this is what I want. Yes, I have to get married, and yes, I still have a good deal of moral outrage over that fact, but I've accepted that I must do so and I freely admit that if it has to be anyone, I'm very lucky that it's Gendry I'll be marrying. If it means that I have the power to run this castle and help the smallfolk here and see to the continued prosperity of this kingdom, I will do so gladly. I would, of course, prefer to be in Winterfell, away from the heat, away from the storms, back where the summer snow chills my fingers to the bone, but it cannot be so. That is not my future. That luxury belongs to Robb and Nymeria. To Bran and Meera. To you and whichever lovely lady you choose to marry, one day. My future lays here. In Storm's End. As Gendry's wife. Lady Arya Baratheon."

Jon made a slight face at the title.

"Sounds strange to the ear, hearing you called anything other than Stark."

"I'll always be a Stark," she laughed. "Even as Lady Baratheon, I suspect I'll continue to be called Stark. Gendry calls me it every time he's mildly put out with me. 'There goes Arya Stark again, they'll say, 'That girl never did fall into line, even when she wed such a fine man. Shame, really, but she's the fiercest lady in the Seven Kingdoms, don't you know? She'll ride into battle to protect your sons as surely as she'll protect her own. A fierce she-wolf of the North sporting an antlered crown, my how it calms my soul to know my son's life is guarded by such a woman.'"

"You imagine they'll sing you praises?" Jon asked, chuckling at her acting skills.

"They already do," Arya said quietly. She looked humbly at her feet for a moment. "You've been so focused on the notion that I might've been tamed, you've missed the parts of the story where I've showed my teeth and protected those within this realm. I saved Gendry from an assassin. I saved Helga, Bridy and Bromilda from their terrible circumstances; ensured they had jobs and were cared for and seen to. I made Bridy one of my handmaidens, despite the habit I have of refusing maidens at all. The Highborns all chatter and gossip and smirk that such a wild wolf pup can be leashed by a man with a strong hand. The smallfolk, however? Well, shall we take a stroll through the courtyards, dear brother? The smallfolk adore me. A few of the old men roll their eyes and turn up their noses at the idea of their Lady wearing britches, but many of the women look at me with awe and with envy. Most approve, and those who don't are growing to accept my ways, just the same."

Jon regarded her for a long moment in silence after that.

"Besides, just because I agreed to marry him and I'm on my best behaviour for the sake of Father's honour, I'm hardly about to just lie down and become a doormat. I give Gendry plenty of cheek. I snap and I snarl and do all the things I've always done. It's just causing less of a stir because as long as Gendry doesn't disapprove, Mother bites her tongue on scolding me."

Jon laughed at that, reaching an arm out for her and pulling her into an embrace.

"I've missed you, little sister," he murmured into her hair when Arya wrapped her arms around his ribs.
"I've missed you too," Arya replied, her throat tight as she cuddled him close. "Gods, I've missed you. All of you. Robb. Bran. Rickon. I even missed Sansa. But I missed you the most, Jon. You've always been my favourite brother."

"Winterfell isn't the same without you," he said, leaning against the battlements without letting her go. "It feels... empty. Robb and Bran are always busy with their new wives. Father has been here with you and Rickon is right at that age where he's almost man enough to act maturely, but so bloody mouthy that it's a miracle I haven't murdered him."

Arya laughed. She'd noticed when conversing with her youngest brother upon their arrival that he was cheekier than ever.

"I believe Father means to leave Rickon here with me after the wedding is over and everyone goes home," she said. "Out of Mother's reach for a while, he said. Else she'll try to have him married off this year, too."

"The last thing we need is that little shit marrying anyone and bringing her home to Winterfell," Jon grumbled.

"What about you?" Arya asked, leaning back in his hold to peer at him. "Has a pretty lady caught your eye enough that you might be tempted?"

Jon rolled his eyes.

"I might be the bastard of a Lord, but I'm still a bastard, little sister. None of the girls want to look twice at me."

"That's a lie and you know it," she chided. "I distinctly saw a few of Gendry's sisters eyeing you off when they spotted you."

"And they all turned up their noses when they realised I'm the Stark bastard," he replied.

"Actually, most of them don't care too much about that here," Arya said. "Robert has so many bastards with the local whores that the girls are all rather used to it. The man has nine children with Lady Mina, and I think that at last count, he had another fifteen bastards, just in the Stormlands. That's not counting however many he might've fucked into the whores and tavern girls he encountered before he was married. Honestly, I don't know why you get so touchy about the subject, Jon. You should meet Mya Stone. She's Gendry elder sister – the bastard that cost Robert our Aunt Lyanna when she heard of Mya's birth. She's brilliant."

"I've heard about her," Jon nodded. "At the Eeyrie, isn't she?"

"Yes. But she's promised to be back for the wedding. She's Gendry's favourite sister. She wouldn't miss it for the world," Arya grinned.

"Ironic that you and Gendry each have a favoured sibling who happens to be bastard born," Jon said.

"Lucky, I'd call it," she replied. "Can I ask you something?"

"What now?" he asked, narrowing her eyes suspiciously at the innocently leading tone she adopted. Arya bit her lip, cuddling into his chest once more before daring to ask her question, unsure she wanted him to see her face should he refuse her request.

"Will you stay here with me?" she asked softly. "Please? I miss you so much when we're apart and I
might be beginning to accept having to live here, but I loathe this castle mostly because it lacks all of
the things I adore about Winterfell. The most prominent of which happens to be you, Jon Snow."

Jon went still against her before pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"We'd have to clear it with Father and with Lord Robert," he answered. "I don't have the freedom of
the hightborn to impose on whomever I choose. And besides, what would I do here? Other than put
up with your rot?"

"Be here with me. You like training the hounds and Storm's End doesn't have a decent Hound
Master. Or there are a thousand things you could do, there's plenty of openings for jobs," Arya told
him.

"And what of you marital duties, Arya?" Jon asked. "You aren't going to feel much like letting that
big brute of a Baratheon fuck his babies into you when you could be off tormenting me into a duel."

"Oh, I can assure you, I'll be only too happy to uphold my marriage duties," Arya replied before her
cheeks turned crimson and she pulled out of Jon's embrace, shocked at her own words.

He stared at her with wide eyes for a minute before he burst out laughing.

"Stop laughing!" Arya demanded, stomping her foot childishy and making Jon laugh all the more.

"A little enamoured with Gendry, are you?" he teased.

"I'll push you from the battlements, Jon," Arya warned.

"You wouldn't, I'm your favourite brother," Jon retorted.

Needing to distract him before he could tease her even more, Arya shoved him.

"Fine. Then the last one to the stables in a rotten egg!" she declared before spinning on her heels and
racing away for the nearest staircase.

"Oi!" Jon shouted, his heavy footsteps pounding behind her as she raced down the stairs fast enough
to make her mother's head spin.

Arya tore through the castle with Jon in her wake, darting around servants, dashing past Sansa and
some of the other ladies, laughing as she went.

"Arya!" Sansa called in protest as she passed her, racing for the Great Hall and the shortcut across
the courtyard beyond to reach the stables.

The commotion drew the attention of everyone in the hall when Arya raced inside, leaping right over
the head of a small boy toddling about and almost tripping her.

"What's the rush?" Bran shouted, spotting Jon racing a few steps behind her.

"Last one to the stable is a rotten egg!" Ayra shouted, spotting both Bran and Rickon in the Hall.
The scrape of chairs as both boys leaped to their feet to chase her drew even more attention and she
didn't doubt many of the other hightborn lords were shaking their heads disapprovingly as she raced
with her brothers on her heels.

Some of Gendry's younger brothers, Roland among them, raced with them, falling behind the Stark
clan as they darted around servants, dodged merchants and shouted apologies to Lords and Ladies.
Rickon crashed into a serving wench and only just managed to catch the poor girl, spinning her
neatly out of his way before she could be trampled and Arya laughed all the more at the promise he called over his shoulder to kiss her better later.

"You'll never catch me, boys!" Arya laughed, taunting them all as she dashed past Gendry's forge, spying him inside it. He looked up as she dashed past with her brothers and many others following her wake.

"What's she done now?" Arya heard him shout after Jon, laying down his hammer to follow them.

Arya dashed into the stable, racing for Visenya's stall and snatching up the mare's bridle.

"You'll never make it out the gates before me, Arya!" Rickon shouted a challenge when he raced into the stall across from hers, his gelding stomped a foot and his eyes rolled in protest.

"Watch me, little brother," Arya laughed, vaulting aboard Visenya while she was still in the stall. Kicking the mare's sides, Arya clung on, bareback, and they tore out of the stall just ahead of the children who'd followed. Arya galloped into the courtyard, drawing alarmed cries from the smallfolk as Rickon followed a few paces behind. When Ghost, Summer, Nymeria and Shaggy all joined the race, people fled before the Stark children in their terror.

Arya laughed, whooping loudly and racing for the gate in the distance, knowing she could outpace Rickon. Bran appeared astride his bay gelding, pulling ahead by a nose and Arya growled at him while the wolves yipped, snarled and snapped at one another. Jon was on their heels and Rickon shouted over the idea that he might come last.

When they all burst through the gate, Arya heard Bran shout.

"First one to the tree-line gets the other's desert for tonight's meal!" he challenged, spurring his gelding forward.

"You're on, Bran!" Jon shouted, galloping for it astride his dappled grey.

When Arya looked over her shoulder, she could see Roland and some of the youngsters trying to keep up with them, having paused to collect their own ponies while others gave up the chase. Beyond them, she spied Gendry and her father up on the battlements above the gate, both of them watching the chaos as she raced her brothers to the tree-line. She couldn't hide the smile that pulled her lips high and she tipped her head back to howl in delight as she faced forward to continue the race.

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

"Do I want to know?" Gendry asked of Ned Stark, watching his betrothed as she raced her brothers, howling like a wolf herself.

"High spirits," Ned shrugged. "She missed the lot of them."

"Aye, she misses Winterfell, too," Gendry agreed, watching the race for the tree-line. Rickon looked like he might win, his horse pulling ahead of the others while the wolves dashed beside their masters.

"She misses the cold and she misses the familiarity," Ned nodded. "But having her brothers here will make her see it's the people, not the castle, that makes a home."

"And when you all return to Winterfell without her?" Gendry wanted to know.

"I've been speaking with Robert about leaving Rickon here, for a time," Ned said. "Else his mother
will try to marry the lad off before his voice even breaks."

Gendry chuckled.

"You know she missed Jon the most," he said.

"Aye, she did. I've half a mind to leave him here too, if your castle can handle more mouths to feed. Or perhaps to send him back a short time after the wedding. If I leave the two of them here with her, you'll never get her in the bedchamber long enough to give me grandchildren," Ned smirked.

Gendry smirked in return, biting his tongue on the idea that he doubted he'd have trouble keeping his betrothed in the bedchamber. Getting her out of the bedchamber would be the trick.

"When does the King arrive?" Gendry asked rather than voicing his thoughts. He didn't expect Ned Stark wanted to know just what Gendry had been doing to Arya in private.

"Three days, I believe," Ned murmured.

"Father's going to need to be kept well distracted while King Rhaegar and Queen Lyanna are here," Gendry worried quietly as the Stark siblings pushed their horses to run in circles around one another, crashing practice swords together in the distance.

"Aye," Ned agreed. "It wouldn't do to see him beheaded for getting mouthy with Rhaegar."

"Lyanna is coming, isn't she?" Gendry confirmed.

"Yes, despite my request against it," Ned admitted. "It will kill Robert to see her again after all this time. Especially when she's pregnant again, I hear."

"How many Targaryens does that make now, between her and Elia?" Gendry wanted to know.

"Sixteen, I believe. Elia is pregnant again, too," Ned replied, looking like the idea annoyed him.

"Braver man than me," Gendry muttered. "One woman seems entirely too much work, let alone two."

Ned looked over at him in surprise for a moment before he threw his head back and began to laugh.

"Living with Arya will be more work that living with ten women would be," Ned chuckled. "And it's often said of the Targaryens that the prolific inbreeding dooms them to greatness or madness. Perhaps Rhaegar falls on the side of madness, to crave two wives and to be so foolish as to breed them both at the same time."

Gendry began to laugh as well.

"Do you have any idea how to corral my Father while they're here?" he asked. "I don't fancy having my wedding ruined with a declaration for war from the King of the Seven Kingdoms."

"I plan to get Robert drunk enough that I can lock him in a cupboard until the whole ordeal is over."

"A month in a cupboard might do him some good," Gendry chuckled. "Or there's always the dungeons."

"I'm sure Lyanna would find that notion amusing," Ned shook his head.

"She hates him, doesn't she?" Gendry guessed, never having met the woman.
"I don't think so," Ned shook his head. "She did, for a time, in our youth. When she learned that he wasn't above crawling between every whore's legs and fucking them full of his bastards, Lyanna was furious. That he would dishonour their betrothal that way never sat right with her. It's why she even considered the idea of looking sideways at Rhaegar, else she never would've. Even if the King is too charming for his own good. She'd have done her duty and married Robert in spite of Rhaegar's interest if he'd used his head to make his decisions instead of his cock."

"Aye, most days Mother hates him for the same reason," Gendry muttered.

Ned nodded sombrely.

"Lyanna no longer hates him, I believe. She pities him. She believed, when she fell for Rhaegar, that she was doing herself a favour by breaking the betrothal, and doing Robert one too. Make no mistake, if my Father hadn't allowed her to do it, if he'd pushed her to marry Robert, our kingdoms would've gone to war when he dishonoured Lyanna in marriage as surely as he'd done in betrothal. She'd likely have slit his throat herself, come to think of it – very much like Arya in that way. No, she thought that he mustn't want her and so wouldn't care if she broke things off. She believed he'd no interest in her, else he'd never have strayed."

"What do you believe?" Gendry asked of the man.

Ned scratched his beard thoughtfully before glancing around to make sure they wouldn't be overheard.

"I believe Robert only claims his undying love for her because she spurned him. Had they wed, he'd have still strayed. He was intrigued, and maybe he even fancied her back then. But being told he couldn't have her after being promised for so long that she would be his… it never sat right with him. It'd be a bit like me letting Arya ride off to Winterfell with those brothers of hers to marry Theon or something."

"Except she doesn't fancy Theon," Gendry commented. "The love story of Queen Lyanna and King Rhaegar is told throughout the Seven Kingdoms."

"Aye, well like I said, Rhaegar's a charming fucker and most of his sons are growing up just the same. Watch out for his brother, though. Viserys is a snivelling piece of shit and their sister, Daenerys is almost a lady."

"Almost?" Gendry asked.

"Aye, almost. She and Lyanna are good friends, despite Daenerys being closer in age to Sansa and Elia's eldest daughter, Rhaenys. She's quiet, but she can be very outspoken and very much for the rights of the downtrodden. She takes on slavers and naysayers of freedom."

"Wild, then?" Gendry guessed.

"Powerful," Ned disagreed. "Prince Aegon will rule after Rhaegar, but Daenerys is the 'Dragon' of the bunch."

"The same way Arya has the 'wolf-blood'?" Gendry frowned.

Ned glanced at him sharply. "Aye, if you believe such things. The dragons are gone, but the magic remains. Arya and Daenerys made fast friends at Sansa's wedding."

"They are all coming to this one?" Gendry frowned. "Do they often drag themselves across the Seven Kingdoms this way?"
"No," Ned's grin was tight. "No, they make exceptions for family. Elia and most of her children didn't come to Robb or Bran's wedding. They all attended Sansa's to Willas. Couldn't afford not to, not without risking offending High Garden. The food supply comes from there, so it wasn't worth missing it. Lyanna and Rhaegar attended all three, and will attend Rickon's when it comes time. They'll all be here for Arya's wedding, some merely for the same reason as every other Lord and Lady is making an appearance. They all want to see, first hand, the shame they expect Arya will bring upon herself. Many believe she'll be dragged to you in chains."

Gendry chuckled. He doubted his bride-to-be would have to be dragged, though she might throw a few more tantrums before she swore before her Old Gods to be his wife for as long as they both lived.

"They're in for some disappointment," Gendry told Ned. "She'll meet me there without a single protest when the day of the wedding comes."

Ned looked sceptical. "Not if she makes a break for it before then. Will you handle the shame of it when she does?"

Gendry noted that he said 'when' and not 'if'.

"I'll hunt her down and drag her back."

"Chains or not, you or I dragging her is what they want to see," Ned said seriously.

"You truly believe she'll run?"

Ned's mouth twisted, his eyes travelling to the middle distance, where four of his six children cavorted aboard their steeds, wolves as big as horses right there amongst them.

"Aye, lad," he sighed. "She'll run. She'll high-tail it for Winterfell when she sees how many people have come to sneer at her for having to marry. So long spent fighting it and such rudeness in her fight haven't won her many friends. More than half your wedding guests have only come to watch her be forced into the one thing she swore she'd never do. Arya's as brave as they come when it's about riding into battle or shouting at her mother about how she refuses to be a prim and proper highborn lady. But she's fought so hard to be considered anything but a lady, that it will terrify her to be thought one when she marries you."

"What do I do?" Gendry asked, frowning.

"Everything you've been doing," Ned shrugged. "Make no mistake, lad. If I didn't think I could entrust her to your care knowing she'd always return to me in the same condition as right now, or better for it, I'd have ridden out of this castle and taken her with me, no matter the war Robert would've declared upon the North for it. When she runs, you go after her. You remind her that she's better off with you than with anyone else. You remind her that if she marries you on her terms, she's not falling into line like all these slobbering fools want to see. You accept that she might refuse to meet you at that alter in a pretty dress when she can wear muddy boots and a ripped shirt."

Gendry would admit, he didn't much like that last idea. He liked the way Arya looked when she wore dresses. He liked the way she looked all dressed to spar with him, too, but he'd like to see her all dressed up and there was no other occasion she would consider important enough for a fancy dress than her own wedding.

"You think she'll run soon?" Gendry asked. "Or not until the day of the wedding?"

Ned watched his children a moment longer before looking over at Gendry.
"I've already been keeping an eye on her," Ned replied evenly. Gendry cringed wondering if that meant he was aware of the way he and Arya had been sneaking off together. "But if I were you, I'd start watching her now. With the arrival of her brothers, she'll be thinking more and more of home. I'd reckon that when the King and all his host arrive, that'll trigger her to run. Princes Aegon is her good-cousin, and he's a cheeky sod. He'll rib her about falling into line and needing a firm hand or a big cock to tie her down and she'll start to think they're all here to laugh at her. Then she'll run."

Gendry nodded slowly.

"If I were to punch Aegon…?" he suggested and Ned laughed.

"The little shit would punch you right back even though he's a foot shorter, and as wide around the chest as one of your legs. He'd likely taunt you all the more, too. A lifetime of being told he'll rule the Seven Kingdoms and training with folk who won't seriously pull him too far into line has left him with a bloated sense of self-confidence."

"Doesn't the King pull him up?" Gendry asked, recalling the number of times his own father cut him and his brothers down to size when they got too big for their britches.

"Oh, he does," Ned laughed. "But Rhaegar's cut from the same cloth. He might have the ability to back up his cheek – Aegon probably does too – but they're both cheeky and know they can get away with it as King and Crown Prince. Who's going to pull them into line?"

"Lyanna?" Gendry guessed.

Ned laughed, nodding. "That, she does. Elia shakes her head about it all, but Lyanna rips them both to pieces when the need arises. Doesn't worry about being caught dressing either of them down in public, that woman."

"She sounds very much like Arya," Gendry shook his head, chuckling at the idea.

Ned Stark sighed, looking out across the flats at his daughter as her mare reared up.

"Arya's colder than Lyanna ever was. Even as a girl. Lyanna didn't mind being a Lady sometimes as long as she still got to play with us lads. As the only girl, she got away with it. She was always wild, and beautiful, and she always knew it. Arya, on the other hand, grew up in Sansa's shadow. Catelyn is a beautiful woman and Sansa is her spitting image. Part of the reason Arya is so wild and wilful and scornful of everything it means to be a lady, is because she hated being told that she would never be as pretty as Sansa; as good at sewing; as much a prim and proper princess. She needed a way to distinguish herself from her sister, to escape that shadow. When she grew a little wild, everyone began to compare her to Lyanna. Another shadow to walk inside of."

Ned shook his head from side to side, as though the thoughts plaguing his might rattle loose.

"She sought a way to outshine those shadows she found herself in, Gendry, and she found it. In Olden times, thousands of years ago, the North had a succession of Queens running Winterfell and lording it over the others. They were powerful and brave. They led their men into battle. They ran their kingdoms without the need for a man to run it for them while they sat and sewed. Arya might as well have stepped right out of that time. She'll make the most fearsome Lady in the Realms, more so than either Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, or even the Ladies of House Mormont. If you let her, she'll charge into battle in defence of you and your kingdom. She'll run Storm's End with all the efficiency of a man and she'll rip you to pieces if you mess up. She's powerful, but she's cold and she feels like she's got something to prove."
"In the time we've been here, I've seen some of that need begin to fade. She doesn't feel like she's got to go out of her way to prove she's not a Lady because you don't pull her up on it when she does something unladylike and you don't heap false praises on her or tease her if she does a few girly things. I'll be honest, lad. I want this to work more than you know. If she doesn't marry you, she'll kill whoever else I throw her at and she'll end up sitting in Winterfell, bored, wasting her talents, and collecting declarations for war with House Stark."

Gendry nodded his head.

"I have no intention of letting her go, Lord Stark," Gendry said quietly, watching his woman as she sparred with her brothers and kicked her horse into another gallop, the others racing after her like the pack of direwolves they all were. "I'll wear the blow of everyone's laughter if she runs. I'll track her down and bring her back every time she tries to quit on me or balks."

Ned watched him for a long moment.

"Why her?" he asked finally, assessing Gendry carefully. "I never asked before, assuming that you saw in her what I see, but even I cringe over the way she embarrasses me and dishonours herself and House Stark, at times. Why are you so willing to let those slights go?"

Gendry glanced sideways at the Warden of the North.

"She's not afraid of me in my battle armour," he said quietly.

Ned raised his eyebrows.

"I've seen you dressed for battle, son. Everyone is a little fearful of you," Ned said.

Gendry shook his head.

"Not Arya," he replied. "You probably don't want to hear exactly what she said to me when I put it on in front of her, but she's not afraid of me, I know that much."

Ned's mouth twitched as though he might bare his teeth at the idea.

"Even my mother is afraid of me in my armour, Lord Stark. And I hate that feeling when they all look at me with fear in their eyes as though I might run them through at any moment. She and my sisters and even some of my brothers cringe in the face of my temper when I let it fly. Arya doesn't. She bares those teeth at me and she snarls like a wolf and she meets me word for word. She doesn't back down or run away or cringe in fear that I might snap her in half. She pokes and prods until I want to tear her hair out and pitch her from the cliffs. She's also not a twit. I met with a lot of the Ladies of the realm before Father wrote to you, Ned. They all wanted my castle and to be Lady Baratheon. They all wanted to spread their legs and let me fuck my heirs into them for the chance, with no sense of self-respect or even a care about what sort of man I might be. The number who tried to throw themselves at me to trap me into marrying them, thinking I must be like my father, was ludicrous."

"And you don't have to worry about any of those things with Arya." Ned shook his head slowly. "She doesn't want the title – at least, not for the sake of rubbing anyone's nose in it – and she certainly has no interest in heirs for a good while, yet. I doubt she'd ever fling herself at you, lad, no matter your looks."

Gendry laughed.

"No, she'd snap and snarl at me until I pin her to something to pull her back into line before she gets
really mean," Gendry laughed. "I don't mind the blows my ego and my honour will take when the other Lords all sneer that she's too wild and not enough a lady because I know I'll never have to fear finding her in someone else's bed. I know she'll help me run this Kingdom and she won't be afraid to tell me I'm being stupid when I fuck up. I know that she'll never poison me or betray me to some other Lord for power or coin. She might try to stab me in the eye when she's gets angry with me, but I'm bigger than her."

Ned laughed.

"Watch out for her habit of slashing at your hamstrings if she can't reach your throat," he warned.

Gendry chuckled.

"Aye," he said. "But that's why I want her. I could've had any number of pretty ladies who'd smile and simper and bare me strong sons and sit pretty in my castle when I ride off into battle, but I've never wanted that. As I'm sure you can imagine, having a Lord who spends most of the castle treasury on Dornish wine and giggling whores hasn't been the most prosperous means of running a kingdom. And my mother isn't a lady like Arya, who spent her days listening to her brothers' lessons on how to run a castle and such things. She was a silly, idealistic girl like most highborn girls tend to be when she married Robert. She thought she'd gotten herself the most handsome man in the seven kingdoms. To find him little more than a war-mongering, whore-chasing drunk was unpleasant for her, at best. I know without doubt that she's had to borrow heavily from her family – the Tyrells – to keep this kingdom afloat. The smallfolk don't like her because she's had to tax them hard and has let some things fall to ruin because she didn't know until it was too late that they needed tending.

"There will be certain things that need to be fixed for the good of my kingdom and I need a woman by my side who understands that. I don't need a twit who'll pout that I'm spending too much time on the smallfolk or who'll demand fancy jewels the kingdom can't afford just to look pretty. I need a woman like Arya next to me. Sure, she might ruffle a few feathers from the surrounding kingdoms, but I don't envision her bitching that I'm spending too little time on her whilst mending the kingdom."

Ned nodded slowly, still watching him shrewdly, intrigued by his explanation and perhaps pleased that he had a better head on his shoulders than Robert did.

"How do you plan to handle the Lannister's attempt on your life?" Ned asked.

Gendry raised his eyebrows.

"To be honest, I thought we'd already handled it. Sending the assassin's body back to Larissa should've gotten the message across that further attempts on my life will be foiled and that no amount of subterfuge will see me marrying Larissa instead of Arya."

"I wouldn't be so sure, lad," Ned sighed. "Larissa might've acted alone, but it would behove you, when Lord Tywin arrives for the wedding, to speak to him about the matter and ensure he's informed. That girl is a snake in lion's colours and she'll twist the insult back as some crass display of triumph on Arya's behalf, construing it as insult heaped upon the insult of your refusal of her."

Gendry nodded seriously.

"I also suggest keeping Arya very far from Larissa during the proceedings of the wedding. I expect Larissa will be one of the ones here to gloat over Arya's misbehaviour and her apparent enforced betrothal. Arya will, undoubtedly, unleash much of her fury with everyone else's gloating upon the Lannister girl, if possible."
"You think she'd hurt her?" Gendry asked.

"I know she'll hurt her," Ned said quietly. "And gladly. She's done it before. If Larissa is a snake in lion's colour, Arya is surely the wolf of her name and her blood, in temperament and violence. Never doubt that should she believe her life or that of the 'pack' is threatened, she will hunt down and destroy that threat as surely as a wolf bringing down a stag in the woods."

Gendry didn't miss the reference to his own house sigil being the usual prey of the direwolf sigil house Stark bore and he wondered as he looked back toward his woman astride her mare, if he yet counted as a member of her 'pack'.
Passion Before Duty

Arya snuck into the forge late in the evening the night before the King and Queens were set to arrive in Storm's End. Gendry had been unusually quiet all day, distracted in a way she was unaccustomed to, and she feared he was getting cold feet as more and more Lords and Ladies of the Realm began to arrive to witness their joining.

He'd retreated to his forge after another dinner fraught with conversation full of the biting of tongues, subtle – and some not so subtle – jabs between past enemies, former friends, and the realm at large. She knew they were all tittering over the idea that the wild Stark she-wolf would finally be tamed. She knew former enemies of her own – many of whom she'd insulted for being prim and proper highborn ladies – were all giggling and gossiping behind their hands about how far she'd come and how much of this was a front before the savage little urchin who dressed like a boy returned, shattering Gendry's delusions that she could ever be a lady.

She'd begun to fear that Gendry might be listening to them and, if she was completely honest, she was a little nervous to think that he might change his mind. She knew that this close to the wedding, she wasn't supposed to be seen spending too much time in Gendry's presence unescorted. It was bad luck, Mother said. Father rolled his eyes behind Mother's back and insisted that the Old Gods saw all and rejoiced that their children were happy.

Arya herself didn't know if the Seven or the Old Gods knew or cared what she did or did not do, but she knew she needed to see Gendry. And she wanted to do it without witnesses, without people observing and analysing their every move and without the fear of being called a trollop for seeking out her betrothed.

Gendry didn't look up as she slipped inside the forge and pressed the door closed with a soft thud, latching it and locking the rest of the world outside. She grumbled to herself about the heat inside the wretched place – the day having been even warmer than those that preceded it since her arrival. How she longed for the cold winds and the chilled air of the North.

Hammering away at the project he seemed to spend every spare minute working on, Gendry was absorbed in his work and as much as she wanted to talk to him, she found a little smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. Leaning against the door, she was almost content to simply stand there all night, watching him. He was glorious. The bunch and stretch of the sinew under his skin was entrancing, the ring of the steel singing with each swing of him hammer. He was carefully shaping what looked like a chest plate and Arya tilted her head, a little smile tugging at the corners of her mouth when she noticed it was a breast plate with just enough room for a pair of tits right around her size, if she wasn't mistaken.

"Gendry?" she asked softly, throwing off his rhythm and startling him when he jumped.

His blue eyes lifted to fix on her face, his hammer paused mid-strike before he blinked and lowered the tool, setting aside the plate quickly as though he didn't want her to see it.

"I thought you were abed," he said quietly, eyeing her with a touch of warmth when he noticed the way she leaned against the closed and latched door and the way she was watching him with appreciation given that he was shirtless and glistening with sweat.

"I couldn't sleep," Arya admitted, pushing away from the door. "You're quiet today?"

He moved around the anvil toward her, meeting her at his work-bench when she pushed away from the door.
the door and picked her way, barefoot, across the floor of his forge. He lifted her up to perch upon the bench before picking up her left foot and Arya squeaked in surprise when he hoisted it up in front of his face, picking at the metal shavings that had stuck to her skin before they could penetrate the flesh.

"You've been pretty quiet yourself, my lady," he told her gruffly, lowering her left foot and lifting the right one.

"I don't like big crowds," she admitted softly, smiling just a little bit when he dusted her foot off, his fingers trailing over her ankles tenderly, almost as though he couldn't help himself.

"Neither do I," he confessed. "They're all watching us, just waiting for us to put a foot wrong."

"And revelling in the way it's making us squirm," Arya grumbled, absently reaching to trail her fingers over his chest, carding them through his chest hair as he lifted his gaze back to her face when he was satisfied she wasn't going to be limping around with metal in her feet.

"They're bothering you with their comments?" Gendry asked quietly, stepping closer until he leaned against the bench, his hips nestled between her thighs.

"Of course, they are," Arya sighed. "I care little for the opinions of others, and have been spiteful in the past when making my own unkind opinions known, but knowing that so many people are waiting with baited breath to see me fail certainly raises my hackles."

"I thought I saw a little flash of fangs at dinner," Gendry smirked, lifting a hand to cup her cheek softly.

"They're getting to you, too," she told him. "You're not... listening to them, are you?"

"About you being a wretched little urchin who'll try to murder me?" he smirked. "Or about how the mighty stag has tamed the savage wolf?"

"Both?" Arya said, looking away, unhappy.

Gendry laughed.

"Well, there can be no denying that you are a wretched little urchin, Stark," he teased softly, tracing the pad of his thumb across her cheek just below her eye.

Arya glared at him.

"My wretched little urchin. And you will, undoubtedly, attempt to murder me more than once over the course of our lives together. As for taming you," Gendry shook his head, still chuckling. "I doubt even I have that power, beautiful."

Arya grinned both at the endearment and the truth of his words. She didn't like to think of herself as having been tamed in the slightest, but she couldn't deny that, to an extent, it was true. She wasn't the angry, wild, willful girl she'd been before coming to Storm's End. Now, she knew what she wanted, and she knew that she needed Gendry's help to get it. Not only that, but he actually made her happy. The idea ought to have confused her, but he was cheeky and funny, and he tolerated her foul temper and didn't bat an eye when she did something unladylike.

"You're the only one with that power, Baratheon," she replied quietly, looking up at him to meet his gaze.
His grin faltered, as though he knew how much such an admission from her cost.

"You feel I've tamed you?" he asked, his brow furrowing as he frowned.

"Perhaps not tamed," Arya allowed. "But I've certainly matured since I arrived here and agreed to marry you. I've settled into my role as a highborn, Jon says."

"I don't want you to settle, Stark," Gendry told her, carding his free hand through her loose long hair, frowning fiercely. "I like you wild."

Arya smiled at him. "I know. I'm rather fond of you for that very fact, actually."

His lips twitched like he might smile.

"I was worried that you might've been second-guessing the idea of marrying me," Arya confessed when he didn't say anything in reply, apparently gobsmacked at her admission of her deepening feelings for him. "When you seemed to be avoiding me and not wanting to talk, I assumed…"

He silenced her with a kiss, his lips meeting hers firmly. Arya sighed against his lips, opening to him and revelling in the feel of his tongue sweeping against hers. Clutching at his hips, Arya pulled him closer until he was pressed against her core, squirming with the fluttering feeling there that made her wish she weren't wearing britches right at that moment. Maybe that was the real reason the ladies all wore dresses. It was much easier to lift a skirt than to undo britches.

Gendry kissed her until she was dizzy and when he pulled back they were both breathing hard.

"I was avoiding you," he admitted softly.

Arya felt a flicker of hurt, her face pulling into a frown.

"Not because I didn't want to spend time with you, beautiful," he murmured, watching her eyes carefully. "I've just been uncomfortably aware that no matter where we go, people have been watching us. They watch our every move and they're judging us. And while I'd like to be like you and care nothing for their opinions, I don't want to give the impression that I might be marrying you because I've already fucked a babe into your belly. I don't want them to doubt that I married you because I wanted to. Not because I was tricked, or trapped, or coerced into it for the sake of our fathers. I want them to know that I picked you out of all those silly bitches."

"By avoiding me?"

"If I don't avoid you, I'm liable to shove you against the nearest flat surface and fuck you," he admitted, grinding himself against the junction of her thighs. "Especially when you get cheeky with me."

Arya smiled softly, pulling him closer.

"So, you're not planning to change your mind at the last minute and send all these people home without seeing us wed?" she confirmed.

"I'm just trying to make sure they watch us wed rather than watching me bed you, repeatedly, in the middle of breakfast."

Arya laughed.

"What about now?" she asked. "There's no one here but us."
"Maybe, but the Smith only knows who might've followed you or spotted you leaving your chambers. They'll have enough to gossip about if they spot the sooty finger-marks I'm leaving all over you."

"Let them gossip," Arya replied, pulling him down and kissing him again.

Gendry grinned against her lips as he kissed her back and Arya kind of liked the way he tangled both of his sooty hands into her hair, securing her face to his even as he leaned into the kiss, his tongue sweeping against hers and making her crazy. Her stomached flipped with excitement and her heart raced with happiness while a low burn below her abdomen fluttered with desire. Arya wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling herself against his front needily and nipping his bottom lip, wanting more.

He gave it. He kissed her harder, his fingers trailing down the sides of her neck before his hot hands cupped her breasts through her shirt. Arya moaned at the contact, her whole body suddenly on fire with need. She wanted him so badly. She wanted to fuck him right there in the forge and no amount of nervousness over never having shagged anyone before was going to stop her. Trailing her hands along the length of his torso, Arya broke from his lips to kiss his neck hungrily and Gendry's head tipped back, his eyes closing against the pleasure.

"By the Seven, Arya," he muttered, catching her hands when she reached for the ties on his britches, intent on getting her hands inside them once more. "If you undo them, you're mine, little wolf. I've been avoiding you because if I get my hands on you, I'm going to fuck you until neither of us can walk."

"Maybe that's what I want," Arya replied.

Gendry shook his head, pulling back slightly to meet her gaze.

"I mean it, Arya," he said quietly. "I don't want to dishonour you before our wedding day. Some things should be done right, and this is one of them. I won't have the gossips thinking I only married you because I fucked you in a moment of weakness and it'd be poor form if I started killing any who badmouth the future Lady Baratheon for a lack of restraint."

"As though they don't already badmouth me for everything else?" Arya challenged, raising her eyebrows.

"None of the things they say about you are correct, other than that you are as fierce as you are beautiful," he said. "We shouldn't give them reason to think there is any truth to any of their rumours by giving in now when our wedding night is so close."

Arya sighed, her fingers still toying with the fastenings on his britches.

"You're… turning me down?" she asked quietly, her brow furrowing.

His brow furrowed in return before he claimed her lips again, his hands going to her hips and sliding her across his workbench to grind her cunt against the hard cock in his britches. Arya moaned against his lips as he laid her down on the bench, leaning over her and letting her feel how much bigger than her he really was; how much stronger; how much more powerful. It didn't scare her. If anything, it made her more lustful. A thrill rushed through her to think that in a little under a week, he would take her to his bedchamber and when he loomed over her like this, they would both be naked. She ached for the chance to feel his body pressed against the length of hers and she squirmed with the need she had to remove all the layers of cloth that prevented his cock from driving inside her cunt.
"I don't think I'll ever turn your down," he muttered against her neck when he pulled away from her lips, kissing at her flesh hungrily.

Arya whined when he worked her shirt up over her chest, pulling at the fabric until her breasts were exposed to his gaze and he pulled back slowly to drink in the sight she made. A flush climbed Arya's cheeks, her hands instinctively reaching to cover herself. He caught her wrists before she could block his view and Arya squirmed under him.

"Fuck," Gendry murmured, his eyes lifting to her face after he'd looked his fill. The stark hunger on his face made her whole-body tingle and Arya moaned softly when he lowered his mouth to her flesh, trailing kisses across her chest, his stubble scratching her skin and making her ache. He rocked himself against her cunt through their clothing and Arya arched under him when he latched onto one of her nipples, his mouth hot and his tongue wicked. She cried out breathlessly and Gendry laved her flesh in response.

Her hands tangled in his hair needily when he released her wrists and traced his fingers across her ribs and her taut stomach while he nipped and sucked and licked at her breasts, making her crazy.

"By the Gods, I want you, Stark," he muttered as he switched to her other breast. Arya moaned in response, arching into him, rubbing herself against him, craving more.

"Please, Gendry," she whispered breathlessly.

Gendry groaned against her shoulder, bucking his hips and grinding his cock against her cunt. Arya felt like she might die from the throbbing ache there, the heat of his skin making the rest of the forge feel cold by comparison.

"You're killing me, Arya," he muttered. "I'm trying not to dishonour you."

"Fuck honour," Arya said breathlessly.

"I don't want all these smug bastards to think we're only wedding because we've been fucking," Gendry muttered.

"Then kiss me in front of all of them like you can't bloody help it," she said. "Don't make me wait for the bloody bedding ceremony, Gendry."

Gendry groaned against her skin, taking slow, deep breaths like he was trying to reach for his self-control so that he could tell her no and remain firm long enough to keep them from breaking tradition completely. She couldn't help but smirk when she felt his hands trail over her hips and her stomach to toy with the ties on her britches. He untied them slowly, his tongue driving her mad as he tormented her breasts relentlessly.

"We'll both wind up in the deepest pits of the Seven Hells if I take you now," he muttered against her skin, tilting those brilliant blue eyes up to meet her gaze.

Arya laughed, carding her fingers through his thick black hair and shaking her head at him.

"Only the Seven would consider a good fuck to be something punishable," she replied. "The Old Gods of the North know no such nonsense. They revel to know their children might find happiness and warmth together."

Gendry looked conflicted for a moment, even as his hands slipped under the waistband of her trousers, slowly peeling them down. He trailed kisses across her ribs and her belly as he peeled her free of her britches until she was laid out, bare, upon his work bench.
"You deserve better than my work-bench under your back the first time I take you, Arya," Gendry told her quietly.

Arya rolled her eyes. "I deserve to not be kept waiting," she replied.

Gendry huffed out a husky laugh even as he trailed kisses across her stomach, his stubble scratching her skin and making her crazy. Her legs shifted restlessly as he shuffled slowly lower, her thighs parting further to accommodate his wide shoulders. Arya pressed her lips together as she felt him trailing his hands up her thighs toward her cunt while his mouth descended toward the same destination. She mewled softly as he leaned back just far enough to peer at her cunt.

"Have you ever done this before?" she asked, glancing down and meeting his gaze when he took his time arranging her thighs until they draped over his shoulders while he knelt on the floor of the forge, his face level with her cunt.

"No," Gendry admitted. "Have you?"

Arya shook her head. "I'd never even kissed a man before I met you."

She could tell from the wicked gleam in his eyes that he liked that. Arya bit her lip and closed her eyes when he looked back at her cunt before leaning in and dragging his tongue over her throbbing flesh.

She thought she might die.

She thought that this must be what the Gods called heaven. His mouth was hot, and his tongue was curious as he licked and kissed her cunt the same way he'd kissed her mouth, his tongue sliding between her lips to taste the sweet nectar within.

"Gods, Gendry," Arya moaned, arching into the touch and tightening her fingers in his hair, her brow furrowing as her heart began to race inside her chest.

"I'm so fucking screwed," she heard Gendry mutter against her skin before he leaned into her, licking her faster, lapping at her body as though he couldn't get enough of her and Arya cried out when he slid his hands over her sensitive skin, his fingers delving inside of her and twisting slowly.

Arya couldn't see straight. She couldn't think. She couldn't focus on anything but the sweet feel of his hands and his mouth upon her heated flesh, making her crazy. Making her writhe. Making her moan. She needed more, and yet she wasn't sure she could stand it. She cried out breathlessly when he latched his lips around the little bundle of nerves at the top of her slit whilst beckoning with his fingers deep inside her. Stars exploded behind her eyes and tingles of sensation raced across her nerves, driving her crazy, making her ache as her heart pounded and her breath sawed in and out.

"Ah!" Arya squeaked when the sensations overwhelmed her, the coil of tension low in her abdomen snapping free with a wave of pleasure that threatened to consume her.

Gendry gave a low, wicked chuckle, rising quickly to his feet and leaning over her.

"You still want it?" he asked, and she could feel the heavy erection he sported pressing insistently between her thighs. From the feel of flesh on flesh, she could tell he'd untied his britches while he'd been tormenting her.

Arya mewled, reaching for him, trying to pull him closer, her body lax with the sweet release coursing through her. She wanted to give him the same release and she wanted to feel him encircling her completely with his strength and his power.
"Please," she whispered, wrapping her legs around his lean hips pulling him closer.

"Here?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

Arya pulled at him, her legs tight around his waist and her hands latching onto his shoulders.

"Don't make me wait, Baratheon. Don't make the first time you fuck me be because we're expected to be married. Fuck me because you want to. Because you can't stand the thought of waiting another second," she told him.

"It will hurt," Gendry warned her.

"I can take it," she shrugged. "Please, Gendry?"

He groaned against her neck and Arya felt the way the tension in his muscles loosened a little under her hands. He pressed his cock more insistently against her cunt, and Arya knew he was going to fuck her.

"You really want to do this here, in the forge?" he asked. "I could sneak you into my bedchamber."

Arya pulled his mouth down to hers, capturing his lips with her own and swallowing his groan as she reached between them, curling her hands around his cock and pulling him closer with it. He kissed her hard as she parted her legs a little wider, guiding his cock to the opening of her cunt, her heels digging into his lower back, pulling him closer. By the Gods, she wanted him like she'd never wanted anything else in all her life and when the blunt head of his cock burrowed against her slit, Arya parted her legs even wider, shifting slightly, trying to find the right angle, trying to take him inside of her.

"Fuck!" Gendry whispered harshly, his eyes clenched closed as he pulled back from kissing her. When he pushed against her, she knew she had him, and Arya grinned against his skin.

Something gave, and she whined in the back of her throat when he suddenly breached her tight sheath, his cock gliding inside of her and making her ache and burn in the best way. Gendry groaned against her neck as he pushed forward while she squirmed until he was sheathed completely inside of her.

"So fucking tight," Arya heard him mutter, and she tried not to squirm, her body protesting the intrusion and aching dully.

"Don't move," she whispered, squeezing her eyes closed, and Gendry froze instantly.

Whining just a little, Arya shifted under him, trying to find a position that would take the pressure off her pelvis and trying to figure out how something that hurt this way could be pleasurable and something that men and women alike seemed to revel in.

"Are you alright?" Gendry asked hoarsely, lifting her just enough that he could peer into her face, his expression caught somewhere between concerned and carnal.

Arya squirmed a little.

"It hurts," she admitted.

"It gets better," Gendry said. "Do you want me to stop?"

Arya frowned at him before shaking her head.
"It might hurt less if I move, beautiful," he murmured, reaching for her and cupping her cheek gently in one of his enormous hands.

"Okay," Arya whispered tightly, nodding her head.

Moving hurt worse, but it eased the sharp sting and spread into a low ache that was easy to ignore as he pulled almost all the way out of her before slowly pushing back in. Arya closed her eyes, clinging to Gendry's chest and burying her face in his neck, her breath coming in little gasps. Gendry groaned softly against her shoulder, moving a little faster, his hand sliding the length of her body to torment that bundle of nerves at the top of her slit and Arya arched at the sudden onslaught of pleasurable sensation. The position allowed him to slide deeper and Arya moaned as he hit a new part of her.


He moved faster, curling his hands under the small of her back, forcing her to arch even more and Arya squeezed her eyes closed as pleasure and pain chased each other through her body, driving her crazy, making her moan.

"I'm not going to last," Gendry muttered, sounding tortured, and Arya knew that such a thing was often laughed over by men, but she couldn't help thinking that it would be a mercy if he finished quickly this time. "I'm going to get you, Stark. I want to hear you moaning."

Arya huffed, laughing at his determination.

"You got me before," she panted. "I can't… not again. Not when it hurts."

Gendry groaned into her neck a second time, moving faster, his hips snapping. Arya tangled her hands into his hair, pulling his face to hers and stealing a kiss from his lips. He kissed her back dizzyingly, driving into her harder, making her moan, making her ache in a good way. When he drove into her harder still, and grunted softly, Arya twitched her hips, watching his face as he pulled back just a bit and feeling the corners of her mouth pull up when she saw the fierce frown he wore as though he were furious and tormented, but happy at the same time.

"Fuck!" Gendry swore, looking a bit annoyed with himself.

Even knowing it likely wouldn't improve his mood, Arya giggled just a little bit at his response when he slowed his pace, thrusting into her a few more times before sinking in fully and simply staring at her.

"You're laughing at me?" he said, frowning at her.

Arya bit her lip. "You look so comically annoyed with yourself," she giggled.

"I didn't get you off," he sighed, panting a little as he held her against him, sprawled across his workbench there in the stifling heat of the forge.

"You got me off with your tongue, Gendry," Arya reminded him. "And considering the horror stories I've been hearing from all the lovely ladies of the realm about their first night with their husbands, I can tell you that you've already outshone all the others with your skills simply by doing so."

Gendry scowled.

"What have they been saying?"
"That I ought to brace myself for how much it might hurt, and that if possible, I ought to find a way to make sure there's enough moisture down there to smooth the passage when you enter me. Even Sansa, though she blushed as red as her hair when she said so, told me that it was probably going to hurt worse than anything I'd ever felt and that the best thing to do would be to simply grin and bear it, whilst thinking of more pleasant things like the baby I might have when you sewed your seed inside of me."

Gendry grimaced.

"Willas is no good in bed, then?" he surmised.

"He's got that bad leg," Arya shrugged her shoulders. "And Sansa would've been blushing and nervous and knowing it was her duty to let him bed her, but not altogether wanting to be bedded, just the same. Most women tell tales that sex is for the men, and the babies we women catch are our reward for tolerating the pain and the sweaty grunting of our husbands for a few minutes."

Gendry looked horrified and he pulled back from her a little, seeming almost stricken.

"Was it that bad?" he frowned, clearly worried as he tried to disengage their bodies.

"Did my breathless cries of pleasure make it seem bad to you?" Arya asked, raising her eyebrows at him. "I suspect many of the ladies of the realm simply have husbands whom they don't particularly care for, and perhaps those husbands aren't so forthcoming with ensuring their pleasure before taking their own."

Gendry was still frowning.

"How badly are you hurt?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Arya told him, though she winced when he stepped back and their bodies become two, rather than one, once more.

"People who are fine don't tend to wince when trying to sit up," Gendry told her, helping her rise into a sitting position.

"So, it aches a bit," Arya shrugged her shoulders. "It hurt worse when you whacked me in training the other day while we were sparring."

Gendry looked like he didn't believe her, and Arya shook her head, a little smile pulling at the corners of her lips that he was so concerned for her wellbeing. What ever would she tell her sister about the first time Gendry bedded her when he was such a sweetheart about it? She could hardly go stirring envy in her pregnant sister's heart that she'd clearly landed the more gifted lover. It would very poor form, especially given the recent and tentative relationship between them thanks to her growing maturity.

"Are you going to be able to walk back to your room?" Gendry wanted to know, frowning all the more even as he crossed to the barrel of water he kept by the door, soaking a cloth in it and using it to clean the faint pink traces of virgin blood and their combined juices from his flesh before rinsing it and returning to her side.

"I'll be fine, Gendry," Arya told him as she took the cloth from him and slid off the bench to clean herself with it as best she could, making a face when she noticed his seed staining the cloth and leaking out of her. "Is it always this messy?"

Gendry laughed.
"Less blood, usually," he admitted. "Though my only experience with women came from painted whores who'd done this a thousand times before."

"Had a lot of whores, did you?" Arya asked narrowing her eyes at the very thought of another woman having lain with her husband even though he wasn't her husband yet.

"Three of them," Gendry confessed, his mouth twitching a little like he wanted to grin at the flare of jealousy in her eyes.

"Who?" Arya asked.

"None you'll ever meet, Arya," he chuckled. "The first was a Lorathi girl that Prince Oberon commissioned to 'break me in', as he put it, when I was a lad of fifteen and Father sent me off to Dorne for a year to negotiate increased imports of Dornish wine."

"And the other two?" Arya wanted to know.

"A tavern wench at Silverhill when we marched to fight back the Iron Islanders," Gendry confessed. "And a barmaid at the Eyrie when I accompanied Mya there for her last name day."

Arya scowled a little more, wondering if this barmaid might be found should she ever manage to accompany Mya to the Eyrie, herself.

"And you, Stark?" Gendry asked. "I'm the first man you've ever kissed?"

Arya nodded. "Does the virgin's blood on your cock suggest otherwise?" she asked snidely.

"No," he shook his head. "It just seems strange that you'd never have kissed any other boys when it surely would've driven your mother mad."

Arya grinned a little at that, shaking her head. "They all called me Arya Horseface," she said. "Those who didn't were my friends, but they were hardly the type to be kissing."

"Not even Mycah?" Gendry asked curiously.

Arya cheeks turned pink at the mention of her friend.

"I briefly fancied him, a while back," Arya confessed in the spirit of truthfulness given that he'd been so forthcoming with the truth about the girls he'd fucked. "But he is a Butcher's boy and I am a Highborn, and no matter that I might've been willing to risk Mother and Father's ire to steal kisses from him, he most certainly wasn't so brave. I doubt he thought of me that way, anyway. It is not so easy to remember I'm a girl when I'm covered in mud, cussing, fighting, and smelling as awful as any boy."

Gendry nodded, looking thoughtful for a long moment as they both began to dress themselves once more.

"And you?" Arya asked. "Did you ever fancy any of the girls you grew up with?"

Gendry's lips twitched again.

"I grew fond of the Lorathi girl in Dorne," he admitted. "I was young and foolish, and she was older than me, more experienced, and paid to seem enamoured with me as she taught me how to pleasure a woman. They are… different in Dorne. They do not scorn the bastard-born down there, but instead embrace them and celebrate them as children born of passion, rather than duty. Prince Oberon
encouraged me to ask the lass to return to Storm's End with me, actually, but in the end, she ended up returning to her homeland before I left Dorne. At fifteen I was heartbroken, but we were called to battle with the Iron Islands shortly after and I fucked the Silverhill tavern wench and stopped being quite so pathetic about it."

"What was her name?" Arya asked curiously.

"The tavern wench? I've got no idea. I was drunk, and she was gone before I woke up. She made herself a lot of coin that night, and mine wasn't the only cock she rode before the company moved on."

"The Lorathi girl," Arya clarified, pulling her shirt back on over her head and hiding her body from Gendry's gaze once more.

"Oh," Gendry said. "Furesca. Her name was Furesca H'Gharitho."

Arya nodded slowly, frowning a little before wiping the damp cloth one more time between her legs and frowning a bit when there was more blood than before.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" Gendry asked when he saw the blood.

"It's normal," Arya told him. "They don't collect the marriage sheets with virgin's blood for nothing, you know."

"Well, what are we going to do when your virgin's blood is spilled here on the floor of my forge, rather than in my bedchamber?" he asked, running a hand through his hair worriedly. "Seven Hells, we'll burn for this lack of restraint, Arya."

"Weren't you just saying it is considered a match of passion, rather than duty, when people fuck outside of wedlock and no coins change hands?" Arya asked, a little amused as she watched him run his fingers through his hair a second time like that might undo what they'd done.

"It'll be an act of passion when your father murders me for dishonouring you like this," Gendry said, frowning fiercely at her.

"I'll just prick my finger and stain the sheets that way on our wedding night, Gendry," she rolled her eyes. "And anyway, this way we can actually enjoy the bedding ceremony, rather than being nervous and uncomfortable and completely clueless with witnesses in the room to ensure you bed me properly, and all that mess."

Gendry frowned at her.

"But you're bleeding," he said.

"Only a little," Arya said. "This is nothing. Wait until my red flower blooms each month. Now that's a lot of blood."

Gendry wrinkled his nose.

"Mayhaps I'll have to fuck a babe or two into your belly to prevent such mess for the nine moons you carry each one," he smirked at her.

"From the horror stories I heard Olena telling Sansa about childbirth, there's even more blood for months after the birth," Arya told him. "Not to mention that you, great hulking brute that you happen to be, will likely fill my belly with sons entirely too large for my scrawny frame. I overheard Lady
Maege Mormont saying to mother that it would be a miracle if I survived birthing your great strapping sons into this world."

Arya was turning away as she said so, intent on tossing the rag she'd been using to clean herself into the fire, lest anyone spot it and realise what they'd done. As such, she didn't see the horrified expression that passed over Gendry's face, nor the fear that constricted around his heart and settled into his soul when the full implications of the passing jest penetrated his brain.

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