No Featherbed For Me

by vixleonnard

Summary

Arya Stark wanted to be a knight; she wanted to find glory and adventure with Needle in her hand. But that is not an appropriate life for a highborn lady, and that was all Arya of House Stark was allowed to be.

Notes

In the first season of the show, Cersei mentions her first child dying when he was still an infant. Let's pretend that baby was Gendry and he's the heir. This means the War of the Five Kings never happens and Jon Arryn dies of natural causes. Just go with it.

Title comes from the song Tom sings in "A Storm of Sword"
The Almost Princess

Her mother announced King Robert and his court were coming to Winterfell during dinner. Arya was not sure where her father was – probably the godswood – but immediately her siblings began to talk about what it would be like to see the king, queen, and everyone else walking around Winterfell. Sansa and Jeyne Poole were whispering something about the princes, but Arya did not bother trying to hear; Sansa never said anything interesting, especially when boys were involved. Picking at her vegetables, Arya dropped her gaze for a moment before looking up to see Bran studying her, a bemused expression on his face; Arya crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue, and Bran smiled, making her smile too. Arya suspected the only person who cared less than her about King Robert coming to Winterfell was Bran; mayhaps they would be able to sneak away into the woods and miss out on most of the propriety. Bran play-fought with her sometimes in the godswood with wooden practice swords; that would certainly be more fun than embroidering with the princess or curtsying to the princes.

“I have heard Prince Gendry is very handsome,” Jeyne Poole was saying as Arya reached over the girl for another roll, earning a sharp look from her sister's friend. “And they say Prince Joffrey is handsome as well.”

Sansa smiles, her cheeks flushing pink. At five-and-ten, everyone said Sansa was the most beautiful girl in the North; Arya tried not to feel jealous, but it was hard sometimes when hearing everyone sing of Sansa's beauty while knowing she was often referred to as “Arya Horseface.” As she tore apart her roll, Arya supposed it was better Sansa was the beautiful one since she actually wanted to wed a prince.

“I would love to dance with a prince,” Sansa sighed. “It has been so long since we've had a real feast. We haven't had one since Robb's wedding.”

Arya thought of Robb's wedding to Jeyne Westerling nearly a year earlier. While Sansa was dancing with Jeyne's younger brother, Theon let Arya have some of his mead and she got drunk; Jon carried her to her room and made her promise she would never do anything like that ever again. Arya missed Jon, so far away on the Wall; though it was unkind, she sometimes thought it would have hurt less if Robb and Jeyne had gone away rather than Jon Snow.

“Mayhaps Father will marry you off to a prince,” Robb laughed, causing Sansa's blush to deepen further. “I'm certain you would not mind being Princess Sansa.”

“It would be wonderful to be a princess,” Sansa demurely replied before sipping her wine.

“You don't even know the princes,” Arya pointed out sourly. “They could be fat or stupid or just plain horrible.”

“They're princes,” Sansa said as if it was the only argument she needed.

“You are just bitter because no prince will ever want to marry you,” Jeyne chimed in.

“I would not want to marry a prince. I do not want to marry anyone.” Getting to her feet, glaring at the steward's daughter, she felt anger welling in her as she spat, “But I will still make a better marriage than you.”

Bran found her in one of the old towers an hour later, climbing through the window with ease. Arya could hear their wolves outside growling as they wrestled, and, as Bran brushed the dirt off of his
palm, Arya declared, “We should run away.”

“Where would we run?” Bran asked, playing along. Since turning two-and-twelve on his last name
day, Bran had grown taller than her, his legs impossibly long; their father said he would likely be as
tall as Uncle Brandon once was. When Jon left, Arya found herself spending more and more time
with Bran, and he was her best friend, the only one who understood how much she disliked
everything about growing older, the threat of being a lady coming closer and closer.

“Beyond the Wall.”

“And be wildings?” Bran shrugged, perching on the window's ledge. “That would be an adventure.
But how will we get past the Wall?”

“Jon will let us through the tunnel. I will bring Needle, you can bring your bow, and we will have
Summer and Nymeria to protect us.” Arya idly drew patterns in the thin layer of grime on the floor.
“Let's leave tonight.”

“We cannot leave tonight,” Bran said, his voice full of practicality. “We do not have food or
supplies. An adventure like this requires planning.”

“I am sick of planning.” Getting to her feet, not bothering to wipe the dirt off of her skirts, Arya
raged, “I hate all of this! I hate Sansa and Jeyne Poole and the stupid princes! I hate that everyone's
leaving and one day Father is going to decide I have to leave too! And it does not even matter what I
want!”

“That is not true,” he argued mildly. “Father would never marry you to someone you did not want to
marry.”

“And if I want to marry no one? If I want to run away and be a knight? What then?”

“Then you and the Maid of Tarth will scandalize the Seven Kingdoms by winning tourneys and
besting knights of great renown.”

Arya smiled at Bran's words, shaking her head. She crossed to one of the windows, staring out at
Winterfell's lands, at her family's lands. As a cool breeze scattered her hair, she declared, “I wish I
had been born a boy.”

“Why?”

She turned to meet Bran's gaze. “Because boys get choices and girls get orders.”

The only reason her father let her go for a ride the morning the king's court was to arrive was by
promising she would be back in plenty of time to bathe and be made appropriate, and Arya honestly
had intended to keep that promise. But then her horse threw a shoe and her, and, by the time Arya
climbed to her feet, her body sore but unbroken, she knew it was going to be a slow-moving return
to Winterfell on both her and the horse's part.

She wore a pair of Bran's old breeches and a tunic she stole from Jon before he left for the Wall, both
too large on her slender frame; her long hair was wild, the wind and her tumble from the saddle
having loosened it from its braid, and she was positively filthy from landing in the dirt. By the time
she returned to the castle, Arya knew her mother and Septa Mordane were going to scrub her skin
raw and lecture her again on being ladylike. The last time something like this happened, her mother
threatened to sell her horse and send her to the silent sisters, and, while Arya was certain Catelyn
Stark would not actually make her become a silent sister, she did believe her mother would take her
It was unseasonably warm today, and Arya could feel sweat pooling at the small of her back, in the hollows of her collarbone; while still half-a-league from Winterfell, Arya could not resist wading into one of the ponds, letting her horse drink while she cooled herself. The sun told her it was already past midday, and Arya tried to hurry, hoping the courtly procession was moving slower than anticipated.

Her hip hurt worse than anything, and Arya knew she was going to have a giant bruise in the morning; there was only slight swelling, but it made her walk with a slight limp, forcing her to bear the majority of her weight on her right leg. Swearing as she nearly stumbled over a rock, Arya was certain she was being punished for riding against her mother's wishes.

Arya saw the Baratheon standards as she crested the hill nearest Winterfell, and she knew she was going to be in more trouble than she ever had in her entire life. Clutching her horse's reins tightly, Arya attempted to enter the yard with as much dignity as she could manage, her hip positively screaming in pain from the strain of her trek. There were people everywhere, horses and litters, and Arya could see members of the Kingsguard looking at her peculiarly as she stumbled towards the stables, neither her family or the royal family in sight.

“Gods be good, girl!” Harwin cried as she escorted her horse into the stable. “What happened to you?”

“Threw a shoe,” she grunted, handing him the reins. “Where's Maester Luwin?”

“In the rookery, I believe. Your mother sent riders out after you.”

Arya silently groaned as she began to hobble towards the castle, tears threatening to appear with every step. She needed to see Maester Luwin; when she fell from the tree last year, he gave her something to take the pain away in her wrist, and she needed that now until the swelling went down. But the rookery was up so many flights of steps, and, if her mother saw how badly she was hurt, she would never let Arya ride alone ever again.

“Do you need help?” someone asked, causing Arya to spin around as best as she could to face the boy who asked her the question.

He looked to be as old as Robb, around eight-and-ten, but he was broader through the shoulders; his hair was black and as messy as her own and his eyes were bright blue. Arya knew he must have come with the king's court, but, judging by the dirt on his breeches and his open surcoat, Arya suspected he was a steward or some lord's son.

“I need to get to the rookery to see Maester Luwin,” she offered after a moment.

“Maester Luwin is in the great hall the king and Lord Stark. I can fetch - “

“No!” she cut in, wobbling a bit on her good leg. Bracing her hand against the wall, she asked, “What of my brothers?”

“Your brothers?” he echoed, confusion folding his brow before realization dawned. “You are Lady Arya?”

Irritation licked at her with his use of her title. “Yes, and I wish to see my brothers. Are they about?”

“Your brother Robb is with the king as well; your younger brothers are with the princes while your father's ward hunts the lands for you. I could fetch your sister - “
“Oh, seven hells, no,” Arya groaned, and the boy laughed, delight flashing in his eyes. With a sigh, crossing her arms over her chest, she asked, “Can I trust you to keep a secret?”

“Oh, my family's honor,” he swore.

“Would you be able to help me to my chambers and not tell a soul?” Seeing the uncertainty on his face, she quickly added, “I will reward you for your silence.”

“And how will my lady do that?”

Arya pretended she did not hear the undercurrent of mocking in his deep voice. “I have some dragons I won. I could pay you.”

“How does a lady win dragons?”

“At cyvasse.” She had won an entire purse from one of the Karstarks the last time they came to Winterfell, and she had not spent a single coin, preferring to stare at the money and know she bested someone. “And I will give you - “

“I do not need money, Lady Arya.” He stooped slightly, wrapping Arya's arm around his shoulders; she sighed in relief at finally having pressure off of her left leg. Letting the boy help her up the stairs, the boy easily bearing her weight, he asked, “How did you hurt yourself?”

“I was thrown from my horse.”

“Really? Your brother said you are the strongest rider he knows.”

“Well, she threw a shoe,” Arya snapped defensively. She was extraordinarily proud of her horsemanship, and she was not going to let some stupid southron boy mock her. “And I am the strongest rider he knows. I'm better than all of my brothers.”

“Mayhaps when you are better, you can prove it.”

Arya opened her mouth to reply but stumbled as she attempted to hop up onto the next step; she nearly spilled to the ground before the southron boy caught her. She gasped as he swept her into his arms the way Jon once had, easily carrying her up the stairs.

“You are a stubborn girl.”

She scoffed. “I know. That is all anyone ever calls me.”

The boy smiled down at her, something she could not identify hinted at in his eyes. “I did not say it was a bad thing.”

Arya felt her stomach flutter nervously for a moment, unused to the feeling, before pointing to her door. “That is my chamber. You cannot come inside.” Waiting until the boy set her on her feet, Arya said, “Thank you. And I will ride with you when I am better. I pay my debts.”

The boy's smile became a grin. “I have never trusted those who do not.” Dipping down as if bending the knee, he quipped, “I shall see you soon, Lady Arya.”

It was not until later, when Maester Luwin was treating her hip and her mother was lecturing her on dangerous behavior, that Arya realized she had not asked the boy his name or to whom he belonged. Vowing to look for him at dinner, Arya managed to sit still while her mother arranged her hair into a complicated updo of braids, not even protesting when she was laced into the least favorite of all of
her gowns; Arya was stubborn but she was not stupid.

Maester Luwin said she could not bear weight upon her leg for an entire day, and Hodor was summoned to carry her to the dining room for the king's feast. Arya hated it, being carried like a cripple, and Bran looked at her with pity in his eyes as she was brought before the king and queen for introductions, apologizing as vigorously as she could manage for not being there when they arrived earlier in the day.

King Robert laughed, his large belly jiggling. “It seems you've got some of that wild wolf blood in you, eh, Ned?”

Her father smiled placidly but Arya was certain he was not as amused as his old friend. Robert was in the middle of asking her a question when she saw the princes and princess file into the dining hall in all of their finery. Arya's eyes widened as she saw the boy from earlier leading the procession, his dirty, unkempt clothing replaced with garments in the Baratheon colors. He smiled at her, amusement twinkling in his blue eyes, and Arya wished she was not being cradled by Hodor because she wanted to walk up to Prince Gendry Baratheon and smack him right in the mouth.

*Stupid prince,* Arya growled to herself as Hodor took her to seat. *He's just a stupid prince playing a trick.*

Arya refused to look at the head table for the rest of the night.

“He is so handsome!” Sansa swooned as their mother smiled indulgently from her place near the window. Arya watched as her older sister pushed the food around her plate without taking a bite, and she literally bit her tongue to keep from spitting something unkind about the prince, knowing it would only draw her mother's ire. “Is he not handsome, Mother?”

“He looks much like his father did as a young man,” Catelyn replied.

“And he is so kind!” Sansa continued, her voice as soft and dreamy as Arya had ever heard it. “He danced with every girl at the feast last night, even the plain ones, but he said I was the best.”

Arya rolled her eyes, tearing into a piece of bacon to keep her from saying anything.

“I am nearly six-and-ten now, Mother, and everyone knows Prince Gendry is not betrothed yet. If Father speaks to the king - “

“If King Robert wishes to wed his son to you, he will be certain to tell your father,” Catelyn gently interrupted, “but I would not raise your hopes so high. Queen Cersei says he is likely to wed Margaery Tyrell of Highgarden.”

Sansa's face fell before sputtering, “But Father is King Robert's oldest friend! He would want Gendry's queen to be a loyal friend!”

Arya could not contain herself anymore. “You are not a loyal friend! You do not even know him! Who cares if he danced with all the girls? He could be the stupidest man in the kingdoms for all you know!”

Her sister's blue eyes filled with disgust. “He is not the stupidest man in the kingdoms; he is going to be king. And even Robb says Gendry is a good man. *You're* the stupid one.”

“Girls!” Catelyn chastised. Sansa instantly closed her mouth, ever the obedient daughter, but Arya felt the weight of unspoken words on her tongue.
She deserves the stupid prince. Let them marry and have 100 stupid children, each one stupider than the last.

Arya hoped Gendry Baratheon would take Sansa far, far away, and then she'd never have to see either one of them ever again.

The king had been at Winterfell for three days when Gendry stumbled upon her in the godswood, practicing her swordsmanship while her brothers went hunting with King Robert and his men. She was smacking her wooden sword against one of the weirwood trees when Gendry stepped into view, a smile on his face; instantly she brought the sword down, grateful she had not taken Needle from its hiding place to practice like she initially planned. Only Jon and Bran knew of Needle, and Arya was certain Gendry would tell everyone about her sword the same way she was certain he had told of their first meeting.

"Why aren't you hunting?" she blurted out, not bothering with a curtsy or the manners her mother and septa tried so hard to teach her.

Gendry shrugged. "Don't much care for it. And I was with Mikken when they rode out."

"Why were you with Mikken?"

He shrugged again, tugging off his fine coat and dropping it onto the ground before stretching out on the grass, his long legs out before him. Arya watched as he settled back on his elbows, looking as at home in the godswood as she was. “I like forges, the idea of making something out of nothing. I'd make a good armorer.”

"Then give up your crown and go be one," she snapped unkindly. "And let Joffrey rule the Seven Kingdoms? We'd be better off with your wolf on the Iron Throne."

Gendry pointed to Nymeria, sunning herself near the water's edge. "What's her name?"

"Nymeria." Crossing her arms over her chest, sinking to the ground, she asked, "Why didn't you tell me you were the prince?"

"Because you didn't ask." Gendry met her gaze unwaveringly. "I know you're angry at me, but I was not trying to trick you. If you had asked me who I was, I would have told you."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"I promised I wouldn't." He reached over, taking hold of her wooden sword by its blade; she thought about wrestling it away, but he didn't appear to trying to keep it. "Do you often practice with swords?"

Arya felt defensiveness rising in her chest. "What, because I'm a girl, I can't swing a sword?"

Gendry blinked in surprise at the aggressiveness in her voice. "No, I..." Sighing, he snapped, frustration in his own voice, "Are you always this unpleasant or is it special just for me?"

Recoiling, she growled, "So sorry, my lord, for not being ladylike enough for you."

He tossed the wooden sword beside her, anger blatantly coloring his features as he got to his feet. "Your sister is far more pleasing than you."

"Then go bother her!"
Arya was not sure why Gendry Baratheon irritated her so; as she returned to the castle, she forced herself to admit he really hadn't done anything to her. But there was something in the way he looked at her, his whole manner, which unnerved her. Guests at Winterfell seldom wished to spend any time with Ned Stark's younger daughter, the troublesome one, the one who was not as comely as her sister; Gendry was the first one to ever seek her out, to not call her “Arya Underfoot” or “Arya Horseface.”

And you ran him off like he was going to murder you.

Mayhaps Sansa was right: she really was hopeless.

Arya was heavy with irritation after a day of embroidering with Princess Myrcella and the rest of the girls of Winterfell when she stepped out into the yard with Sansa, Myrcella, and Jeyne Poole. Her brothers, Theon, and the princes were all there, Bran and Tommen currently crossing swords, and Arya felt jealousy well in her breast. She loved Bran dearly, but she was better with a sword than her younger brother; it was not fair she had to spend the day listening to silly girls titter over boys and making stitches while Bran got to play.

While Sansa, Jeyne, and Myrcella decided to gather flowers, Arya sat upon a railing to watch the boys spar; Bran bested Tommen easily before being disarmed by Joffrey. Arya idly noted Gendry made no move to pick up a sword, even when invited to by Robb; he made some comment about a hammer, and Arya dimly recalled King Robert's weapon of choice was a warhammer.

Good for a melee but not well-suited against a sword.

When Joffrey and Robb began to cross swords, Robb clearly better with his blade than the younger prince, Arya found Gendry staring at her with his bright blue eyes; after a moment, a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and Arya found herself tentatively returning it, the nearest she would get to making a peace offering. The heir to the Seven Kingdoms crossed the yard, climbing up to sit beside her on the railing; after a moment he divulged, “Your sister told me I must forgive your poor manners for you are hopeless.”

Arya laughed mirthlessly. “I would rather be hopeless than helpless.”

“I have only known you a week and the only thing I am certain of is you are anything but helpless.” He studied her from the corner of his eye, and Arya dropped her gaze, not liking the way his gaze twisted her insides.

“I do not - “

“I like it,” he cut in, his voice lower than before, thick with something Arya did not recognize. “I like that you do not call me ‘my prince.’ I like that you do not seem to care at all that I am a prince. And I like that you do not care a bit what anyone thinks of you.”

“That's not true,” she argued, softening a bit. “I care what my father thinks and my brother Jon.”

“He is your natural-brother, yes? The one at the Wall?”

Arya nodded. She was not sure why she confessed, “I miss him more than I have ever missed anyone or anything,” but Gendry did not seem to judge her for it. Arya knew everyone thought that, because Jon was a bastard, he was somehow less deserving of her love, but Jon Snow was the only person who ever seemed to love her exactly as she was.

“I have a natural brother named Edric Storm,” Gendry revealed, his eyes following Tommen and
Rickon as they played with Shaggydog. “My father had him raised at Storm's End because Edric's mother was a lady. When I was young, I loved to play with him; Joffrey and I have never particularly cared for each other. Sometimes...Sometimes I wish I had been a bastard as well so I could have remained with Edric.”

She was not as good with people as Sansa, but Arya understood what Gendry just confessed to her was something deeply personal. Arya fumbled for a moment before venturing, “But can you not do as you wish since you are the prince?”

Gendry's laugh was shockingly bitter. “I am willing to wager you have more of a choice in your life than I do in mine.”

“If that were true, I wouldn't have spent all morning having Septa Mordane tell me how horrendous my stitches are.” Fidgeting with her skirts, she ventured, “I do still owe you for the other day if you still want to see Winterfell.”

“I do.”

“I can have Harwin saddle the horses. Is a kingsguard coming?”

“If it would make you more comfortable.”

Arya frowned in confusion. “Why would a kingsguard make me comfortable? There is nothing in the forest to get you, and there have not been wildings spotted in years.”

A light blush filled Gendry's cheeks. “I simply meant...Well, if a lady is riding with a man unaccompanied....I would not people to talk.”

She laughed as she hopped from the railing. “This is not the south. Besides, everyone knows if you ever tried anything improper, I'd kill you.”

Gendry's laughter was loud in the yard, and it started Arya with the force of his amusement. “I appreciate the warning.”

The prince did not sit a horse as well as Arya expected; he blushed when she told him so, sputtering about how seldom he got to ride anymore and how, unlike she and her brothers, horses were not required as much in King's Landing. She showed him the hot springs and her favorite places in the forest, including the pond where she sneaked away to swim sometimes.

“You parents let you swim?”

Arya shrugged. “When I was small, Old Nan used to take all of us to swim. And now that we're older, Bran and Rickon are still allowed to go, but Mother says it's improper for a girl of my age to do so.” She wrinkled her nose. “So I do not tell her.”

“I have not been swimming since three years past. We went to Casterly Rock for a tourney being held there, and my uncle Tyrion let us bathe in the sea. Mother was furious, of course, but it was so much fun. Have you ever seen the sea?”

She shook her head. “I saw the Trident once when we went to Riverrun for my uncle Edmure's wedding, but that is the farthest south I have ever been. When we were small, Jon and I used to say we were going to visit every one of the Seven Kingdoms. I wanted to see the Westerlands so I could see a lion, and he wanted to see Dorne because - “ She broke off, suddenly afraid of saying too much.
Gendry seemed to know exactly what she was going to say. “Because that is where his mother is from?”

Arya blinked in surprise. “How do you know that?”

“Gossip never really dies at court, especially when it comes to a good mystery.” Idly stroking his horse’s mane, he admitted, “Ned Dayne is a squire at court. When I mentioned coming north, he said his aunt Ashara’s son was the natural-son of Ned Stark.”

Arya shifted in her saddle, discomfited by the idea of everyone in the Red Keep gossiping about her parents. “My father has never said that Ashara Dayne is Jon’s mother. My uncle Benjen told him once when he was in his cups. They say she was very beautiful.”

“Her sister Allyria is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, and they say she is not half-so-beautiful as her sister.” Noticing Arya’s expression, he quickly assured her, “But Lord Stark obviously loves your lady mother. I would not fret any.”

“I am not fretting. I just do not think it is fair Jon never got to know his mother.” Rearing her horse around, digging her heels into its sides to rush it up a hill, she heard Gendry curse before following her, shouting for her to slow. When they reached the top of the hill, Gendry was out of breath, and Arya almost apologized.

And then Gendry gasped as he took in the full picture of Winterfell spread out before them, its rolling hills and the rich green of the land, and Arya felt pride swell in her breast. She loved the North, loved everything about it, and seeing the way Gendry’s eyes widened, a smile playing at his lips, made her grateful for being born a Stark.

“I could stay here forever,” Gendry declared, such genuineness in his voice Arya could not help but study him for a moment.

“Are you going to marry my sister?” she asked, unsure why the words fell out of her mouth, why those words came out.

He swallowed hard, and Arya watched as he seemed to struggle for words for a moment. Finally he said, “I do not know who I am going to marry, but I do know I will not get to choose.”

Arya never really thought about it before, but it did not seem as easy to be a prince as she once believed.

“We should head back,” she ventured after a moment. When Gendry nodded absently, she grinned and challenged, “I’ll race you!”

There was nothing Arya loved more than riding at full-speed, her hair flying behind her, the echo of hooves in the air. She could hear Gendry urging his horse on faster, trying to reach her, and Arya laughed as she rose in the stirrups, casting a quick glance over her shoulder to see Gendry gaining on her. Her horse was still running as fast as its legs could carry her when she burst through the gates, startling one of the Kingsguard and a few of the men gathered in the yard. Yanking the reins so her horse would stop, she saw her father already opening his mouth to chastise her when Gendry came roaring in behind her, cursing her with a laugh.

“You are half horse, my lady,” he panted as he slowed his horse to a stop, wiping sweat from his brow with his sleeve. Grinning down at his father, Gendry pronounced, “I fear I have shamed the family name, Father. I have let Lady Arya best me on a horse.”

“You did not let me do anything,” she argued, allowing her father to help her from her mount. “I am
just better than you.”

Robert bellowed with laughter, and Arya noticed the wineskin in his hand for the first time. “You’ve got a lot of nerve, girl, I’ll give you that.” He motioned for Ned to bring her closer, and Arya willingly went, knowing she could not refuse the king. She managed not to wince as he leaned forward, studying her face while breathing the stench of strongwine into her face, before proclaiming, a touch of sadness in his voice, “Gods, you are just like her, aren't you?”

“Who?” she asked in confusion.

Robert did not answer her, turning his attention to Ned. “Have you made a match for her yet?”

“No, we were waiting until she is older. She is not even four-and-ten yet.”

The king nodded for a moment before patting Arya on the cheek as if she was a small child. “I shall find you a good husband.”

Arya knew he meant it to be sweet; instead it sounded like a threat.

It was ungodly hot that afternoon, and Arya could barely breathe in the humidity of the castle. Septa Mordane excused them from the solar, sweat running down her face, and Arya quickly hurried to the stables, riding for the pond as quickly as her horse could carry her. All she could think of while botching her stitches was how nice the cool water from the pond would feel on her overheated skin, how great it would be to float atop the water on her back the way Jon taught her to do. As she tied her horse to one of the trees, Arya was already unlacing her gown, her slippers discarded, when she noticed there was already someone in the pond.

Arya hesitated near the trunk of the tree, studying the back of the man in her pond. His skin was not as pale as her own, and his dark hair stuck to his head from the water; muscles danced beneath his skin as he moved, and Arya could tell he was strong. She had seen men without their shirts before—her brothers, Theon, her father—but this was different; she was not supposed to look at a man who was not her family, especially when he was undressed, and Arya blushed as she wondered if he wore breeches beneath the water or was completely nude.

And then the man turned and Arya nearly gasped as she realized it was Gendry, his own eyes wide with shock at being discovered. Arya dropped her gaze from his face, but that was worse because now she was staring at his chest and stomach, ridged with muscle, and a line of dark hair which disappeared beneath the water.

“I am sorry,” she blurted out, giving Gendry her back, bright red with embarrassment.

“I did not mean to take your swimming spot. It was so warm and I...” Gendry trailed off, and Arya wondered if he was blushing as red as she was. Screwing up her courage, she turned and saw Gendry was climbing from the water, his breeches clinging to his legs.

“You do not have to leave,” she blurted out. “You were here first.”

“But you wish to swim. I did not mean to intrude upon your place.”

Irritated with herself for behaving as if she was Sansa, simpering and flushing over something as silly as swimming, Arya shrugged, wiggling out of her gown, leaving herself clad in a thin shift and her smallclothes. She dove cleanly into the water, touching the soft, spongy bottom of the pond before pushing to the surface, shaking the water from her face. When she opened her eyes, she found Gendry staring at her with dark eyes.
“What?”

“You,” he began before trailing off, shaking his head; drops of water clung to his hair and eyelashes, catching the sunlight, and Arya suddenly thought Sansa was right: he was handsome.

“I what?” she pushed as she swam towards him, twisting her body to spin through the water as she did so. Her father always said the only Tully quality she had was her love of the water, and Arya believed him; she would be sad when winter finally came and kept her trapped indoors.

“You're extraordinary,” he murmured, a peculiar expression on his face, and Arya was not sure if he was japing or not. She splashed him in the face, giggling as he spat water from his mouth.

“Stop being stupid,” she ordered before disappearing beneath the water, narrowly missing the splash he was returning.

Arya was not sure how long they had been playing in the pond; her fingers were staring to wrinkle, but it was more fun playing with Gendry than it was her brothers. Rickon was still too little to be much fun, Bran was always busy with his lessons, and Robb said he was too old to play now that he was wed; ever since Jon went to the Wall, everything changed, became more serious. Gendry did not say he was too old to play even though he was of an age with Robb; he did not tell her she was not acting like a lady or lecture her for playing too rough. When she leaped upon his back, he tossed her off; when he grabbed her by the wrists, she kicked him in the stomach. As she once again slipped from Gendry’s grasp, she decided she liked the prince, that he somehow had even become her friend.

“Are you coming to court with your father?” Gendry asked as they both tried to catch their breaths. She scoffed with a shake of her head, pulling at her shift which now felt like a second skin. “He and Mother wanted me to, but I convinced them to let me stay with Robb and Jeyne. I promised I would help Jeyne with the babe when it comes.”

Disappointment twisted his face. “So only Sansa and the boys are coming then?”

“Sansa says it's better this way because now I won't embarrass the entire family by acting like a wilding at court.” Arya smirked. “She is afraid I will do something so horrendous, your father will not let you marry her.”

“She should be more concerned about what Mace Tyrell will do if he thinks Margaery is going to be forgotten.” His fingers skimming the water, he declared, “You should come to court.”

“I do not want to. It would be more sewing and dancing and listening to stupid girls talk about their marriage prospects and whether or not they have flowered or what they will name their children. I would die of boredom within a fortnight if I did not murder someone first.”

“Court is boring,” Gendry allowed, “but it would be much less so if you came.” Grinning, he enticed, “And there are adventures to be had. I could show you the dragon skulls beneath the Red Keep and the secret passages; I could even have Tobbo Mott make you a sword of your own. There are tourneys, too! We are to have one at Storm's End for my uncle Renly's name day, and you could come to Casterly Rock with us. I could show you lions if you still wish to see one; my grandfather keeps them in the lower levels of the Rock, and I bet you could even touch one if you wished.”

“No,” she argued calmly, her voice matter-of-fact, “because we would not get to have any adventures. We would get to the Red Keep and they'll announce who you’re going to marry, and once they do, we will not be allowed to play together anymore. And your father said he is going to find me a husband, and, if my father lets him, then I'll get sent away anyway. I would rather stay at
Winterfell as long as I can before I get traded away like a bloody horse.”

Gendry's face folded in consternation. “Is that what you think we're doing, playing together?”

“What else would it be?” she asked, genuinely confused.

He shook his head with a mirthless chuckle. “Nothing, I suppose.” Raking his fingers through his hair, Gendry looked up at the sky and groaned, “What am I doing?”

“Why are you acting like this?”

Gendry looked at her in disbelief. “Because I'm stupid! Because I thought you liked me!”

“I do like you when you aren't acting like you've gone mad!”

“No, I mean – Gods, you are so stupid sometimes!”

Arya watched in shock for a beat as Gendry climbed out of the water, pacing the grass like a caged animal, before following him onto the bank, pushing her tangled hair over her shoulders. She stepped into his path, pressing a hand against his chest, and snapped, “What is your problem?!”

“My problem?” he echoed. “My problem is I have spent every spare minute with you for the past month, and I thought it was because you liked me! My problem is you act like you know everything but then play dumb! My problem is you keep treating me like I'm Jon, and I'm not your bloody brother!”

“Who asked you to spend time with me?” she shouted in return. “You were the one who kept following me around! I'm not dumb; you just don't make any sense! And I know you're not my brother because my brother isn't a stupid, bull-headed boy!”

Gendry looked positively furious, and for a moment Arya thought he was going to strike her. But then he stepped back, his fists clenched tightly at his sides, and growled, “You make no sense whatsoever! You keep acting like you're a child but you're a woman-grown!”

“I am not!”

Letting his eyes linger upon her body, he spat, “You certainly look it.”

Arya glanced down and promptly felt herself flush in humiliation; her shift and smallclothes had become transparent in the water, and she was as good as nude before him. Rushing over to her discarded dress, she pulled it up and quickly climbed atop her horse. “You are the most disgusting person I have ever known, and I hope you die!”

She refused to look back, vowing never to speak to Gendry Baratheon ever again.

“Did you have a fight with Gendry?” Bran asked as he climbed through Arya's open window, hopping to the floor with his usual grace.

Arya did not look up from polishing Needle. “Gendry is stupid and I do not care to ever discuss him again.”

Bran looked at her for a moment before stating, “He is looking for you, you know. He asked why you were not at dinner.”

“I do not care.”
“And he asked Maester Luwin if you were ill.”

“If I am sick, it is only because he has made me so.”

Bran picked up an old doll from her shelf before replacing it. “What did he do?” When Arya did not respond, he asked, his usually calm voice filling with a hint of Robb's temper, “Did he try to do something improper to you?”

Arya finally looked up, shock on her face. “No! No, he...He is stupid but he is not a raper.” Resuming her polishing, she finally admitted, “He makes me so angry. I do not understand him.”

“What is it you do not understand? I mean, I have not spent a great deal of time with him, but Prince Gendry does not seem to be that complicated. I've found him to be quite candid, not like Joffrey at all.” Bran studied her for a moment before asking, “Do you ever think you're the complicated one?”

“I am not complicated,” she objected. “And I did not do anything and he just started acting like a complete prick!” Arya grunted in frustration. “I just want him and the king to leave already so things can be normal again!”

“They'll never be normal again, Arya. Father's the Hand now; all of us have to go to court. Even if you stay, it will still be different.”

“I do not want it to be different! He should just say no to the king!”

“King Robert is his best friend. You do not say no to your best friend.” Bran shrugged, his face placid. “The world is changing whether you like it or not, and mayhaps it would not be the worst thing for you to have a friend at court, especially if he does end up being Sansa's husband.”

Arya did not like or understand the complicated mix of emotions in the pit of her stomach at the idea of Gendry and Sansa wedding. “We could still run away to the Wall.”

Bran smiled as he began to climb out her window. “Arya Stark, Queen of the Wildings.”

Sometimes Arya wished Bran was not nearly so practical.

It was not difficult to find Gendry; as she suspected, he was in the forge, idly running her fingers across Mikken's tools. When he noticed her, Gendry paused for a moment, a variety of emotions flickering across his face before seeming to settle on apologetic.

“I did not mean to upset you earlier.”

“Yes, you did,” she retorted without malice. “Why didn't you go into town with Theon and Joffrey? No taste for whores?”

Gendry smirked. “What does a lady know of whores?”

She rolled her eyes. “I know Theon spends any spare coin he has on Ros and when he runs out, he beds Kyra instead.”

“He recommended Ros. I'm certain my brother is spending our grandfather's coin on her as we speak.”

“You did not answer my question,” she pointed out. She knew of King Robert's reputation for wenching, had heard her mother make a comment to her father about all of Robert's bastard children; she wondered if Gendry would dishonor Sansa that way one day.
“I’ve never bedded a whore nor do I intend to.” Amusement filled his blue eyes. “And you? Have you bedded down with whores?”

“I once shared a bed with Jeyne Poole. Does that count?”

He laughed before tapering off, his fingers running around the edges of the anvil. Finally he said, his voice soft but firm, “I like you.”

“And I told you that I - “

“No, Arya, I like you.” Coming around the anvil, his hands clasped before him in the same way she had seen the knights of the Kingsguard do, he clarified, “I like you the way a man likes a woman, not as a friend or a brother. I want you. The reason I was so angry this afternoon was because I thought you knew that and were playing dumb.”

Arya stared at him for a moment, her words failing her, before blurt out out, “But you're supposed to marry Sansa.”

“I think Sansa is perfectly fine, but I do not want to marry her or Margaery Tyrell or whoever else my father puts forward. I just want you.”

Arya began to shake her head. “But Sansa - “

“I am going to tell my father what I wish,” Gendry cut in, his voice thick with stubbornness. “He says he wants to make a match for you, and I will be that match.”

“No, you won't. Your parents will never let you wed me; I am no queen. And it would break Sansa's heart! She would never forgive me, even if your parents say no. Do not do this.”

“Arya - “

She could feel a peculiar panic swelling in her. “You cannot do this, Gendry! You will ruin everything! And I do not even want to marry someone so - “

“You do not like me? You do not want me?”

There was something plaintive in his tone which made Arya feel incredibly guilty. “I do not know.”

“You do not know?” he parroted incredulously. “Well, think about it then!”

Arya shook her head vehemently. “She is my sister, and, while I may not like her, she wants to be your queen. So you need to just...stop.”

Gendry clenched his jaw tightly before nodding, averting his eyes. Finally he said, his voice cooler and more detached than she had ever heard it, “I will not bother you again, my lady.”

When all of court left two days later, Arya refused to look at Gendry as she said her goodbyes, only offering him a perfunctory curtsy before he disappeared down the kingsroad.

_Sansa will be a better queen than I ever would have been._

But Arya did not like to think about that.
The She-Wolf at Court

The raven arrived from King's Landing only a month after the birth of Robb's son, King Robert's seal on the paper. Arya saw Robb's eyes widen when he read the words and, when he lifted his gaze, Arya suspected she knew exactly what it said.

“You are to come to court for the announcement of your betrothal to Lord Edric Dayne of Starfall.”

Arya wondered how feasible her plan of escape to the Wall really was.

The ride to King's Landing was long but not particularly unpleasant; Robb was nowhere near as strict with her as their parents were, and it made their stays in the inns more pleasurable with mead to help her sleep. By the time they reached the Crownlands, she had won a fair amount of coin from Theon playing dice and learned some impressively inappropriate jokes to share with Bran and Gendry.

Not Gendry, she reminded herself as they rode towards the Red Keep. He is nothing now.

Ned and Catelyn met them upon their arrival, hugging them as if they had been parted for years rather than only nine moons. Arya was surprised to see Bran had grown even taller since their parting, and Rickon was not even at court anymore, having been sent to Riverrun as a page. When Sansa came to greet them accompanied by Margaery Tyrell, Arya idly noted Gendry's other potential bride was very pretty though in a different way than Sansa. Both of the older girls congratulated her on her betrothal, and Arya could read the naked longing in their eyes, both having expected to be betrothed to Prince Gendry long ago.

“You will like Lord Edric,” Sansa declared as Arya was forced to remain still while maids laced pearls into her hair. Arya wished to turn around and tell her sister exactly what she thought of the engagement but said nothing, not when her mother was fussing with the purple gown Allyria Dayne had made for Arya as a gift. “He is kind and you will be the Lady of Starfall.”

“Ashara Dayne threw herself from the Palestone Tower at Starfall,” Arya said instead, staring at her unfamiliar reflection in the mirror. Sansa looked at her in confusion but Arya saw Catelyn freeze.

“Who is Ashara Dayne and why did she kill herself?”

“Sansa, you should ready yourself for the feast,” Catelyn answered, lifting the beautiful silk gown from the bed. “I can finish with Arya myself.” When they were alone, all of Arya's dark hair pinned and adorned with pearls, Catelyn sighed. “Who told you the story of Ashara Dayne?”

“Uncle Benjen told Jon, Jon told me some and Gendry, the rest.” Meeting her mother's gaze in the mirror, she asked, “Did she leap from the tower because Father took Jon away?”

“I do not know why Ashara did what she did, but I would not say her name before your father. He cares not at all for gossip, especially about those who cannot defend themselves against it.”

As Arya stepped into the gown, so different from her northern dresses, she asked, “Did you love Father when you married him or did you still love Uncle Brandon?”

Catelyn paused for a moment before carefully pulling the ribbons which would lace the gown up the back. “I did not know your father when I wed him. My betrothal to Brandon was long, and I knew him as well as I could have given the circumstances. I was certain I loved him, and I mourned him when he died.”
“Did you want to marry Father? Did Grandfather Hoster give you a choice?”

“There are not many choices given to women, Arya, and even less given during times of war. But once I grew to know your father, I loved him.”

“So he did not love you either when you wed.”

Arya saw her mother flinch a bit, and she instantly regretted the statement. “Many things will be said about Ned Stark one day, but the one which will carry on for generations is how well he wears his honor. He wed me because it was what needed to be done, and I suppose he felt sorry for what happened to Brandon, what was taken from me. And I suspect, if I am being quite honest, he loved Ashara Dayne and hoped to wed her before everything changed.”

“I don't want to marry Edric Dayne.”

“I know.” Smoothing the back of her dress, Catelyn said knowingly, “But you have not told me the name of the boy you wish to marry.”

“I wish to marry no one.”

Catelyn smiled. “And which boy in the Seven Kingdoms do you wish to also not marry anyone?”

Arya frowned, trying to tug the neckline of the dress higher to cover more of her breasts. “It does not matter. Nothing I want will ever matter ever again.”

Her mother frowned for a moment before plucking a large winter rose from the collection of flowers in the vase. Urging Arya to sit, Catelyn carefully wound the long step of the rose through Arya's hair, the blue petals bright amongst the dark strands of her hair.

“You never knew your Aunt Lyanna, but she was much like you. She came with Brandon and your grandfather to visit at Riverrun after my betrothal, and I quite liked her. Brandon used to say she was wilder than even the worst northern winter, but he said it with such love in his voice.”

“Father never speaks of her.”

“No, he has never forgiven himself for not reaching her sooner, for not saving her. Sometimes I do not think Robert has forgiven him either. Lyanna Stark was as much a force of nature as the wind or the waves, and I think a little piece of Ned died the day she did.” Resting her hands on Arya's shoulders, she confided, “The day you were born, screeching and red-faced as you were, he took one look at you and said, 'Oh, she has Lya's look.' It was the first time I had heard him speak her name since she died. He has always indulged you because of it.”

“He always says I have to start acting like a lady.”

“And then when you are gone, he laughs at your escapades and gets you a new horse.” Catelyn kissed the crown of her head. “My point, my dear, is memory has a way of softening what was there and making people forget what was unpleasant. Lyanna once told me she never wished to marry if she did not love her husband, and she knew Robert no better than I knew Ned.”

Arya understood what was not being said; it was her specialty. “You are saying I am exactly like Lyanna.”

“It is why King Robert took such an interest in your marriage prospects.” A teasing smile on her face, she added, “Gods forbid anything happens to Queen Cersei before you are properly wed or else I believe he might just claim you for himself.”
Turning on her stool, Arya locked gazes with her mother. “No one man would be able to steal me from Winterfell, especially if I was on a horse. I could only be taken if I wanted to be taken.”

Catelyn nodded minutely. “But why would you want to be taken?”

*Because I do not want to marry the man chosen for me.*

Arya sighed, slowly rising to her feet. She thought of Needle hidden away in her trunks, thought of Winterfell and the scent of the air, thought of Jon as she last remembered him, thought of everything she loved; Arya did not doubt she could escape King’s Landing, hide and live as someone else entirely, but she did not want to be followed. The last time a Stark bride went missing, a war was waged to bring her home, and Arya heard the subtle reminder in her mother's voice: *do not be like Lyanna in this.*

She could see it in her father's eyes, in King Robert's; neither man was looking at her. They were seeing a woman who had been dead for nearly twenty years, a woman who was barely older than Arya when she died; from the whispers of the court, Arya suspected those who were old enough to remember Lyanna Stark were seeing the same. Arya lowered her gaze, staring at the floor as she was escorted to Edric Dayne of Starfall; she knew he squired for Lord Beric Dondarrion, that he was nicknamed Ned, and most everyone agreed he was an honorable man. She certainly could have been promised to someone worse, someone like Joffrey; she could survive this.

*Mayhaps I will even like him.*

He was not very tall or broad; his fair hair fell across his forehead, and he wore House Dayne colors which flattered his coloring. Arya supposed he was attractive, but she could not say he was handsome. When he kissed her hand, his lips were dry and a bit rough, and Arya hoped she would not have to kiss him tonight.

It was not until she was seated beside Edric that she saw Gendry for the first time since he left Winterfell. He sat to the right of the king, his blue eyes fixed upon her as he glowered beneath the dark fringe of his hair; Arya saw him summon one of the servants multiple times to refill his cup, and, as the night wore on, a flush started to fill his cheeks. She had seen Theon look like that often enough to know the heir of the Seven Kingdoms was drunk, and Queen Cersei seemed to notice it too, gesturing for the servant to skip Gendry's cup when he returned with the wineskin.

When the music began for the dancing, Arya could not help but flinch. She hated to dance, having been declared hopeless at it years earlier; she could still remember her dancing lessons back at Winterfell, how she tripped and stumbled while Sansa floated gracefully about the floor. It was not like the footwork needed for sword fighting; with Needle in her hand, Arya could always find her rhythm. With a man pushing her about the floor, all Arya ever felt was a need to take charge and stop moving backwards.

Edric held her loosely, his own feet as clumsy as hers; Arya was certain they looked ridiculous and was grateful when other couples began to join them. Her eyes found Bran's across the room, her brother partnering Princess Myrcella, and he stuck the tip of his tongue out, drawing a wan smile from her. Edric attempted to start a handful of conversations as they danced, but neither could seem to sustain them; she wished she was like Sansa in that moment, always knowing the right thing to say or do.

It felt as if the song would never end, and then Robb, Bran, and a handful of other lords were asking for the pleasure of a dance. Arya wished she could say no, wished she was back at Winterfell with Jeyne and baby Rickard; instead she smiled tersely and tried not to stare longingly at her chair. She was trying not to flinch from Lord Baelish's touch when suddenly Gendry was there, unsteady on his
feet but unwavering in his gaze.

“I am cutting in,” he stated, and Arya did not recognize his voice, deep and commanding. It was a prince's voice, the voice of a man who would one day be king, and Arya saw Lord Baelish reach the same realization at she did only a moment before Gendry took hold of her.

His grip was tight, one hand settling lower than appropriate on her back, and Arya blushed at how closely he held her; she could feel the heat of his body through the thin silk of her gown, and, when she attempted to put some distance between them, he pulled her even closer, the small swells of her breasts brushing against his chest.


Arya resisted the urge to raise her knee to catch him between the legs. “And you are drunk, Prince Gendry.”

His fingers biting into the small of her back, he continued, “You do not even look like you. You look like some Dornish whore.”

She struggled for a moment but, seeing the queen glaring at her, Arya stilled, hating Gendry and his stupid Lannister mother. “I do not care if you are the prince, I will - “

“They put you in a gown and put trinkets in your hair, and now you look just like the rest of them. Bet you’re even going to curtsy and call him ‘my lord.’ You'll ride off for Starfall and when you come back, you'll be just another lady.” Arya gasped as Gendry brought his mouth down to her ear, his hot breath tickling her skin. “They will ruin you. They will take everything wonderful about you and make you like everyone else. Do not let them do it, Arya. Say no and go back to Winterfell. You cannot let them - “

Arya started as her father's hand came down upon Gendry's shoulder, Ned Stark's face outwardly calm though anger burned in his eyes. “Prince Gendry, your father requires you.”

Gendry kept his eyes on her face as he nodded. “Yes, Lord Stark.”

When Gendry followed her father towards the head table, Arya saw her escape, quickly hurrying from the great hall to catch her breath. She stood in the hallway, seething over Gendry's words, embarrassed and frustrated. With a grunt, she ripped the flower from her hair, tugging at the pins which held her hair tight against her head, shaking the locks loose; Arya wiped the stain from her lips as she hurried towards her chamber in the Tower of the Hand, angry tears welling in her eyes.

Stupid, bull-headed arse! I hate him! I hate him!

By the time Catelyn came to her chamber, Arya was dressed in Bran's breeches and an old tunic she stole from Theon, her hair tangled and messy around her face. Her mother sighed as she lifted the Dornish gown from the floor, setting it on the chest at the foot of the bed. Arya waited for the harsh words she was certain were to come, but Catelyn said nothing for a long time, perching upon the bed, her fingers stroking Arya's hair.

Finally Catelyn murmured, “What happened between you and the prince while he was at Winterfell?”

“Nothing,” she instantly replied, keeping her back to Catelyn so she could not read the lie upon her face. “Gendry is my friend, almost like a brother.”

“No brother holds his sister that closely, Arya.” When Arya says nothing, Catelyn continued, “You
are not in trouble. But there are things your father and I must know, especially with the betrothal.”

“What sorts of things?”

She felt her mother shift uncomfortably behind her. “Has Gendry ever kissed you or touched you? Have you... Has he seen you without your gown or touched you beneath your clothing? Have you ever touched him?”

Arya felt her cheeks warm as understanding sank in; her mother wanted to know if she was still a maiden, if she was ruined and her betrothal would need to be broken. After a moment, trusting her voice, she confessed, “We went swimming together once. I kept my shift on but he could see through it. That is all.”

“That is all? No kisses, no touches?”

“He truly is only my friend. I did not lay with him.” Arya finally turned, her grey eyes meeting Catelyn's blue ones. “That is what you want to know, isn't it? Gendry did not ruin me and I did not give him my maidenhead.”

Relief flooded Catelyn's face, obviously thinking of Robert's many indiscretions. Brushing a look of hair from Arya's forehead, she asked, “Do you understand what happens between a lord and lady in the marriage bed?”

“Septa Mordane explained it when I flowered.”

Her kind face folding into a kind smile, Catelyn asked, “Is Gendry the reason you do not wish to wed Edric?”

Arya returned her gaze to the wall, giving Catelyn her back. “I would make a terrible queen.”

That was the closest to the truth Arya would allow herself to feel.

The Red Keep was even more boring than Arya imagined it to be. Unlike at Winterfell where she could generally come and go as she pleased, Arya was now forced to spend her days with Princess Myrcella, Sansa, Margaery Tyrell, and Margaery's cousins; she suffered through embroidery sessions and endless gossip, through meals where no one did anything more than pick at their food and through games of cards. No one played dice or cyvasse; no one was interested in tourneys beyond dreaming of being crowned Queen of Love and Beauty. Arya had never particularly felt connected to other girls, but now she felt as if she was in another country entirely where she did not speak the language or understand the customs.

Arya was miserable, really and truly, and she started to panic as she realized this was her life now.

Sansa kept telling her she was lucky. “At least you have a betrothed,” her older sister pointed out one morning as they broke their fast. “I am two years older than you and am still not promised. Margaery's father said the king will announce Gendry's betrothed after the next tourney, but I am starting to believe I will never wed!”

Arya rolled her eyes at her sister's dramatics. “Take Edric then. You can be the Lady of Starfall and I'll go back to Winterfell.”

Sansa's eyes widened in disbelief. “Are you mad? Do you know what happens if you break a betrothal?” She scoffed. “Honestly, Arya, you're not a child anymore. When will you stop acting like one?”
It was Sansa's words and her desire to prove to Sansa she was not like her which lead Arya to investigate King's Landing. Everyone paid attention to ladies in the Crownlands, but dirty beggar girls were ignored; once she put on her boys' clothing and did not brush her hair, Arya looked like any other girl in Flea Bottom. Sneaking out of the Keep required a bit more work, but, once free of its walls, Arya laughed as she walked through the streets.

There were far more people in King's Landing than in Winterfell, and the streets bustled with activity. Arya watched as familiar faces from the Keep went in and out of a brothel, as they bought pastries and treats; when she spotted the sign for the forge of Tobho Mott, Arya hurried over, looking at the daggers and other pieces of steel which were available for sale. She remembered Gendry once telling her how he liked to come here and watch Mott craft steel, how Mott made the best steel in the Seven Kingdoms.

Her eyes tracing the elegant lines of a broadsword on the wall, its handle inlaid with a black gem, Arya wished she had a sword half-so-handsome.

“If you ain't got dragons to spend, you ain't standing around here,” Tobho Mott snapped, startling Arya from her admiration.

“I was just looking.”

“And blocking the way for people who can buy what I'm selling! Get out of here!”

Arya huffed away, pushing her hair off of her forehead. She saw a few of the City Watch milling about in their gold cloaks, and Arya did not like the way one of them was looking at her; there was nothing outwardly threatening about him, but there was a shadow in his eyes, the promise of pain. Arya quickly hurried down the road, ducking into an alley which lead her down to the water. The ocean lapped at the shore, ships coming in to dock, but Arya could only stare out at the endless expanse of the Narrow Sea.

_Across the sea is Essos. If I sneaked aboard a ship, I could go to Pentos or Braavos or even Volantis. I could start all over where no one has ever heard of Arya Stark and be whoever I wanted to be._

The hand fell heavily on her shoulder, and Arya whirled around, pulling Needle from her waistband; Jory Cassel stepped back immediately but shook his head. “All of King's Landing is looking for you, Lady Arya. You have your parents worried sick.”

With a sigh, Arya replaced Needle on her hip as she allowed Jory to lead her back to the Red Keep. In the distance she could hear Nymeria howling, tied up with Lady and Summer somewhere, and Arya almost howled in return, feeling the bite of a tether as tightly around her own throat as Nymeria did.

Her parents were in King Robert's solar with the king, Gendry, Edric, Robb, and Sansa with them. Her mother rushed to her, squeezing her tightly, and Arya shifted uncomfortably as Catelyn rubbed at the dirt on her cheeks.

“Where have you been?” Catelyn exclaimed.

“I wanted to explore.”

“And what are you wearing? You look like an urchin!” Catelyn began to smooth down her hair, and Arya pulled back, shaking her head in irritation. She saw hints of a smile on both Robb and Gendry's face, but Edric looked deeply confused and Sansa, disgusted.
“I did not mean to worry anyone.”

Ned stepped forward, pointing to Needle on her hip. “And where did you get that?”

“It's mine,” was all Arya said, her hand clutching the pommel a bit desperately. Her father extended his hand and Arya sighed, begrudgingly handing him her most prized possession. Ned studied the blade for a moment before declaring, “This is Mikken's mark. Who gave you this?”

“I did,” Robb and Gendry said in unison, and King Robert laughed as he motioned for this squire to refill his cup of wine.

“You gave us all a fright, girl.” Robert said, drops of wine clinging to his beard. “You shouldn't leave the Keep without protection.”

“I can protect myself,” she retorted, wincing as Catelyn squeezed her shoulder painfully in reproach.

“With your little sword?” Robert turned to Edric, who shifted uneasily on the balls of his feet. “You shall have your hands full with this one, Lord Edric. The mountains of Dorne will not know what has hit them.”

Ned Dayne's eyes met Arya's, and she saw nervousness reflected there. “There are not so many dangers in Dorne, Your Grace. Princess Arianne travels freely there unmolested.”

“Then it is a good place for our wandering lady.” Robert pointed to Needle. “So who gave you the blade, Lady Arya? Was it my son or your brother?”

Arya frowned, debating whether or not to answer at all, before seeing the expression on her father's face. Skirting the edge of the truth, she replied, “My brother,” and thought of Jon in her chamber the day he gave it to her, the soft smile on his face.

“So everything is settled then,” Robert declared, motioning for his cup to refilled again. “Off with you then, girl.”

Sansa and Catelyn escorted her back to her chambers, both her mother and sister chastising her for her behavior, but Arya heard nothing; all she could think of was Needle, now lost to her forever. It was the only thing she had left of Jon Snow, made perfect for her 9-year-old hand, and she felt tears rising in her throat at the unfairness of it all.

She felt ridiculous as she silently wept in the tub as the maids scrubbed her clean, her skin nearly raw by the time the day's adventures were washed away, but Arya could not help it. As more soap was added to her hair, the older woman clucking about its state, Arya thought of Lyanna Stark's statue in the crypt at Winterfell, of the serene stone face and the flowers her father always laid across her lap. Arya suddenly wondered if Rhaegar Targaryen had stolen her at all or if she had climbed upon the back of his horse and begged the prince to take her far, far away, betrothal be damned; though she never dared breathe her aunt's name to her father, she knew from her conversation with Catelyn that her mother, at least, had some sort of suspicion about what transpired all those years ago.

Edric Dayne did not love her even a quarter as much as Robert Baratheon loved Lyanna; mayhaps it would not matter if she disappeared. He could wed Sansa, who was prettier with courtlier manners. Arya told herself the thought did not make her cry harder, but it did upset her. Sansa would never play cyvasse with Gendry or race him upon horseback; she would never do any of the things Gendry liked and certainly would not understand his wish to be an armorer. Mayhaps he thought Edric

But Sansa is to marry the prince.

Arya told herself the thought did not make her cry harder, but it did upset her. Sansa would never play cyvasse with Gendry or race him upon horseback; she would never do any of the things Gendry liked and certainly would not understand his wish to be an armorer. Mayhaps he thought Edric
Dayne would ruin her, but Arya knew Sansa or Margaery Tyrell would ruin him, turn him into another spoiled, boring prince, not the boy who was her friend at all.

So distracted by her thoughts, Arya did not realize someone was knocking on her chamber door until her father called her name through it. Cinching her robe more tightly around her body, Arya shouted for him to enter, and she felt her heart swell at the sight of Needle in his hand.

“I do not believe Robb gave you this sword.”

Arya shrugged as she climbed onto her bed. “I did not say he did.”

Ned smiled, setting Needle upon the chest at the foot of her bed before sitting beside her. “From Jon then?”

“He gave it to me before he left for the Wall. It's called Needle.”

“A good blade deserves a name.” Ned took her hand, enfolding it in both of his; Arya remembered how she used to marvel at how her tiny hand would be swallowed by his. “What did you want to explore this afternoon?”

“Everything. It is so boring to do nothing but sew and gossip all day. Margaery wanted to go for a ride a few days ago, but we never even got above a trot! Her cousins ride sidesaddle!”

He chuckled. “It sounds as if you miss the North as much as I do.”

“But at least you get to go back someday.” Pulling her hand away, she got to her feet and began to pace. “I will never get to go back to Winterfell. You are sending me away to Dorne!”

Ned's face looked pained as he offered, “This is how things are done for ladies - “

“I do not want to be a lady! I do not want to be Lady Dayne of Starfall! I am Arya Stark of Winterfell, and that is my place!”

“Arya - “

“I will not marry him! I will run away like Aunt Lyanna - “

Ned's eyes widened as he stilled his daughter with a rough hand. “You must never say that ever again, Arya, do you understand? Lyanna was taken by Rhaegar Targaryen against her will. Everyone knows that, most especially the king.”

She stared at her father, Stark grey meeting Stark grey, before murmuring, “I wish someone would kidnap me.”

Arya was grateful when her father pulled her into an embrace, inhaling the scent of the North which always seemed to cling to him. His voice soft and comforting against her ear, he said, “I will speak to your mother and to the Daynes. I have no wish to force you to do anything you do not want to do, and House Dayne is reasonable; I am certain we can end your betrothal if it upsets you so.”

“But Sansa said it would ruin our family's honor,” she sniffled against his collar.

“Honor comes in many forms, my girl.” Ned kissed her hair. “No daughter of House Stark will ever be wed to someone against their will.”

Arya had never loved her father more.
Arya was genuinely surprised when Edric Dayne sought her out, a cyvasse board in his hands. His face was set with determination, his pale hair brushed off of his forehead, and Arya felt Sansa and Margaery’s eyes upon her as Edric set the game atop the table.

“Prince Gendry says you like to play games,” Ned Dayne offered, keeping his eyes upon Arya, “especially cyvasse. I thought we could play.”

“I suppose.” Arya opened the case, removing the board and setting up her pieces while Ned did the same. She glared at Sansa as her sister smiling knowingly before rising from her seat, taking Margaery with her so that only Arya and Ned remained in the small solar.

She won the first two games easily before nearly falling to Ned in the third; by the fourth, Ned managed to eek out a victory, and Arya could see the pride in his eyes at doing so.

“You are very good at this,” Ned stated. “Gendry says you played often at Winterfell.”

“One of my father’s bannermen learned it from a Dornishman, and he taught me how to play. When he returned to his home, he left me the game since I enjoyed it. I like to play dice too,” she added.

“Dice? I did not know ladies played dice.”

“I do not much care for what ladies do.”

A hint of amusement tugged at his mouth. “Yes, I have heard that.”

“What does that mean?” she snapped, awaiting some jape about her impropriety.

Panic bloomed on Ned’s face. “Oh, I did not mean – I have just heard that you do not enjoy typically feminine pursuits. Gendry said - “

“What all has Gendry said?”

Fiddling with the pieces on the board, Ned admitted, “He said I should not bring you flowers or jewelry and that you do not care for dancing. He also said that you like to go riding but real riding, not the kind ladies do. He suggested I give you a sand steed for a wedding present.”

“When did he tell you this?”

Anxiously playing with the dragon piece, he sputtered, “Your father came to me a few days ago and said that you – that perhaps it was not a good match between us. My aunt Allyria does not want to break the betrothal, says she will not have a Stark shame our house again. You know this?”

Arya nodded, having heard a similar story from her father, albeit without the slights against the Dayne family honor; he was attempting to find a suitable agreement. “I do.”

“I have no sisters for your brothers to wed, and Allyria has been promised to Lord Beric for years. I thought if I...if you got to know me and I, you mayhaps you would want to wed me.” Ned finally met her gaze. “I think you to be very pretty and I would be a good husband. Prince Tommen told me you and Gendry played together at Winterfell, so I asked him if he could help me to understand you.”

Arya shifted a bit in her chair, guilt and embarrassment warring for top billing within her; she had been so desperate to be free of her betrothal, she had not given consideration to Ned's feelings. Finally she conceded, “I think I would like a sand steed.”
Ned smiled the first truly genuine smile Arya had ever seen on his face. “Dorne is very different from here and from the North. Ladies have more chances there, can do more than just sew and dance. Princess Arianne will rule one day and there is much sport to be had. I truly think you would like Starfall, my lady.”

Arya still did not want to wed, but she also knew that, if Allyria Dayne did not agree to putting the betrothal aside, it would cause innumerable problems for her father. Ned Dayne did not seem so bad; mayhaps a marriage to him would not be a terrible fate. Robb always spoke of the family coming before personal desires, and Arya did not want anyone to say she brought shame upon House Stark.

When she told her parents that night that she wished to honor the betrothal, she could see the uncertainty in their eyes.

“You must be certain, Arya,” Ned said. “You cannot continue to change your mind.”

She nodded in understanding. “I think I was just scared,” she lied, fidgeting with her skirt. “But I spoke to Ned today and I think it will be a good match.” Smiling wanly to try to sell her words, she continued, “I know Ned is already six-and-ten. Am I to be the same when we wed?”

Catelyn blinked before replying, “The date is at our discretion.”

“I do not like it here at court. I would rather go to Dorne than remain here.”

Both Ned and Catelyn utterly confused. “Arya, three days ago you were begging your father to set aside this engagement - “

“And if he sets it aside, there will just be another to take its place. Ned Dayne isn't so bad, and if you are waiting for me to find a man I would prefer, you will wait forever.” Remembering Sansa's words, the taste of them souring on her tongue, she stated, “I am a hightborn lady, and ladies wed lords. It is a good match, especially for a second daughter, and it would insult the king if I broke it since he arranged it.”

Ned studied her for a moment before asking, “This is your will, free and true?”

“On my honor as a Stark, I will wed Edric Dayne and become Lady of Starfall.”

That evening, as Arya sipped watered wine, King Robert announced Gendry's betrothal to Sansa Stark of Winterfell.

The tourney to celebrate Gendry and Sansa's betrothal was a grand affair. Arya could barely believe so many people were able to fit into the stands as the melee was set to begin. Sansa sat beside her in front of the royal box, Robert, Cersei, Myrcella, and Tommen seated behind them; Margaery Tyrell was on Sansa's other side, smiling despite the disappointment of being passed over for queen; Arya heard Margaery was going to be offered as a wife to Joffrey, and she thought that was a horrible consolation prize to losing the chance to be queen.

Gendry and Joffrey both were competing in the tourney as well as Bran and Edric; all would ride tilts later in the day, but none would be competing in the melee. Arya saw Gendry across the yard, tension in his face, and she knew he was angry he could not participate in the brawl, would not be able to use his fine, new hammer. Her father explained melees were the most dangerous of the tourney events, and it was unsuitable for the heir to the Seven Kingdoms to risk himself in such a way.

Ned lowered his voice when he confided, “They say there is more honor in riding a tilt than in
winning the melee, and it is not a princely sport.”

King Robert used to compete in the melees; she wondered if he held the same opinion.

After one of the Tarlys was pronounced the winner of the melee, Arya left Sansa and Margaery to explore the grounds, stopping to purchase some honeyed milk and sugared dough. As she licked stray sugar from her fingers, she saw Gendry approaching, Ser Barristan silently trailing him; he looked quite fine in his new armor, the Baratheon sigil on his chest, and Arya idly thought he was precisely the sort of man who filled maidens' dreams.

“Might I have some?” he asked, pointing to the pastry in her hand.

“You are part Lannister; have you not enough gold to buy your own?”

Gendry grinned, mischief on his face, and for a moment Arya was back at Winterfell with him. “Could you, at least, pretend to respect your prince?”

“I cannot respect anyone who is going to lose so horribly today.”

“Lose?” he echoed. “How can I lose when my uncle is one of the greatest tourney knights ever to sit a horse?”

“So? Your other uncle sits in the stands and cheers enthusiastically for Ser Loras. Will you be doing that as well?”

He laughed, reaching over and tearing a piece of the pastry to top into his mouth. Manners forgotten, he declared, “I am going to win today.”

“You have as much chance of winning today as I do of being crowned Queen of Love and Beauty. You're hopeless on a horse.”

“I have been practicing with Ser Barristan. Tell her how fine I have become,” he urged his protector.

Ser Barristan looked vaguely amused as he dutifully said, “He has become an admirable rider.”

“See?” Tearing off another piece of Arya's sweet, Gendry continued, “I will unseat every knight who rides today, and then the singers will sing of my skills.”

“Well, Sansa would certainly love to receive the flowers.”

“And you would not?”

Arya scoffed, sipping her milk before offering it out to him, which he accepted. “Everyone would think it a jape if I did. Besides, I would rather ride a tilt.”

“You could always compete as a mystery knight, like the Knight of the Laughing Tree from Harrenhal.”

“Yes, because the Harrenhal tourney ended so well for the Starks.” As the wind picked up, scattering Arya's hair, she reached to push it out of her face only to find Gendry's hand already there, softly tucking the lock behind her ear. Arya froze, unsure what to do; if she drew attention to them, it would be all over court and would certainly upset Sansa. Gendry seemed to catch himself almost immediately, pulling his hand away, grasping the pommel of his sword as if to keep himself from doing it again.

“Did you give Lord Ned a favor for today?” Gendry asked after a beat.
“He has not asked.”

“Sansa gave me a handkerchief.”

Arya was certain Sansa had been praying to every god in existence for a knight to ask a favor of her since they were small. “How disappointed she’ll be when you're unseated in the first tilt.”

Gendry smirked before asking, his voice whisper soft, “May I have one from you?”

“No.”

“Please.”

“No.”

“I will not wear it where anyone could see.”

Arya scoffed. “How sweet of you to dishonor my sister and me away from prying eyes.”

Gendry’s face darkened. Stepping closer, anger on his face, he growled, “Do not stand there and judge me like you are better. You love Edric Dayne no more than I love Sansa, and you would weep no tears if your marriage did not happen. At least I am honest, but you, you are the biggest liar I have ever known.”

She heard the echoes of his words for the rest of the day, most especially when he placed the crown of roses upon a smiling Sansa's lap.

It took a fortnight for Arya's fury to build, a fortnight for it to fester like a wound; by the time arrangements for Sansa's wedding were in full swing, Arya could no longer keep her feelings inside. When she marched through the Red Keep to find Gendry, she did so with violence in her heart, wanting to rip him limb from limb.

She found Gendry in Maegor's Holdfast, ascending the stairs towards his apartment with Ser Meryn at his side. Arya barely paid any mind to the knight of the Kingsguard; instead she marched up alongside Gendry and snapped, “You are wrong! You are wrong about everything, and you are stupid besides! You have no right to judge me, especially since you have not an ounce of honor to you! I pity my sister for having to wed you, for you will be as terrible a husband to her as your father is to your mother!”

She gasped when Gendry suddenly gripped her by the upper arm, all but dragging her up the remaining stairs. He flung open the door to his chamber, practically throwing Arya inside, before telling Ser Meryn, “No one enters, do you understand?”

Arya flew at him the moment the door closed, her fist catching him in the ribs; Gendry grasped her wrists to contain the blows, his strength far greater than Arya's, and it only infuriated her further. She hooked her foot behind his leg, sending him sprawling to the floor, taking her with him. For a moment they wrestled about before Arya found herself pinned beneath the bulk of him, staring up into his furious face.

“Let go of me!”

“You attacked me!” Gendry released her arms, rolling onto his back on the floor beside her. As their breathing regulated, he declared, “You are madder than Aerys.”
“I am not a liar.”

Gendry was quiet for a moment before challenging, “Then tell the truth: if I was the second son rather than the next bloody king, would you have let me ask my father about a betrothal?”

She sat up, wrapping her arms around her legs, keeping her eyes fixated on the blue material of her gown. “Yes,” she finally mumbled.

Gendry rose, turning his body to face her. “Does it bother you, my betrothal to Sansa?”

“Yes,” she repeated.

“Do you truly want to wed Ned?”

Arya finally lifted her head, meeting Gendry's blue eyes. “No.”

She drew air in sharply through her nose as Gendry cupped her face with calloused hands. Arya felt the urge to pull back, unsure what was about to happen but certain it would not be honorable; she tried to think of Sansa, of how happy she was when being crowned Queen of Love and Beauty, but all she could see was Gendry.

*He's going to kiss me,* she realized, shivering as his breath misted against her skin. *He's going to kiss me, and I'm only supposed to kiss Ned.*

Gendry's mouth was warm but firm, nowhere near as tentative as Ned's had been the only time he attempted to kiss her; Arya had not cared for Ned's fumbling kiss after the tourney, but Gendry's kiss warmed her, making heat coil in the pit of her stomach. She shifted her knees beneath her body, trying to gain more traction, and Gendry pulled back, a question written on his face.

Arya knew this was her chance to say no, to stop this here and now; if she kissed Gendry again, it was a betrayal of Sansa and Ned, but most of all her honor and potentially that of House Stark. Her father always said a man could never regain his honor once lost.

But she still leaned forward, catching Gendry's mouth with her own there on the floor of his chamber, and Gendry moaned as his fingers slid into her hair, pulling her closer.

When Ser Meryn knocked on the chamber door, she and Gendry were in his bed, their kisses having become more heated; Arya blushed as she saw the state of Gendry's clothing: his surcoat discarded, his shirt wrinkled from her grasping hands, his laces half-undone. The neck of her gown was unlaced as well, and Arya could feel the rawness of her skin from the rasp of Gendry's whiskers. She quickly tried to rearrange her skirt, which had risen near her hips, and her heart froze as the door swung open, King Robert and Ser Jaime entering.

Gendry leaped from the bed, his face flushing bright, and Arya saw the shock on the king's fat face as well as the hint of amusement in Ser Jaime's eyes. She could feel embarrassment and shame rising in her throat; Arya knew it was improper to do what she was did, even if she and Gendry were not betrothed to others. Her parents would be humiliated when the king told them.

“Lady Arya,” Robert greeted, his voice free of mirth for the first time since Arya met him. “Do you have somewhere to be?”

Arya nodded immediately, smoothing down her tangled hair. “Yes, Your Grace.”

She did not dare look at Gendry as she hurried from his chamber, all but running to the Tower of the Hand. Arya wondered if she should tell her mother, prepare her for what was going to be said; her
family would hate her for what she did to Sansa, and Arya knew she deserved it for being so dishonorable.

For two days, Arya waited for King Robert to tell Ned what he saw; for two days, Arya refused to so much as acknowledge Gendry, purposefully avoiding contact with him while Sansa cooed and sighed over their wedding plans. On the third day, Arya returned from riding with the Tyrell cousins to find Gendry waiting outside her chamber.

“You cannot be here!” she hissed, looking around to make sure none of her family was around.

“You have been avoiding me. How else would I talk to you?” Gendry reached to touch her arm, but Arya jerked back, needing to keep distance between them. She flinched at the hurt on his face but tried to steel herself against it. “If this is about my father - “

“He saw us!”

“And he will not tell anyone.” He managed to look embarrassed as he admitted, “He says every king has appetites.”

“I'm not a bloody dinner!” Wrenching open her chamber door, Arya growled, “It cannot happen again. It was a mistake that would hurt a lot of people. Sansa is my sister, and you are going to be my good-brother, and that is all we are to each other. Understand?”

“Arya...”

“It will be better when I am in Dorne,” she declared, nearly choking on the lie. “Once you learn to love Sansa - “

“I love you!”

Wide-eyed, panic and disbelief overwhelming her, she shouted, “Well, don't!” before slamming her chamber door shut, throwing down the bar which would keep him from entering. Arya crossed to her window, staring out at King's Landing as her heart fluttered wildly in her chest; in the distance she could see ships leaving port, and she wondered if it was too late to stowaway.

Sansa and Gendry's wedding was the grandest event Arya ever saw. She sat in the Great Sept of Baelor in her new gown, watching as Sansa and Gendry recited the words the High Septon gave them, and she thought this was precisely the sort of wedding Sansa always dreamed of when they were children. Sansa was undeniably beautiful in her gold gown, her Stark cloak around her shoulders; her auburn hair was elaborately done in an upsweep of curls, and her blue eyes were bright with pleasure. Gendry looked as handsome as any knight in one of Sansa's songs, his shoulders seeming impossibly broad with the Baratheon cloak around them, and Arya could not resist the urge to look away as Gendry wrapped Sansa's in his cloak, brushing a chaste kiss against Sansa's mouth.

Everyone cheered as they were declared man and wife; the furor was so great no one noticed Arya's voice did not join.

She sat between Rickon and Bran at the feast, Edric seated across from her; Arya vaguely followed their conversations, contributing when asked but preferring to keep quiet, soaking in her displeasure. Further down the table, she could see Robb and Jeyne, her good-sister's belly swelling again, and Arya suddenly longed for Winterfell, wanting to be a thousand leagues away, to be anywhere but in the great hall. Her cup was never empty, and, by the time the calls for the bedding began, Arya knew she was well and truly drunk.
“Aren’t you going to help put them to bed?” Bran asked as the young ladies of court rushed to help Gendry out of his clothing. Sansa was blushing brightly as the men pulled her from her chair with grasping hands, but Gendry’s face was inscrutable as ever, serious and unsmiling.

“No,” was all managed, pushing back from the table, stumbling to her feet. She swayed for a moment, grasping the edge of the table for balance, before declaring, “I am going to bed.”

“My lady, do you require assistance?” Ned asked, rising to his feet.

A raucous cheer went up from those participating in the bedding, and Arya felt vomit rise in her throat. “Yes, thank you, my lord.”

Ned grasped her elbow tightly as they navigated the halls of the Red Keep, doing his best to keep her upright; Arya’s head felt too heavy for her body, the world spinning at an angle, and she wondered how Theon could stand to feel this way so often. As they slowly ascended the stairs of the Tower of the Hand, Arya slurred, “I want to get married in the godswood.”

“That’s fine,” Ned replied, and she could hear the bemusement in his voice.

“And I want to go to Dorne now. I do not like it here.”

“I can speak to your father about making arrangements - “

“I am sick of arrangements! Everything is arranged and nothing good ever happens.” Arya sagged against Ned as they crested the steps, the fight suddenly leaving her body. Lifting a limp hand, she pointed to a door. “That is mine.”

“Lady Arya, I am sorry.”

Leaning against her door, afraid she could collapse entirely without it, she shook her head in confusion. “For what?”

Ned’s kind face folded in empathy. “For the prince.”

Fumbling for the door handle, she snapped, “What about the prince?”

The empathy transformed into pity, and Arya felt her stomach lurch at his words. “There are no secrets at court, my lady.”

She stumbled as she forced the door open, everything in the world feeling as if it had been turned upside down. Brain swimming, she managed, “You know nothing,” before closing the door, collapsing on the floor of her chamber. Arya shivered against the cool stone but could not keep her legs steady enough to stand; somewhere in the castle, Gendry was taking Sansa’s maidenhead, and Arya suddenly felt full of irrational fury towards her sister, towards Gendry, towards everyone and everything.

*I shall run to the Wall, Arya thought as sleep began to claim her. Jon and I will become King and Queen of the wildings.*

Her dreams were full of blood, death, and destruction, men whose faces changed, screams for help and cries of pain; there was nothing pleasant left in her brain, and, when Arya awoke, stiff and sore from the floor, she was certain there was nothing pleasant left anywhere.

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*This is your own fault. And Gendry is just a stupid bull-headed boy. He does not even matter.*
Mayhaps if she told the lie enough, it would start to be true.

The day Sansa announced she was with child, Arya went to her father and asked for her wedding to be as soon as possible.

“There is no rush,” Ned said, his brow furrowed in confusion. “I have spoken to Edric, and he is more than prepared to wait until you are a bit older.”

“I will be five-and-ten on my next name day. That is almost as old as Mother when you wed her.”

“Arya, I do not - “

“I cannot be here anymore!” she interrupted, hating the shrill edge of her voice.

Her father stared at her for a long beat before nodding. “I will make the arrangements for travel to Dorne.” His face softening, he pressed, “You are sure this is what you want?”

No, I want to go back to Winterfell. I want to be nine-years-old again and chasing Jon through the godwood. I want to go to the Wall with Bran and have the adventures we always talked of having. I want to go back to that day in Mikken's forge and tell Gendry I want to be his queen. I want to be a common girl and Gendry to be an armorer instead of a king. I want to forget my own name and everything I am to go be someone else.

“This is what I want.”

Her wedding was nowhere near as grand as Sansa's; there was no godwood at Starfall, and so Arya found herself making vows in King's Landing, refusing to look at the guests, keeping her grey eyes upon Ned. When the soft purple cloak bearing the sigil of House Dayne was placed upon her shoulders, her Stark cloak taken away, Arya bit her tongue to keep from crying out and pleading for its return. "It's all a mistake! she fantasized of yelling. "I am a Stark, now and always!"

Ned's kiss was gentle, the pressure of his mouth against hers negligible; she tried to banish the memories of Gendry's hungry mouth away, but they rose to taunt her. She saw Sansa out of the corner of her eye, smiling placidly with one hand resting against her middle; Gendry met her gaze, his jaw tightly clenched, and she hated him for looking so betrayed.

They were only having a small feast, a larger one planned at Starfall upon their return, and Arya was grateful for the lack of ceremony. She sat at the head table with Ned, drinking Dornish wine from their shared cup, while he laughed and japed with the guests, and Arya gamely danced with those who asked, struggling to keep conversation afloat. Bran teased her as they danced, offering to fetch horses so she might make her getaway, and Arya found herself laughing genuinely for the first time that evening; Jon was her best brother and always would be, but only 14 months separated she and Bran, and he had always been her shadow as children. With Jon at the Wall, Robb in Winterfell, and Rickon at Riverrun, Bran was the only brother she had left now.

“You will come visit me, yes?” Dropping her voice so as not to be overheard, she divulged, “Ned says the Tower of Joy is near Starfall. We could explore it.”

Bran smiled. “Could we swim in the Summer Sea as well?”

“We can do anything we wish. I am the Lady of Starfall now, and I am in charge.”

“Does your husband know that?”
“He will.” She laughed along with Bran for a moment before confessing, “I do not think I will make a good lady wife or mother.”

“Probably not,” Bran conceded with a mischievous grin, “but you certainly cannot be the worst. Remember Lady Dustin?”

Arya smiled as the song ended, preparing to return to her seat, when the calls began to bed them. She hoped her face did not show how much she did not want to be stripped by the men at the feast, flinching slightly as the men surrounded her, the ladies pulling Ned to his feet and dragging him towards the chamber. Arya cried out in surprise when she felt rough hands jerk at her laces, the gown tightening painfully, and she lashed out on instinct, her elbow catching someone in the ribs with a grunt.

“We got a fighter!” one of the strange men shouted, eliciting cheers from the others, and Arya wished she had Needle to bury in his gut.

This is horrible, she thought as she began to struggle against their hands, the fabric of her gown tearing as it was jerked down her arms, one of the men catching the neck of her shift and ripping it cleanly down the middle. Arya's arms rose to cross over her small breasts, tears of humiliation filling her eyes, and she gasped when fingers hooked in the waistband of her smallclothes, twisting away, lashing out with her feet.

“That's enough,” Gendry ordered, and Arya jerked her head up to see Gendry standing there, jerking the drunken Stormlander away from her. The men fell back a bit as the prince stood before her, their hoots and shouts a bit more subdued, and Arya seethed as they made suggestions for how Gendry should remove her last article of clothing.

“Too bad First Night isn't around anymore or you could have both she-wolves,” one of the Lannister men hooted, and Arya saw the pure rage simmering in Gendry's eyes. He wants to hurt these men as badly as I do.

She gasped as Gendry suddenly threw her over his shoulder, lifting her as if she weighed no more than a babe, carrying her into the chamber. Ned sat on the bed, his smallclothes still in place as well, and Arya awkwardly tried to cover herself as Gendry set her upon the bed, a pained smile on his face.

“Best wishes, Lord and Lady Dayne,” the heir to the throne choked out before disappearing behind the door, which seemed to make an inordinate amount of noise in closing. Arya kept her eyes on her lap, unsure what was supposed to happen next; she spent enough time with men and eavesdropping on conversations not meant for her ears that she had a vague understanding of what happened in the marriage bed, but she could not imagine doing that with Ned Dayne.

My husband, she reminded herself, inhaling deeply. She was certainly not the first woman who married a man she did not love or even feel the slightest of attraction to; her own mother did so, and she certainly loved her father now.

Arya started a bit as Ned rested a warm hand on her knee, a slight tremor to his touch. Turning her head to look at him, she saw the same uncertainty in Ned's face she was positive was on her own.

“If it makes you feel better, I have never done this either,” he confessed. “But I am very happy it is with you.”

It was a sweet sentiment; if Arya had ever been the type of girl who wanted sweetness, it would have been perfect.
But Arya had never wanted sweet words and romantic gestures. She wanted adventure and excitement, and she was not likely to find either of those with Edric Dayne as the Lady of Starfall, hidden away in Dorne.

“We should get this over with.”

Surprise and disappointment flickered over Ned's face before he nodded resolutely, leaning forward to kiss her.

It hurt more than Arya thought it would; she literally bit her tongue to keep from crying out at the sharp stab of pain as Ned entered her, the burn which never abated. He moaned above her, pleasure on his features, and Arya closed her eyes, trying to summon to mind the scent of the godswood in Winterfell, the feel of the wind in her hair as she rode through the hills, the sound of Nymeria's howl. The afternoon she spent exchanging kisses and touches with Gendry, her body had felt overly warm, her lungs unable to hold breath; now she felt colder than the Wall, bearing the weight of a man she barely knew, joining her body to someone she could hardly conceive of as more than a friend.

He cried her name as his pleasure peaked, and Arya wrinkled her nose at the warm stickiness between her thighs, the seed she hoped would not take root. Ned pressed moist kisses to her face, breathing sweet words against her skin, and Arya tried to summon a kind feeling for him, some sort of softness or affection but found only resentment at being born a girl and an overwhelming sense of being trapped.

_I can never go home again_, Arya realized, and it was then – and only then – that she allowed a few tears to slip from her eyes.
The Lady of Starfall

Ned was right; she did like Dorne. Though completely opposite of Winterfell in every way, Arya found herself enjoying the mountains, the warm winds off the Summer Sea, and the nearly endless rides upon Winter, the sand steed Ned promised her at the beginning of their betrothal. The servants and smallfolk of Starfall were all kind, seemingly amused by their Northern lady, and Arya found herself enjoying their company. When they traveled to Sunspear upon the invitation of Prince Doran, Arya found she especially enjoyed Oberyn Martell's bastard daughters, each more scandalous than the next; and yet she also found herself unbearably sad, for if bastard children were treated as kindly in the North as they were in Dorne, she never would have had to part with Jon Snow.

She vowed to see Jon Snow again someday, and, when she did, she would tell him everything about Dorne and give him the dragonglass dagger she found when exploring what remained of the Tower of Joy.

The first few years of her marriage were not terrible, but Arya could hardly say she loved Ned Dayne; if anything, she was fond of him, the same way she was fond of Jory Cassel or Harwin. He was always kind, never raising his voice or uttering a cruel word when they occasionally quarreled; never once did he come to her rooms and force himself upon her the way she heard some husbands did. It saddened Arya her life had been reduced to such simple comforts – she would have died as a child to consider not being raped by her husband a courtesy – but Arya could not think that way; to not go mad, she had to cling to what little remained.

Thrice her stomach swelled in those first three years, and thrice Arya bled before the baby could quicken; though the maester and Ned kept assuring her she would bear a healthy child, Arya began to associate pregnancy with ruined gowns and bloodied sheets. It was peculiar how little she felt with each lost child; the first time she was so panicked and scared, she did not feel grief until much later and even then the grief was more at what she perceived to be as her failure. The second time, the longest of her failed pregnancies, she lost so much blood, the maester thought she was going to die as well. The last babe, lost only three months earlier, had hardly seemed real; Arya had not expected to carry the child to term, convinced her womb was as hopeless at nurturing as she was, and so, when she bled again, she felt only a curious feeling of inevitability.

She was not meant to have children, not like Sansa, who had given Gendry two daughters and was due in the birthing bed any day.

Maester Malcolm had a thousand ideas as to what could help increase her fertility, what could help her provide Ned with an heir. Arya choked back the vile concoctions of herbs, drank teas which stained her tongue purple, went mad as she did not ride Winter or do anything strenuous but no child came and Arya began to despise the sight of Ned in her chamber, his eyes twisted full of hope and resignation.

Once she told Ned it would not bother her if he sired a bastard, if he named that child his heir, and offended Ned's honor so badly, he would not speak to her for an entire moon cycle. Arya tried to explain her reasoning, but her husband wanted to hear none of it, and so the subject was never broached again.

It was only the Second Ironborn Rebellion which ended their fighting, and that was simply because Ned was leaving for war. Euron and Victarion Greyjoy were laying siege to the Reach and to the Dornish coast, and Arya knew war was required to push them back. As the men of Starfall readied, Arya was loaded upon her horse with a retinue of men, being sent from Starfall in case the Ironborn were able to make it to the castle.
“I know your father's ward was a Greyjoy, but the Ironborn are merciless when they raid,” Ned explained as Arya complained of being sent away. “Should something happen to me and they take Starfall, they will rape you to death, and that is if they are being merciful. I would rather have you safe with your sister hundreds of leagues away than risk you becoming someone's saltwife.”

“I am not some helpless woman,” she argued. “I can fight!”

“This is not playing with swords in the yard, Arya; this is war! I will not have my wife in the midst of that.”

“This is ridiculous. The Greyjoys will not take Starfall; Prince Doran will not allow it. I can stay here - “

“Gods damn it, Arya, could you not argue with me in this?!” Ned shouted, startling her with the ferocity in his voice. Repentance instantly filled his face as he quickly said, “I am sorry, my love, but I will not be moved in this. This siege could be long and bloody, and Princess Sansa says you are more than welcome as one of her ladies.”

“I would rather fight the Ironborn than go be one of Sansa's ladies.”

“Arya,” he sighed, exhaustion creeping in, and Arya knew it was a lost cause. She was going to be hidden away in the Red Keep, back to listening to the Tyrell cousins prattle on while she wondered if she could survive the fall should she jump from the window to run away.

“I will send for you when this is over,” Ned said as the horses were being packed, the supplies loaded onto carts. He gently cupped Arya's face, tender even now, and Arya wondered why Edric Dayne seemed to love her so well when she had done nothing to deserve it, to reciprocate it. “When you return, we will try for another baby. I am certain you will bear a healthy son.”

“I am certain as well,” she lied, kissing him softly, his beard scratching her cheeks. “Stay safe, my lord.”

“Try not to get into too much trouble in King's Landing.”

She could not help but smile. “No, only the usual amount.”

If Arya had known it would be the last time she would ever see Ned Dayne, she liked to think she would have said something profound or declared her love, would have done something to show Ned she was not as cool to him as he thought.

But since she thought she would see him again, Arya simply mounted Winter and rode for King's Landing.

It was much colder in the Crownlands than it was in Dorne, and Arya was embarrassed to shiver beneath her cloak; she had the blood of Winterfell in her veins, and there she was, shuddering like the summer child she was. By the time they reached the Red Keep, both she and Winter were covered in a dusting of snow, and Arya was certain she would never feel her hands and feet again.

“Lady Dayne,” one of her father's men greeted as he helped her from Winter's back, and, even after three years, Arya still felt the impulse to protest and say that was not her name.

She shook the snow from her hair as she entered the castle, throwing back her hood, and Arya froze in place as her father, Gendry, and Lord Baelish stepped into view. In the years since she left for Dorne, so much had changed in the Crownlands already, and the men before her were no different;
Ned Stark's beard was now almost completely silver and Lord Baelish had begun to grow a bit of a paunch beneath his doublet. But the differences were most clear on Prince Gendry.

At three-and-twenty, Gendry looked more serious than he ever had; though his eyes were the bright blue she remembered, a dark beard now covered his cheeks and framed his mouth, kept short and far neater than the one King Robert wore. Arya could still read the strength in his arms and shoulders, his chest seeming to have gotten even broader in her absence, and there was a hint of exhaustion to him now, as if the responsibilities of his birth finally caught him. She knew she did not look like the girl she once was; age and three pregnancies had changed her body, softened the places which were once purely muscle, added to curves which were once minimal. Arya was never a vain woman, but suddenly she worried what Gendry would think of her now and she hated herself for it.

"Your husband is at war and you're concerned what your sister's husband thinks of your looks?" a voice which sounded remarkably like Sansa snapped in her brain. "What sort of person are you?"

"Arya," Gendry breathed, the hint of a smile tugging at his lips, and she was so grateful to not be addressed with Edric's name, she nearly ran to him as if she was three-and-ten again.

She had never been good with her curtsies, and she was woefully out of practice, but Arya still bent the knee, impertinence in her eyes even as she did so. "My prince."

Gendry chuckled as she rose and Ned stepped forward. "You are the only person I have ever known who can make my title sound like a jape."

"A lady does what she can, my lord." Arya hugged her father with a desperate closeness, three years worth of missing him encapsulated in the embrace; she smiled at how tightly he returned the gesture, and it made her feel far less childish to know her father missed her as much as she missed him.

"Sansa has been anxiously awaiting your arrival," Ned reported as they broke apart.

"I highly doubt that."

"Well, certainly she has been awaiting your arrival," Gendry corrected. "She is with your mother and the children in her solar if you wish to join them, though I'm sure you're exhausted from the trip."

Ned turned to Gendry and Littlefinger. "I will join you both later as soon as I have seen Arya settled in."

"You do not have to - "

"I insist."

The moment Gendry and the Master of Coin disappeared, Ned took her into his arms again, squeezing her tightly as he sighed against her ear, "Oh, my girl, I have missed you."

"Not nearly as much as I have missed you." Smiling as her father took her arm, she asked, "Is Bran at court?"

"He is at Casterly Rock with Prince Joffrey; he is helping to fortify the coast, should the Ironborn attempt to attack the Westerlands."

Arya felt the disappointment begin to wrap around her body; she had so many stories to share with Bran as well as a fine dagger she had the armorer at Starfall make for him. "So only Sansa is here?"

Ned smiled indulgently. "Your brothers will come once the rebellion has been put down."
“Why is Gendry not at war?” she asked as they entered Maegor's Holdfast, headed towards the apartments of the future queen.

“Robert wants him here in case the Stormlands need defending.” Patting Arya’s arms, he assured her, “This rebellion will not last long, and everyone will safely return.”

Sometimes Arya thought her father forgot who she actually was. She was not like Sansa or Margaery Tyrell; Arya understood war and weaponry as well as any of her brothers. Men often rode to war to never return again, and there was no guarantee of safety. And while Arya could appreciate Ned trying to comfort her, she also had no desire to be given the platitudes fed to wives; she would always prefer the unkind truth to a sugared lie.

Sansa had only grown more beautiful in Arya's time away from court, motherhood seeming to have made her blossom. As Arya accepted her restrained embrace, she found herself envying the lush auburn hair flowing down her sister's back, the womanly curves which were only enhanced by the emerald-colored gown she wore; her husband frequently told Arya she was pretty, but there was no denying that Sansa Stark was the sister who turned heads. The three princesses Sansa birthed all had hair as red as Sansa's, though their features were clearly Baratheon, and Arya was certain they would grow to be as comely as their mother someday.

Her mother's smile was wide and warm, and Arya felt like a child again as she inhaled the sweet scent of Catelyn's hair. She had never been as close to her mother as she was to her father, but life was lonely in Dorne; there were nights when all Arya wanted was to see her mother again, to feel Catelyn's gentle hands trying to untangle her hair.

“I am sorry of the circumstances, but it is so wonderful to see you,” Catelyn declared, motioning for Arya to sit. “Your presence has been missed.”

It was a mother's lie, the sort designed to comfort a child, but Arya appreciated it; she was not naïve enough to think anyone outside of her family even realized she was gone. She was well-aware of the opinions of the other members of court when it came to her, the wild daughter of Eddard Stark, and Arya was fine with that; the only opinions which had ever mattered to her were those of the Starks.

Sansa's daughters were called Elinor, Rose, and baby Alisa; Arya balanced Rose upon her knee while Sansa regaled her with all the things she had missed while in Dorne. She barely managed to feign interest in the comings-and-goings of ladies she barely remembered, of men she did not care for, but, if Arya had learned anything since being married, it was how to school her face to not reveal her actual thoughts. *Mayhaps I will end up a lady yet,* she thought without humor as she absently ran a hand over Rose's auburn hair.

“I was sorry to hear of your babies,” Sansa offered, kindness in her Tully blue eyes, and Arya felt a surprising rush of affection towards her sister in that moment. Arya was used to pity when it came to her inability to bear a child; she was used to well-meaning people offering bits of advice or empty platitudes. There was only genuine sadness in Sansa's words, and, while Arya had come to terms with the losses, it strangely meant more to her to hear it from Sansa.

“Thank you.”

“If you would like, Grand Maester Pycelle could examine you to see if there is something which could help.”

The idea of that wrinkled, old man touching her made Arya shudder. “No, thank you. I'm quite sick of maesters.”
Sansa adjusted baby Alisa in her arms, staring down into her daughter's face with a pained expression; Arya was certain she was imaging what it would be like to be as barren as her younger sister, and Arya could not even blame her for it. It was far more important to Sansa's life to have healthy children, to provide Gendry with an heir. She didn't doubt it drove Sansa crazy to have birthed three babies and not a single boy, but everyone always seemed to underestimate Sansa's drive; Arya knew her sister would have as many children as it took to deliver a little prince.

_Let her have a dozen and be the kindliest queen to ever live. Just let me have some kind of adventure once Ned returns, anything more exciting than managing the household accounts and begging Maester Malcolm to be given leave to ride._

Arya did not begrudge Sansa the things she wanted; she just wished she could get something she wanted too.

The snows were starting to drift when Arya returned from walking Nymeria, who was desperate to run after being penned with Lady. By the time Arya returned to the Red Keep, she could barely see six inches in front of her face, and the wind was howling like the wolves at Winterfell. She headed towards the Tower, wanting to change out of her wet clothing before dinner, and Arya could feel the chill in the air down to her bones.

Opening the door to her chamber, Arya was stunned to see her parents waiting inside, a piece of paper clutched in Ned's hand. Unhooking her cloak, she began to ask what was going on when she saw the expressions on their faces. Instantly Arya knew what they were going to tell her, and she found herself calmly sinking to the bed as her father spoke.

An Ironborn's ax ended Edric Dayne's life as he tried to defend Starfall's coast. While Dorne ultimately won the battle, it was not without heavy losses; Arya read the names on the paper Ned held, recognizing most of her husband's closest friends amongst the fallen, and she closed her eyes as she pictured the faces of those who fell, men she dined with, men she respected. She could feel her mother waiting for her tears, but Arya found she had none, a peculiar feeling of numbness settling throughout her body as well as the realization she no longer had a place in Westeros.

Ned was dead, and he had no heir; Starfall now passed to Allyria. She knew what happened to young widows; they were married off again as quickly as possible, usually to men who were less likely to care over their bride's maidenhood. But that was what happened to widows who were not barren, and Arya knew there was no way she was going to be wedded to any man who required an heir, which left only men old enough to have sired or grandsired her.

She thought of her aunt Lysa in the Vale and dead Jon Arryn, and Arya swore right then and there she would never wed again, to all seven hells with the consequences.

Two moons after learning of Ned's death, Arya found herself driven from her bed, plagued by heavy thoughts and a lingering sense of guilt. She slipped quietly through the halls of the castle, finding her way to the library; Arya never much cared for books – not like Bran, who could recite all of the histories without flaw – but it was still too bitterly cold to go outside. There was a large table in the room, and she could see someone left scrolls and maps; taking a seat, she followed the line representing the Kingsroad, tracing the way back to Winterfell, measuring the distance between King's Landing and the Wall.

Once, right after they were married, she had asked Ned if they could ever go to the Wall to see Jon. She tried to explain how important Jon Snow was to her, how long it had been since she last saw him, but logical Ned only saw 1,000 leagues stretched out between Starfall and Castle Black, not to mention the imprropriety of a lady amongst the Night's Watch.
“I do not want to join,” she remembered objecting. “I just wish to see my brother.”

“No brother would want his sister in the company of murderers, rapers, and thieves.”

Ned had no siblings; it was the only excuse Arya could think of which would explain why he could not understand what it was like to be taken away from the people who knew you best.

“Are you plotting my war, Lady Arya?” a voice asked in the darkness, and she jerked up, prepared to run, when she saw it was only Gendry, a lantern in one hand, a wineskin in the other.

“Why are you sneaking about?” she snapped, settling back into her chair.

“I was here first; I only went to get wine. Not to mention you are in my castle, therefore I cannot be the sneak.” He smiled as he sat, extending the wineskin. She accepted it, taking a sip, and wrinkling her nose at the taste of the hippocras.

“That is bloody awful.”

“It was all I could find this late. What has driven you from your bed at this hour?”

Arya shrugged, not wanting to say anything; she returned her gaze to the map, using her fingers to measure the distance separating Westeros from Essos. After a moment, she asked, “How much does it cost to book passage across the Narrow Sea?”

Gendry blinked in surprise. “Have you business in the Free Cities?”

She scoffed. “Yes, I am going to hire a Faceless Man because you insist on being so stupid.”

The prince shook his head before venturing, “I am not sure. It would depend on the ship, I suppose. Why do you ask?”

“Because I want to leave.”

“If you wish to return to Winterfell - “

“Why, so I can be called back to court one day and given to a new husband?” Arya pushed the map back towards him. “I know what people say about me, you know. Just because I do not care does not mean I do not hear, and everyone says your father is going to give me to some old, fat lord in Lannisport.”

“Arya - “

“As soon as the war is over, he is going to send me there. My father will protest, but I will still be sent because your father is the king and stupid Lord Marbrand gets a young wife to fuck while his son goes out and wins battles from the Iron Throne! And what’s worse is everyone will sing of what a good match it is because what else can a barren, wild widow hope for?”

“Arya - “

“I would rather spend the rest of my life begging in the Free Cities than ever spending a night pinned beneath Lord Marbrand - “

“Arya!” When she started in surprise at the volume of his voice, he said in a much gentler voice, “Do you honestly believe I would let you get traded away to Damon Marbrand? He asked for you, that much is true, but I told Father there was no way Eddard Stark would ever agree to a match like that.”
The fight began to drain from her as his words sank in, and Arya reached for the hippocras, choking back the cloying taste on her tongue. Finally, her voice whisper soft, she confessed, “I was a poor wife.”

“I am sure that is not - “

“I hated it, being a wife. It was not Ned's fault; he was as kind as I could have ever hoped. But I never did any of the things I was supposed to as a wife. I did not embroider his shirts or remember his favorite foods so I could tell the cooks. Half of the time we did not even speak because we had nothing to say to each other. And on top of it all, I could not even give him a child.” Arya wiped at a stray tear which escaped her eye. “Jeyne Poole was right all those years ago. I am too much a boy to ever be a lady and too much a lady to ever be a boy. There is no place for me.”

“That is not true,” Gendry argued. “Mayhaps you're right and you don't belong at court or as someone's wife. But I knew you at Winterfell, I saw how happy you were there, and there is no doubt in my mind that is your place.” Scrubbing at his face with his hands, he groaned, “This is why I knew you should not go to Dorne.”

“Because you knew I would be a horrible wife?”

“Because they have made you think there is something wrong with you!” Getting to his feet, pacing in agitation, he snapped, “When I first met you, you were unlike anyone else I had ever known. All of the ladies I knew where so proper and joyless, but you, you were the freest, bravest girl I had ever met. You were not meant to be some lord's wife. You are worth more than that.”

“It does not matter what you think I'm worth. We both know eventually my father will agree to another marriage, and, when he does, I'll be sent away again. I will not wed again, Gendry, I won't!”

His face twisted in anger, and it gave Arya a perverse thrill at the fight building between them; Ned hated to argue and, the few times his anger peaked, it dissipated just as quickly. Arya missed it, the give and take. “You would not have to if you had just said yes when I asked you!”

It was an old argument, and it was one which never served to make Arya feel thirteen-years-old again, confused by feelings she didn't understand and hungry for something she couldn't put into words. “We would still be exactly where we are except you'd be married to Margaery Tyrell instead! Your parents would never have approved a match between us, and it would have killed Sansa's prospects as well.”

“Why do you care for Sansa's prospects? She certainly cared none for yours!” Arya recoiled, opening her mouth to curse him for daring to speak ill of her sister, when he rushed on, “I told her I wanted to marry you! I told her I was sorry but I could not wed her, and Sansa went directly to my mother and told her everything!”

“She wouldn't,” Arya objected, shaking her head.

“She did. My father came to me that very night and said I could bed you as often as I needed to get it out of my system, but Baratheons do not break marriage contracts. I tried to tell him I loved you as much as he loved your aunt, but he wouldn't hear of it. If you had just agreed - “

“It does not even matter anymore! You married Sansa! You have three children, children you never would have had with me! And you are even stupider than I ever thought if you think even for a moment that we ever could have been happy together.”

“Why wouldn't we have been happy? I would not have forced you into a gown and asked you to
“Which is precisely why I could never have been your queen.” Arya pushed to her feet, nearly tumbling the chair backwards. “You are as bad as your father. You are so miserable in your own life, you have convinced yourself how different everything would be if you had just married me instead. But all we ever did was play or fight, and your father would have fucked every woman in the Kingdoms whether he was married to Cersei Lannister or Lyanna Stark. I thought you were my friend, but now you are not even that.”

Gendry caught her upper arm as she tried to pass, and Arya began to struggle instantly; he grunted as her elbow caught him in the stomach, but Arya found herself pressed against the wall, held easily in place by the strength in his hands. “You are the most frustrating, irritating woman in the entire world, do you know that?”

“Then let me go or else I'll scream.”

A pained expression flickered over his features as he released her. “I wasn’t going to hurt you. I wouldn’t...” Gendry took a step back and then another, grabbing the hippocras and swallowing it down like a man dying of thirst. He sounded as young as Rickon when he murmured, “I’d have been a good husband to you. I am not my father.”

Arya did not let him say anything else. She hurried back to her room, leaving Gendry to his maps, hippocras, and regrets.

They would not speak again for months.

The corridors beneath the Red Keep were as cool as the crypts at Winterfell and nearly as dark, but the blackness did not scare Arya. There were a few torches upon the walls, but, the deeper she went, the less the light touched. Gendry once offered to show her the dragon skulls hidden away down here, but, after their last argument, she could not bring herself to make the request, especially with so many lords descending upon King’s Landing for the feast to celebrate the crushing of the Second Ironborn Rebellion.

It had been eight moons since Ned’s death, and now, with the Rebellion over, Arya knew her life was no longer going to be held in limbo. Whispers still filled the halls about what her fate would be – every day there seemed to be a new suitor put forward – and Arya could read the weariness in her father's face well enough to know he did not like the plans any more than she did. She pleaded to go back to Winterfell, to Robb, Jeyne, and her nephews, but Catelyn repeatedly told her it was not an option they could explore.

“Daughters wed, Arya,” Catelyn said earlier as embroidered a new gown for Elinor. “I understand Edric’s death is still fresh, but hiding in Winterfell will not accomplish anything. You are only eight-and-ten; there is so much life still before you and you could still - “

“I am not going to be a mother,” she cut in, frustration mounting. “You had five children; Sansa has three and will certainly have more, and neither of you have ever bled. I am barren, and pretending as if I am not will not make me a better prospect.”

Catelyn frowned, setting down the dress. With a tired shake of her head, her ruby hair scattering across her shoulders, she sighed, “Arya...you know the words of the Tullys?”

“Family, duty, honor.”

“Do you understand what that means?” Without giving Arya a chance to respond, she said, “We
must do what is required of us rather than seeking the pleasure of what we want.”

“What sort of life is that?”

“A lady’s life.”

“I do not want to be a lady.”

Catelyn smiled sadly. “You have been saying that since you were six-years-old, but it does not change the fact you are a lady. Whether Stark, Dayne, or any other name, you shall always be a lady; it is in your blood.”

So is the North, Arya wanted to say, but she didn't; instead she waited until her mother left before deciding she would go exploring as if she was a child again.

The largest of the dragon skulls were massive, bigger than anything Arya had ever seen; she remember Old Nan's tales of mammoths and giants, but Arya could not recall any of her dragon tales. She ran her hands across the bones, tracing the points of the teeth, and, when she stepped into the massive jaws of what she assumed was once Balerion the Black Dread, Arya found she did not even fill half of its mouth; even Hodor would have been able to stand erect and still have room to spare.

“Aren't you a bit old to be playing with dragons?” a voice in the blackness asked, and Arya gasped, pulling the dragonglass dagger from its hiding place amongst her skirts. When the man stepped into the muted light, she sighed in exasperation, lowering the blade.

“Honesty, Gendry - “

“I am not Gendry, my lady.” Stepping fully into the torch's light, Arya saw that, while the man bore an incredible strong resemblance to the prince, he was not quite as tall and his ears were bigger as well. “I am Ser Edric Storm.”

Gendry's natural-brother, the one from Storm's End. “You should not creep about after ladies. Have you no manners?”

An amused smile spread across his features. “Everyone knows bastards are not like ordinary men. We are born of shame, suckled on disgust, and raised with unnatural tendencies. And do not forget how untrustworthy we are.”

Arya scoffed. “The most honest man I have ever known was a bastard. I believe it is simply you who has poor manners.” Tucking the dagger back into her gown, she spat, “Why were you following me?”

“An attempt at chivalry, I assure you, my lady. When I saw you come down this way, I assumed you were lost, and this is a poor place for a highborn lady to find herself alone. Had I known you were simply an admirer of dragons, I would not have bothered.”

“Then why not announce yourself?” she challenged. “For all I know, you followed me down here to rape me.”

“If I intended to rape you, I would not have announced myself and given you a chance to pull your blade. Tell me: where does a lady obtain an obsidian blade? They are remarkably rare.”

“I do not have to tell you anything!”
Edric Storm held up his hands. “I am sorry if I frightened you -“

“You did not frighten me; you startled me. And I thought you were your stupid brother, so I certainly was not scared.”

His face sobering, eyebrows raised, he said, “You speak so crassly about your prince, the future king?”

“Do not bother defending his honor. I have told him to his face how stupid I find him half-a-hundred times.”

Realization dawned on his face. “You are Princess Sansa's sister, the Lady Dayne.”

“I am Arya Stark,” she corrected.

Edric nodded as if her name explained everything. “Gendry has mentioned you often.” His blue eyes taking her in, he added, “You are not what I was expecting.”

*You are not as pretty as your sister,* Arya silently translated. “Yes, well, this is what I am.” Gathering her skirts, she moved to brush past King Robert’s bastard but he followed, silent as a septon as they ascended the stairs. When the stale air became fresh again, the return of light making Arya squint, she nearly stumbled on the last step, and Edric shot forward, catching her elbow to keep her upright.

“Thank you,” she said begrudgingly as she regained her balance.

Edric Storm studied her face for a moment before venturing, “You should go to him.”

“Excuse me?”

“I fought beside him at Storm's End, and I was at his side when the fever from his wound nearly took him. It was your name he called, your face he saw when the septas tended him. He misses you.”

Bristling, she snapped, “You have no idea what you are talking about.”

“I know he made me swear that, if he should fall, I was to spirit you away to Braavos so you could not be married off again.” Edric's eyes burned blue as fire as he repeated, “You should go to him.”

Before Arya could reply, Sansa entered the room, stopping in her tracks at the sight of them. Arya blushed, realizing how the situation must look with Edric's hand still lingering on her arm, and she instinctively jerked away which, judging by the way Sansa's eyes bulged, only made them look even more guilty. Edric bent the knee, murmuring a courteous greeting, before fleeing the room, leaving Arya to withstand her sister's disbelieving stare.

“Do not say anything,” Arya ordered as Sansa opened her mouth.

“He’s a bastard, Arya,” her sister hissed, her voice dropping on the last word as if it was the foulest curse ever to be uttered. “If anyone else saw you with him -“

“What, they would whisper about me? Let them. I do not care.”

“You should. It is going to be difficult enough to find you another husband. If it is suspected you have been – if you allowed Edric – if you were thought -“

Only Sansa, Arya thought, could be the mother of three children and still be unable to discuss what men and women did together in bed. “Have no worry, Sansa. I have no interest in Edric Storm.”
Doubt shone brightly in Sansa's eyes. “Whether he is King Robert's son or not, you cannot put yourself level with him. If he comes to you again - “

“I do not need you to defend my honor, Sansa.”

Her sister gave a decidedly unladylike snort. “How can I, when you continue to behave as though you haven't got an ounce of it?”

If they were still children, Arya would have slapped her or pulled her hair, so enraged at Sansa lecturing her on honor when all Sansa had ever done was whatever others told her to do; if she was married to anyone else, Arya would have said something vicious and deliberately hurtful, something which would bring tears to her eyes and make her rue the day she ever crossed her.

But they were adults and Sansa would one day be queen, so Arya simply walked away, her fists clenched so tightly at her sides, her nails drew blood on her palms.

Arya's distaste for feasts and celebrations had not changed over the years. Though she gamely wore her finest dress and wore the jeweled bracelet Ned Dayne gave her for her sixteenth name day, Arya refused to sit to have her hair done, preferring for it to fall unbound over her shoulders, and she positively refused to allow Sansa to paint her face with rouge or lipstain.

“You could be pretty if you would just try,” Sansa offered, clearly hoping it would sway her little sister, but Arya remained adamant, and Sansa declared she would be the plainest girl at the feast.

It would never occur to Sansa that was Arya's goal. Being invisible in these sorts of situations was the only way Arya could maintain her sanity.

Sansa was right, of course; every lady at court, from those who had not even flowered to those who were barely able to stand upright, were done up as if it was their wedding day. Dresses of every color filled the hall, silk and Myrish lace telegraphing who was the best off, and all the ladies wore their hair in the complicated southron updos Sansa favored. Her sister was a trendsetter at court; hardly a day could pass where Sansa did not favor one style of gown and suddenly all of her ladies were wearing the same. The men were finely dressed as well, and Arya smiled at how uncomfortable her father looked in the outfit Catelyn had made, the Hand pin standing out against the gray of his coat. Bran wore similar garb, looking tall and handsome, and Arya saw how the young ladies blushed when Bran favored them with a smile; Bran, of course, was completely oblivious to it, and Arya heard rumors there was some girl in the Neck her brother was having an affair with, some crannogman's daughter.

With all three princes back from war, the ladies of court were falling all over themselves to congratulate them on their bravery. Everyone knew of the wound Gendry took at Storm's End, an arrow having pierced his shoulder which turned into a festering wound; he was the last of the princes to return to court, riding gingerly on a new horse, nearly a stone-and-a-half lighter. Sansa sat beside him at the head table, smiling and engaging with all those around them, but anyone with eyes could see just how unhappy Gendry was to be there. He pulled heavily from his cup of wine, speaking to hardly anyone, and Arya watched as he rose and crossed to the table where Edric Storm sat, dropping into the seat beside his natural-brother.

“What has put such a serious look on your face?” Bran asked, stealing a bit of fruit from her untouched plate.

“Nothing.” Pushing her food around, quiet for a moment, she asked, “What was it like, being at war?”
Bran paused, considering, before he sighed. “It was not exciting like I thought it would be. I served beneath Prince Joffrey and rode beside Prince Tommen, but I spent most of the time with regular men from the Westerlands. All they wanted was to return to their peaceful lives. And war, it makes...It turns some men into savages.” He sighed again. “It is over now, and we all paid a price, you as much as any.”

Arya looked down at the amethyst bracelet on her wrist, the one Ned had looked so proud of when he gave it to her, and, for the first time, she felt a genuine twist of grief for the man who died in Dorne, the man she had never been able to love well enough.

By the time the dancing started, Arya was downright surly, tired of the noise, the people, the pleasantries; the rest of Sansa's ladies were changing partners as often as possible, fluttering eyelashes and tittering at the drunken flirtations, but, beyond a few Dornishmen Arya knew at Starfall, no one asked to take a turn with her. She had already tried to sneak out twice, both times having been caught by Catelyn, and Arya felt decidedly less like a woman-grown when her mother was nearby.

“You look as if you are about to be marched to your death.”

Arya looked up from her wine to see Edric Storm standing above her, a cup of wine in his hand. “I should be so lucky.”

The king's bastard smiled, setting down his cup and extending his hand. “Will you honor me with a dance, Lady Dayne?”

“Arya,” she corrected with a wrinkle of her nose, accepting his hand as she rose, “and only because it will irritate my sister. Do not presume to think I like your company.”

“I would never.”

He was a better dancer than she, moving with a surprising amount of grace for someone his size, and, up close, Arya could see he looked less like Gendry than she initially thought. The trueborn son of Robert Baratheon was taller, broad without being bulky, the same way Jaime Lannister was; Delena Florent's bastard was built more like the king, a bulk to his body which would one day turn soft as it had with Robert. But his eyes, his eyes were Gendry’s as well as the black hair which laid neater against his forehead than his elder brother's ever did.

“Are you this unpleasant with everyone or is it specific to me?”

Arya smiled despite herself. “It would depend who you ask, but most would say I am always this unpleasant.”

“I have asked about you. Would you care to wager a guess how you were described?”

“I can only imagine.”

“Willful, wild, unladylike, troublesome,” Edric ticked off. “There was some mention of you slapping one of the Tyrell bannermen - “

“He grabbed my arse!”

Edric chuckled. “And, of course, Gendry has much to say about you.”

Arya shifted uncomfortably in his arms. “I do not want - “
“Brave, smart, beautiful, fun,” he listed. “You were all he could talk about some days. I must have heard every adventure you two had, at least, twice. I’ve never heard Gendry speak so highly of anyone.”

“I do not know what you are trying to do - “

“I am trying to do nothing, Lady Arya.” There was a challenge in Edric’s eyes as he asked, “Is there something you would like me to do?”

“Yes,” she answered immediately. “Leave me alone.”

Arya did not care how it appeared, her leaving the dance floor before the end of the song, Edric Storm standing there in surprise; she did not care about anything beyond putting distance between herself and the stupid natural-son of the king. She did not know what game Edric was playing, but she wanted no part in any of it.

_This is not my place, _Arya thought for the thousandth time as she took in the festivities. _I have no place at all._

So lost in her thoughts, Arya gasped and nearly stumbled when King Robert caught her by the arm, jerking her to him. She could smell the stench of wine leaking from every pore, and Arya twisted her face away when the king leaned forward, pressing a sloppy kiss to her cheek, the gruffness of his beard scratching roughly at her cheek.

“Lady Arya! Has Ser Edric done something to displease you? I'll have him beheaded for it.”

“No, Your Grace,” she managed, trying to subtly twist herself away. Arya could easily admit she did not have the courtliest manners but not even she was going to risk drawing attention to and embarrassing the royal family at a celebration. Her eyes darted around the room, trying to find her parents, but Robert kept turning her head back towards him with an amused laugh.

“Do not tell me you are shy! You've never seemed so shy with my son.”

“Not shy, Your Grace,” Arya gritted out, hating the fat, drunk king more than she ever had.

“You look so much like her,” Robert declared, his plump fingers capturing her chin to study her face. “Sometimes I lose my breath because I think she has returned to me.”

Arya did not need the king to elaborate; she knew exactly whom he wanted to pretend she was. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“Ah, but there is no loss while you are here.” Arya flinched as his grip tightened upon her, his mouth uncomfortably close to hers. “You must get lonely, widowed as you are, a pretty, young thing like you. I am more than happy to offer you my company.”

_I would die before I ever let you fuck me._ “I cannot imagine my father would approve of that.”

Robert laughed, blowing the scent of alcohol into her face. “I was under the impression you enjoyed doing things without approval. And I assure you I’ve more skill at pleasing a woman than my son or your dead husband.”

“I do not need pleasing.”

“Well, I do.” His fingers bit into the soft flesh of her arse. “Tonight I shall - “
“Get your hands off of her,” Gendry ordered, his voice tight and brittle as he sidled up to them. Arya lifted her eyes, imploring him for assistance, but her old fiend's eyes did not leave his father's flushed face, murder in his Baratheon blue eyes.

Robert's grip loosened but he did not fully release Arya, one hand lingering on her arm in a mockery of dance position. His round face was as red as the strongwine he drank, and his body stiffened with indignation. “Now see here, boy -“

“I am no boy, and she is not Lyanna Stark. You are embarrassing yourself.”

The king's hold on her instantly dropped, but Arya could read the fury in Robert's eyes, a fury echoed in Gendry's. Arya was dimly aware that people were starting to turn and look, but she could not bring herself to care about the appearances when there was a very real chance that the king and the prince were going to come to blows on the floor of the Great Hall.

“Careful, boy,” Robert warned, voice heavy with threats. “Your wife is watching.”

Gendry did not turn to confirm this, but Arya did; Sansa was watching with wide eyes across the hall, having stilled her dancing with Lord Renly to take in the scene. Arya could see the accusations in her sister's eyes, the demand to know, What have you done now?

“If you ever touch her again, my uncle will not be the only kingslayer,” Gendry pronounced, his voice unwaveringly calm. “Do you understand me?”

King Robert did not have a chance to respond; Ned Stark and Ser Barristan were suddenly there, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard escorting Gendry away as Arya's father said something to Robert. Arya quickly hurried past the gawking members of court, exiting the Great Hall without any interference from her mother. She managed to make it all the way to her chamber before the scream of frustration exploded from her chest, her hands tearing at her bedclothes as she raged; she grabbed the dragonglass dagger and shredded her pillows, feathers flying in all directions as she pretended the overstuffed pillows were the king's massive stomach and the feathers, his entrails.

Arya would have traded anything in that moment to have been born a man, to know no man would ever grab at her again, to have the training and the weapons needed to defend herself. Robb, Jon, Bran, and Rickon would never have to worry that a drunken king would grope them like a common whore; they would never have to wake every day burdened down by the fear they would be forced to wed an old man. Her brothers were free and Sansa was a princess, but Arya...Arya was trapped.

They should seal me up in the Tower of Joy and be done with it.

Arya barred her door that night, slept on her ruined bed with feathers around her like snow. She dreamed of Winterfell that night, of Jon Snow and Robb, of Old Nan and Hodor; Arya dreamed of home, the only place she wanted to return to and the only place she knew she may never see again.

But most of all Arya dreamed of Lyanna Stark climbing on the back of Rhaegar Targaryen's horse, riding as far away from the life that had been planned for her in exchange for the promise of a life of her own making.

She awoke with the scent of winter roses in her nose.

Arya was summoned to the king's solar a month after the disastrous feast. Ser Jaime escorted her from her embroidery session with Sansa and her ladies, his armor gleaming in the sunlight trickling in through the windows, and Arya saw something familiar in the cut of Jaime Lannister's jaw, the jaw she remembered Gendry possessed when his face was not covered with a black beard.
“Is the king alone?” she asked as they reached the door, anxiety and fear twisting in her gut.

“No, my lady,” was all Ser Jaime offered, and then she was entering the solar to find the king in the company of her father, Lord Renly, and Queen Cersei. With the exception of the queen, no one looked particularly happy, and Arya knew this meeting was not going to end well for her.

Arya was surprised when it was Queen Cersei who spoke rather than the king. “A lady of your age and breeding without a husband is a poor situation. With the war over, it is time you wed again. Lord Renly has agreed to such a match.”

Her eyes snapped to the king’s younger brother, who looked well and truly miserable. Unlike most of the ladies at court, Arya understood what the “friendship” between Lord Renly and Ser Loras Tyrell was; the chances of Renly Baratheon asking for her hand were the same as Ned declaring Hodor to be Lord of Winterfell.

“You shall wed before the next moon so you and Renly can return to Storm’s End. It requires a strong hand, especially after the damage sustained by the Ironborn.”

Arya took several deep breaths, choking back the sharp words she wanted to throw at the queen, before turning her eyes upon Renly. “I’m barren,” she announced. “They have told you that? You’ll have no heir from me.”

“They have,” the older man confirmed. “But all I require is your company, Lady Arya.”

“Your father always says how clever you are,” Cersei chimed in. “Mayhaps you can bring some of that Northern cleverness to the Stormlands.”

She looked to Ned, who met her gaze unflinchingly before shaking his head minutely, and Arya’s hope sank. The king’s brother was being offered as a husband, and, if he protested the match, it would put all of House Stark at odds with the Iron Throne. On the surface, wedding the Lord of Storm’s End was a coup for a barren widow, especially when Renly was as handsome and well-liked as he was. The rumors of his preferences were well-known, of course, but Arya had heard the same rumors about Whoresbane Umber, Oberyn Martell, and a half-dozen other men throughout the years; rumors were always a part of court and all of those men eventually took wives and paramours.

“Have you nothing else to say?” Cersei prompted.

If she was Sansa, she would know precisely what courtesy to offer, what words would make the queen smile; if she was Robb or Bran, she would bend the knee and say something about the honor of House Stark and what a wonderful offer this was.

But Arya was Arya, so she said, “Would it matter?”

Cersei Lannister smirked. “No.”

Arya left the solar with the date of her wedding, her presence requested at the Great Sept of Baelor in a fortnight; only her father’s arm linked through her own kept Arya from collapsing entirely.

“Did you know - “

“No,” Ned cut in, knowing what she was asking. “I had no idea they were planning this until I was told this morning. I tried to talk Robert out of it but - “

“But he’s angry at me for the feast,” Arya finished, “and the queen has never liked me.”
Ned was quiet for several long beats before stating, “I swore to you once I would never force you into a marriage you did not want. If you truly do not want this, I will find a way to honor that promise.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to hold him to it, but Arya did not want trouble to rain upon her family due to her actions. “No, I can withstand a marriage to Renly Baratheon. It is not as if he will come to my bed.”

Ned did not smile; Arya had not expected it. “I am sorry, Arya. I should have sent you back to Winterfell when you asked.”

“You couldn’t,” she pointed out. “Sansa wanted me here, and she will be the queen.”

Her father bent, pressing a kiss to her dark hair. “You are a Stark, my girl, through and through. Sometimes I believe there is more winter in your blood than in mine.”

That is because I have to be as icy as the Wall to survive.

“You look as if you will be attending a funeral rather than a wedding,” Sansa complained as Arya grudgingly stood still for the fitting of her wedding gown. Her sister sat upon a stool near the window, her hair looking aflame in the early afternoon sun, and Arya could barely suppress the urge to leap from the pedestal and stab her with one of the seamstress's pins.

“Lord Renly is very handsome,” her sister continued, “and you will be the Lady of Storm's End. It is certainly a better option than some minor son. You should be more grateful.”

“Grateful? You do not understand; you wanted to wed Gendry. It was the only thing you ever wanted. You have no comprehension what it is like to be married off to a man you do not know and do not want.”

“You act as if you're being carried off and raped by some savage. I thought this would be a match you'd want.”

“Why would I want it? He's over thirty and a stranger besides!”

“You are impossible! You did not want to wed Ned Dayne when he was a perfectly kind man, and now you do not want to wed Renly, whom I was certain you'd find pleasing! I would never have suggested it if I didn't!”

Arya froze. “You suggested this match? You?”

Sansa's hands fluttered nervously. “I simply thought...It was not my intention...” Turning her eyes on the seamstress, she ordered, “Leave us.” The moment the chamber door closed, the proper princess receded and Sansa Stark, Arya's only sister, returned. “I thought you would be attracted to him.”

“Why? When have I ever given you any indication I thought about Renly Baratheon at all?”

“Well, he is the spitting image of Gendry, and the Seven know how attracted you are to him.” Sansa got to her feet, pinning Arya in place with her gaze. “I am not stupid, Arya, despite what you and my husband seem to think. I have seen the way you look at him when you think no one is watching, and Gods know he cannot be in the same room as you without staring. All of court whispers about it.”

“Sansa - “
“He told me before we were ever wed he was in love with you, and Cersei assured me it would pass once I gave him an heir. Well, I have given him three daughters and been a loyal wife besides, and still he longs for you.”

“I have never shared a bed with your husband.”

“Of course you haven’t.” Sansa snorted, brushing dust from her skirts. “Gendry is not King Robert, and his honor would not abide it. I may not be the woman my husband wants, but I know him.”

“I do not have to listen - “

“I am not Queen Cersei,” Sansa rushed on, her voice stronger than Arya had ever heard it, sounding more and more like their lady mother with each breath. “Mayhaps she can turn a blind eye to Robert's indiscretions, but I will not be laughed at in my own castle. I am not some silly child, and I will not wait until you both finally break and I am forced to bear witness to the shame of it all.”

“Gods, Sansa - “

“You will let me speak!” Taking a steadying breath, Sansa declared, vulnerability creeping into her voice, “I had thought when you returned from Dorne that we could finally be sisters. I thought your time in Dorne and your marriage would have made you softer, but you are as much a stranger to me now as you were when we were children.”

Arya felt a peculiar hollowness in her chest at Sansa's pained words. She carefully stepped down from the pedestal, one of the pins pushing painfully into her skin, but Arya did not cry out; the pain was her penance. Finally she weakly managed, “What would you like me to say?”

“I do not want you to say anything. I just want you to leave. Go to Storm's End, go be Renly's bride, go as far away from my husband as it takes for him to forget he ever knew Arya Stark. You can pretend Renly is my husband for all I care but just leave Gendry to me.” Wiping at a stray tear on her porcelain cheek, Sansa gritted out, “As long as you remain at court, you ruin everything.”

She nodded as if she understood, as if she agreed, but Arya was certain she would never understand anything ever again. When she looked at Sansa now, she did not see the pretty princess the women of court envied or the frustrating sister of her youth; for the first time Arya saw the woman beneath the courtesies and pleasantries, the lady of only one-and-twenty who was scared she was going to lose her husband.

“I loved him too,” she found herself confessing for the first time, her voice trembling.

Sansa studied her for a moment before calmly ordering, “If you bear me any love, you'll stop.”

Arya sat in her unfinished gown for the rest of the afternoon, Sansa's words ringing in her ears.

Renly looked as if he was going to be ill.

Arya stood in the chamber, having managed to keep her shift during the bedding ritual this time, shifting her weight uncomfortably as she stared at the man seated on the bed in his smallclothes. Sansa was right; he was handsome, his body lean and lightly muscled. She was used to seeing him in his fine clothing, the garments which were beautiful enough to rival her gowns, but, in only his underclothes, Renly Baratheon looked even younger than she did, his skin a sickly pale, a light sweat visible on his forehead.

I bet he has never laid with a woman before, Arya thought as she poured them each a cup of wine,
throwing hers back in one hard gulp. *He is more a maiden than I.*

Renly murmured his thanks as he accepted the cup, draining his cup as quickly as Arya drained hers, and Arya reached for the skin to refill it. “Mayhaps you shouldn't,” Renly protested, swallowing hard. “It can be...difficult for a man to perform his duties when he has drank too much.”

“It can be difficult for a man to perform his duties when he has no interest in his wife,” Arya countered, taking a seat at the foot of the bed.

His blush was ferocious. “My lady, I find you - “

“If you are going to be my husband, Lord Renly, I would prefer you not to lie.” Arya stared at her hands for a moment before meeting her husband's watery gaze. “I am no maiden; they will not look at the sheets in the morn. We do not have to do this.”

“Our marriage will not be valid without a bedding, Lady Arya.”

“I will swear before the Seven you bedded me well.” She pushed herself towards the center of the soft mattress, drawing her legs under her shift as if she was a child again. “I know they forced this marriage upon you, and I am sorry for that. It was my fault.”

Renly settled back against the headboard, quirking an eyebrow in interest, the color starting to return to his face. “How so?”

“My sister thought I would prefer you due to your looks.”

He chuckled in his chest. “So the stories are true about you and my nephew then?”

Arya bristled at his tone. “As true as the stories about you and Ser Loras.”

The smile disappeared from Renly's face as he pushed off the bed to fetch the wineskin. When he returned, Arya could see there was weariness in his eyes as well as a touch of fear. Feeling a bit of guilt, she assured him, “I do not care what you do with the Knight of the Flowers as long as you are discreet. I hate to be laughed at.”

“That is something we have in common.” Renly handed her the wineskin, and she drank. “Your father gave me very strict orders to make sure I did everything in power to keep you happy. He can be a terrifying man.”

Arya smiled for the first time since her betrothal was announced. “Did he tell you what would make me happy?”

“He said you are homesick. I thought mayhaps we could go North when spring comes.”

Hope fluttered in her chest. “Truly?”

“I have never seen Winterfell, and I must confess I am not nearly as skilled at running Storm's End as Cortnay Penrose. Mayhaps we can see all Seven Kingdoms.” Renly smirked, gesturing for the wineskin. Raising it as if in a toast, he declared, “If we are going to be in this sham of a marriage, we may as well have a bit of adventure.”

Though she certainly hadn't thought it possible when the day dawned, Arya supposed it would not be terrible being Renly Baratheon's wife.
Arya did not care for the Stormlands the way she had for Dorne. Though Renly certainly allowed her more freedom than Ned had, the attitudes of the Stormlands were vastly different than those held further south. Renly did not care if she spent all day riding Winter around the grounds, had men's clothing made for her so she would stop swiping his breeches, and delighted in the filthy jokes she had learned from eavesdropping on Theon, but he was the only one; the love the smallfolk bore for Renly did not extend to his bride, and Arya found herself painfully lonely.

At Starfall, even when she was at her unhappiest, she, at least, had friends. Lady Allyria enjoyed riding with her, Ned's men loved to wager at cyvasse, and their wives told bawdy tales which made Arya's sides ache with laughter. But the women at Storm's End found her as strange as a dog with two heads, were terrified of Nymeria, and the men all thought Renly needed to keep a firmer hold upon her. Cortnay Penrose was the worst; so often he invoked the memories of the better ladies of Storm's End which came before her, and Arya began to dread the sight of the bald man even more than she once hated the sight of Maester Malcolm. For awhile, she held out hope that mayhaps Edric Storm would return to Storm's End, a familiar face who would, at least, speak to her beyond what was simply courteous, but he remained at court with Gendry, leaving Arya bereft of companionship.

Renly was kind enough, always quick with a smile and quip, but he was also frivolous. He was not good at managing Storm's End, had little head for figures, and the tedium of a lord's life bored him to no end; Cortnay Penrose handled much of the day-to-day affairs, but the decisions which were to be made by the lord Renly promptly passed along to Arya. Soon she was handling all of the affairs of Storm's End, managing the Stormlands and telling Renly whose grievances needed to be heard and how incomes could be increased. There would be weeks where Renly would disappear with his friends, traveling to the Reach or other holdfasts, and Arya suspected he did so simply because he did not want to handle his responsibilities. It was shortly after their first anniversary as man and wife that Arya heard one of the smallfolk refer to her as the Lord of Storm's End.

“It's unnatural,” the man had said, not realizing the woman in men's clothing was the wife of his liege lord. “No man should have to bend the knee to a lady, especially one that isn't even a lady. They say that she-wolf's got a cock between her legs.”

“If she had a cock, Lord Renly might actually fuck her,” another man chimed in, and then there was laughter, rough and cruel, which reminded Arya of Jeyne Poole telling her how she was so ugly, no man would ever want her.

Later, as she wandered through the godswood no one at Storm's End ever visited but her, Arya found herself thinking of Ned Dayne as she last saw him, his fair hair messy from running his fingers through it, an edge of fear in his eyes. She remembered those first few months of her marriage, how she studied Ned when he was not paying attention, trying to figure out who he was; he talked more than most of the men she had known, but Arya remembered her father once warning her that a man's words and a man's actions did not always match. Ned Dayne professed to be a calm, slightly shy man, which was what Arya found to be true; there was no boldness to him, no rebelliousness.

But he was kind and gentle with her; he made sure Allyria helped her adapt to life at Starfall, helped her learn Dornish customs and dances. One of the few truly happy times she had with her first husband had occurred during their first year of marriage, shortly before the first baby was lost. They were invited to Sunspear for Prince Oberyn's name day celebration, and Ned had the most beautiful Dornish gowns made for her. At the celebration, limbs loosened from sweet wine she drank to soothe her mouth burning from the food, she let Ned lead her onto the dance floor, her body as fluid
as water as she danced; Ned's eyes burned with desire for her that night, and, if Arya tried, she could still feel his hands against her skin, the hungry press of his mouth against hers.

Though she would never admit it to anyone but herself, Arya missed sharing her bed with a man. Mayhaps it was wanton or shameful, but it was difficult to go from being married to a man who showered her with kisses and tried desperately to please her to having a husband who barely remembered she existed.

*This is the sacrifice I made*, she thought as she sat before the heart tree. *I did not want an old man to climb upon me, so I wed a man who would rather bed one of my brothers than me. I was happy enough in Dorne and still I complained. Mayhaps nothing will ever make me happy.*

The crunching of footsteps on the ground brought Arya's attention towards the path, her hand instinctively falling to Needle in her waistband. A tall, lean man entered the clearing, the hood of his cloak obscuring his face, but Arya could tell from his clothing he was not highborn; though well-kept, his clothing was clearly old and patched in places, and Arya thought he might be an apprentice or even a tradesmen. That is, until she saw the sword upon his hip. Arya cared little for gowns and could not differentiate one type of embroidery from another, but she knew Valyrian steel on sight.

“Who goes there?”

The man froze, lifting his own head as if startled, and Arya saw his eyes were a deep purple, the same as the Daynes of Starfall. His skin was paler than Arya's own, the same unblemished porcelain as Sansa's complexion, and his features were sharp yet handsome.

“I am sorry, my lady. I did not expect to find anyone here.”

“Well, you have found me, and you should identify yourself.” When the man hesitated, she drew herself to her feet, raising her chin in frustration. “I am the Lady of Storm's End, and I command you to drop your hood and tell me your name.”

He was still for a moment before inclining his head, pushing back the hood to reveal a shock of blue hair which brushed his shoulders. “I did not mean any disrespect to you, Lady Baratheon. I am Griff of Tyrosh. I have only recently come to the Stormlands, and I certainly did not mean to scare you.”

“You did not scare me,” she scoffed, smirking when Griff of Tyrosh started as Nymeria broke through the trees to sit beside her. “What is a Tyroshi doing in the Stormlands?”

“My mother is from Tyrosh, but my father is originally from Westeros. I grew up in the Free Cities, but I had heard life was more prosperous here.”

“And the blade on your hip? How did you come by it?”

“It was gifted to me by the commander of the Golden Company after I won a great victory.”

“You are a sellsword?” she said, voice thick with derision.

Griff's smile was small, lightly tinged with self-deprecation. “We cannot all be born to highborn lords and ladies who make us good marriages, Lady Baratheon. I am sorry to have disturbed your prayers.”

As he moved to turn, she asked, “Why, if you are from the Free Cities, did you come to the godsdowd? They do not keep the Old Gods there.”

Griff lifted his face towards the sky, the red leaves clinging desperately to the trees. “I had heard
stories, and I wished to see it for myself. I also came to offer my services to Storm's End, but your castellan said House Baratheon does not hire men such as myself.”

“Cortnay Penrose would die before ever hiring a sellsword.” Reaching down to scratch Nymeria's head, she offered, “Lord Connington is still looking for men. His interests were hit considerably by the Ironborn. Are you alone or do you have other men from the Golden Company?”

“There are four men, counting myself, and a lady as well.”

“If you would like, I could write Lord Connington.”

Griff's face wrinkled in confusion. “Why would a lady as highborn as yourself care what becomes of sellswords?”

Remembering one of Septa Mordane's long ago lessons, Arya shrugged. “No matter how small, a lady should care for all who serve her husband.”

A shadow passed over his handsome face, flickering by so quickly Arya almost thought she imagined it. “I thank you for the offer, but I can make my own way.”

When she returned to the castle, she asked Cortnay Penrose about Griff of Tyrosh; the older man ranted about the unsuitability of sellswords, how it would besmirch the honor of House Baratheon and King Robert would never stand for such foolishness. By the time he was finished, Arya could hardly keep from rolling her eyes, but she was unable to keep the frown from her face when he handed her a letter from Renly.

“Your lord husband will remain at Highgarden for three more moons,” Penrose reported, “and he has given you leave to invite Lady Dondarrion to visit, should you want for company.”

Arya knew Renly undoubtedly thought he was being generous, providing her with the freedom she was once so desperate to acquire.

*If he is going to give me freedom, she thought as she lay in her large bed, then I shall take the fullest advantage of it.*

The next morning, Arya set out to find the blue-haired sellsword from Tyrosh.

It was surprisingly much harder to find a man with blue hair and Valyrian steel than Arya thought it would be. The smallfolk were naturally distrustful of her, Renly's bride or not, and none were eager to give her any information. It was not until she pulled three gold dragons from her purse that a man in a tavern told her of seeing blue-haired men living in a house near the kingsroad.

The snows were nearly melted along the kingsroad, and Winter was finally able to run again; her sand steed was a powerful horse, but his speed was always lessened by the snow. Arya inhaled the fresh scent of the air as her hair flowed behind her, as Nymeria loped along beside her; she tried to imagine she was riding the hills surrounding Winterfell, but the scent of the south could never replicate the unique smell of home. So wrapped up in her imaginings, Arya nearly missed the small house nearly hidden by a grove of trees; only its red door set it apart from the other houses of the smallfolk. Slowing Winter, Arya saw a man and woman of an age with her father standing in the yard; the man's hair was as blue as Griff's and the woman wore the robes of a Septa.

Both looked at her with wide, startled eyes, but neither bent the knee; if Griff's tale was honest and they were new to Westeros, they likely did not know she was Lady Baratheon of Storm's End.
“May we help you?” the woman queried, her voice soft and unimposing.

Arya swung down from Winter's back, pushing her windblown locks over her shoulders. “I am looking for Griff of Tyrosh. I was told I could find him here.”

“Young Griff is hunting,” the woman offered, “but I can tell him of your inquiry. Who may I say has called?”

“Arya Stark. Baratheon,” she quickly corrected with a wince. “I am Arya Baratheon of Storm's End. We met yesterday in the godswood.”

“And what business do you have with my son?” the man gruffly demanded.

Arya shrugged. “I wished to offer him work. He asked my man about it, and I have some available.”

“He does not need work at Storm's End.”

Irritation flared in her belly. “Well, he is a man-grown and, if he does not like my offer, he can tell me himself.”

“My lady,” the Septa began, “we do not wish to involve ourselves with the Iron Throne. Young Griff was hasty in approaching your lord husband's men, and we apologize for any offense we have given. I am certain you can find other men to dedicate their swords to your cause.”

“I have no cause, Septa, and I would prefer to discuss the matter with Griff.”

“Discuss what matter with me?” Griff asked as he came out of the trees, flanked on either side by men old enough to have fathered him. His blue hair was flowing unrestrained, the neat ties from the day before forgotten, and a bow was slung over his shoulder; one of the men carried two large birds felled by arrows.

“Lady Baratheon has come to make an offer,” the Septa said, her voice conspicuously flat, and Arya had a feeling there was an entirely different conversation occurring beneath the woman's gentle words.

“I am sorry, my lady. I thought Storm's End was clear in not requiring my sword.”

“It is not Storm's End which is requesting your skills; it is solely me.”

Griff smirked. “Establishing your own little queensguard?”

“I do not need protected,” she declared, spitting the word as if it was foul. “If you listened to any of the gossip, that much you would know. I want lessons. I have a sword but I was parted from my brothers before I could fully learn to use it. I cannot ask our Master-At-Arms to teach me because he would go running straight to Lord Penrose, who would send ravens to Renly, my father, and the king.” When the Tyroshi man said nothing, she removed a small purse of silver from her saddle and tossed it to him. “I can pay you as well as anyone in the Free Cities, and there is no risk of dying. All I require is discretion.”

Griff tossed the purse to the clean-shaven man, who quickly counted the coins. “What you are asking could get me killed. Lords do not take kindly to lowborn men toiling with their wives.”

She scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Let me assure you, ser, that my husband would neither notice or care if you fucked me on his dining table mid-meal so long as you did not obstruct his view of the Knight of the Flowers. He will care even less if you teach me to use a sword. It is only Lord Penrose who
would care, and, if we are discreet, he will never know.” When Griff simply stared, Arya sighed, swinging her leg over Winter's back, settling into her saddle. “I thought a member of the Golden Company would not be so craven.”

“I will train you,” Griff pronounced just as she was about to dig her heels into Winter's sides.

“Griff!” his father snapped, and Arya almost smiled; blue-haired or not, Griff's father sounded exactly like Ned Stark when he used to chastise her brothers.

His son flicked his violet eyes towards his father but gave no other indication he heard him speak. “A gold dragon for every time you come for a lesson.”

“That is fair.”

“And I wish to ride that horse of yours.” Griff laughed at Arya's snort. “I have never seen a horse like this. Where did you get it?”

“It is a sand steed from Dorne. My first husband gave it to me as a wedding present.”

“Your first husband,” Griff repeated ponderously. “And who were you before you becoming Lady Baratheon?”

“Lady Dayne of Starfall.” Turning Winter towards the kingsroad, she added, “And we will discuss my horse when I return tomorrow. I shall bring practice swords, and I do not want you to go easy on me.”

There was something about Griff's smile which made Arya smile in turn. Silly blue hair notwithstanding, Griff of Tyrosh was very handsome.

The clean-shaven man was called Haldon Halfmaester, and Arya suspected he did not care much for her; she knew Griff's father, also called Griff, did not like her. Duck, the man with the orange hair, helped in her training sometimes, and, from the way he explained things, Arya suspected he might have once been Master-at-Arms somewhere like Ser Rodrik. Only Septa Lemore was consistently friendly, occasionally eschewing her septa's robes for gowns; Arya suspected Lemore was not nearly as pious as other septas and even that suspicion was based only on Arya's preference for the woman.

She had been slipping to the house with the red door for nearly two moons when Lemore invited her to remain for evening meal. Arya saw Old Griff scowl, opening his mouth to protest, but Young Griff silenced him with a glare, insisting Arya remained. She knew that she shouldn't; Cortnay Penrose watched her like a hawk when she returned, always battering her with questions, and if she was late, he would certainly report her alleged misdeeds to Renly.

But, purchased with gold or not, Young Griff and his companions were the closest things to friends Arya had in the Stormlands, and it had been so long since she ate a meal with people who actually spoke to her, rather than at her.

“This is Dornish food!” she declared in surprise as all of them gathered around the tiny table, Lemore placing dishes of hot food upon it. Arya was sandwiched between Young Griff and Duck, and the tantalizing smells of the peppers and spices of Dorne made her stomach ache in anticipation. No matter how many requests she made of the cooks of Storm's End, they could never make the dishes she learned to love at Starfall; she suspected Penrose played a part in that, his disdain for Dorne and especially the Martells well-known.

“Griff mentioned you used to be the Lady of Starfall. I thought it would be a nice change.” Sinking
into her seat, Lemore confessed, “I have never quite learned to like such plain food myself.”

“Are you from Dorne?”

“In another life, I was.” Lemore smiled, her purple eyes twinkling with laughter. “But what of you, Lady Arya? Mayhaps you could favor us with tales from the North. None of us have ever seen anything above the Neck.”

Heaping her plate with peppers and richly spiced meat, Arya eagerly complied. “It is very different there; I think it is better but I'm sure others would disagree. The Starks were the Kings of Winter before Aegon the Conqueror came, and Winterfell has been my family's seat for 8,000 years. It is the best place in the world. There are hot springs and a godswood, and you can ride all day long if you wish it. Renly promised we will go when spring has truly come, and then I am going on to the Wall.”

“The Wall? Are you taking the black, m'lady?” Duck laughed.

“My brother Jon is Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. I am going to visit him and my brother Robb, who is Lord of Winterfell while my father is the Hand.”

“You are not afraid of the Wall?” Haldon asked. “There are terrible tales coming down, and they say there are wildlings serving the realm now.”

Arya shrugged, plucking a pepper from her dish and letting the heat explode upon her tongue. “So there are wildings. If Griff does his job correctly, I will be able to wield a sword skillfully, and, if he doesn't, Jon will guard me.”

“There is a story, is there not, about a wilding taking a Stark princess?” Young Griff said, reaching for the wineskin. “There was a rose or something similar?”

“Bael the Bard,” Arya supplied, remembering Old Nan telling she and Sansa the story when they were small. “But he didn't really take her. She was in the crypts beneath Winterfell the entire time. The crypts are very dark and go deep into the earth. My father never let us go too deeply down where the old kings lay; we were never allowed to pass Lyanna's place.”

“Lyanna,” Griff repeated. “She was the one stolen by Rhaegar Targaryen, yes? She was the one the Seven Kingdoms went to war for?”

She shifted in her chair, surprised the sellsword did not know the tale; she wondered if the exploits of Westeros were known in Essos. “Prince Rhaegar named her Queen of Love and Beauty over Princess Elia at the tourney at Harrenhal. They say he kidnapped her and hid her away at the Tower of Joy, and King Robert nearly went mad at the idea of him raping her. But that was not what started the war.”

“No?” Old Griff challenged, his voice rough. “Then tell us, Lady Baratheon, what did?”

“The Mad King started it,” she snapped, her dislike for the older man plain. “My uncle Brandon went to King’s Landing to face Rhaegar and get his sister, but Aerys had them captured. He sent for the fathers of Brandon and his men, and, when my grandfather came, the Mad King burnt him alive and killed Brandon before demanding Jon Arryn send my father and Robert to court to face the same. Jon Arryn refused and called his banners. That is what started the war.”

“There was a tension in the room Arya did not fully understand, tension which only thickened when Old Griff pushed, “And Prince Rhaegar and his family?”

“Rhaegar died in single combat against Robert on the Trident, not that it truly mattered since Lyanna
died anyway. Tywin Lannister sacked King's Landing, and his men murdered Prince Aegon and Princess Rhaenys as well as raping and murdering Elia Martell.”

“And you think that's just?”

Arya slammed her fork down, glaring hatefully at the older man. “Of course I don't think that's just! Princess Elia was defenseless, and what honor is there in murdering children? Even if Rhaegar did kidnap and rape my aunt, his family played no part in it. They could have sent them into exile as they did Aerys's other children.”

“Aerys's children weren't sent into exile,” Old Griff corrected, voice as tight as a bow string. “They fled or risked being murdered as well. Though, I suppose, the noble Eddard Stark left those details out of the stories he tells.”

“That's enough!” Young Griff ordered, and Arya blinked in surprise at how drastically different Griff’s voice sounded. It was the voice of a commander, not the pleasant tone of the sellsword who japed with her in the yard.

“He’s right,” Lemore chimed in, her voice softer. “We do not insult our guests, especially ones as dignified as Lady Baratheon.” Spooning a helping of vegetables onto her plate, Lemore ventured, “If you do not mind me asking, what happened to your husband, the Lord Dayne?”

Taking several deep breaths to soothe her temper, Arya finally answered, “He was killed during the Ironborn Rebellion while defending the coast of Starfall. We had no children, so Starfall passed to his aunt Allyria.”

“You want no children?”

“I cannot have them. A child will not quicken in my womb.” It was strange, she thought, how the truth of her words did not hurt until she saw the pity in another's eyes. “But I would make a poor mother.”

“Why is that?” Young Griff asked.

“Because I am a poor lady.” Arya smiled wryly at her friend. “I pay you a dragon a day to teach me to swing a sword. I am hopeless at my stitches, I prefer horses to people, I hate dancing, and I am more comfortable in breeches than I ever am a gown. Why do you think the queen dumped me to rot in Storm's End? She wanted me close enough I could be under watch but not so close as to cause trouble at court.”

“How did you cause trouble at court?” Duck queried as he tore into his meat.

Arya smirked. “You have been in the Stormlands for weeks. Surely you have heard the stories.”

“You had an affair with the prince,” Old Griff supplied distastefully.

“I didn't, but there were enough whispers that my sister preferred me away from court. And the queen has never much cared for me ever since King Robert spent an entire feast calling me Lyanna.” Meeting Old Griff’s cold gaze, Arya swore, “I may not be a lady, but I would not bed my sister's husband. There is no honor in that.”

“You place a high price on honor,” Old Griff begrudgingly observed.

“My parents would not have it any other way.”
As Haldon and Duck began to discuss something which happened in town, Arya found herself stealing looks at Old Griff. Young Griff said they were all members of the Golden Company, save Septa Lemore, but Old Griff did not behave like a sellsword; there was something noble in the way he spoke and carried himself. She saw it in Young Griff as well, hints of a man he was trying to hide, and Arya began to suspect there was a great deal more to these five people than what they said.

The light pressure against her knee drew Arya's attention back to the table. Glancing down, she saw Young Griff's fingers absently circling her kneecap as he playfully argued with Duck; it was on the tip of Arya's tongue to chastise him for being so bold, to remind him she was married and of far higher birth than he, but then Griff turned and smiled at her. The secret smile was small, barely noticeable to anyone else at the table, but it made Arya's heart give a particular lurch, especially when coupled with the heat in his violet eyes; it had been a very long time since someone looked at her with desire rather than disdain.

Not since Gendry...

After stuffing herself to the brim with Lemore's cooking, Arya announced she had to return to Storm's End. Lemore embraced her tightly, and there was something in the way she held Arya against her body which brought to mind Catelyn Stark. Griff rose from the table to walk her out, and it seemed odd to see her sellsword without his Valyrian steel strapped to his hip.

“I will not be able to come tomorrow until after midday,” Arya explained as they walked to the tree where Winter was tethered. “I have to hear grievances, which is dreadfully boring, and most of the lords would rather speak to Penrose but - “

Griff’s lips were warm and firm, his tongue tasting of Lemore's peppers; Arya froze at the press of his mouth against hers for only a moment before she responded, rising on her toes as her hands knotted in the front of his black tunic. She nearly stumbled as Griff walked her backwards, one hand sliding into her loose hair, the other clutching tightly at her hip; her back rested against the trunk of a tree, and she could feel the length of Griff's body pressing tightly against hers.

You have a husband, a voice which sounded remarkably like Sansa chastised. You are a Stark of Winterfell, and you are letting a lowborn sellsword besmirch your honor like a common woman. Stop it right now, Arya!

But her husband would never want to share her bed, had been at Highgarden for half of their marriage, and she was only twenty-years-old; Arya did not think she could spend the rest of her life being forgotten in Storm's End.

Arya shivered as Griff pulled back, his warm breath misting against her face. “Then I shall see you at midday,” he murmured, peppering wet kisses against the column of her throat. “That is, unless you'd like to stay.”

“I have a husband,” she weakly blurted out, tilting her head to allow Griff to kiss the sensitive skin behind her ear. “This is not proper.”

“What is improper is Renly Baratheon leaving you to rot in this place,” Griff retorted, a surprising ferocity in his voice even as his touch remained gentle. “What is improper is you do not have a husband who thanks the Gods every day to be wedded to you.”

Despite the warmth flowing through her veins, Arya forced herself to slip from Griff's embrace. “You barely know me.”

“I know you are bold and brave, that you are funny and honorable - “
“You praise my honor while asking me to break the vows I made to my husband?”

Griff scoffed. “We both know your husband does not hesitate to break those vows, and you said yourself he would not care if I fucked you on his dinner table. Why cling to a promise made when everyone who made you swear it knew how ridiculous it was?”

“A Stark is no oathbreaker.”

“If that were true, where did your bastard brother come from?” He stepped closer, one hand closing gently around her elbow. “You are human, Arya, and you deserve better than the life your parents sold you into.”

“My parents did not sell me -“

“No, it was your sister,” he acknowledged, his words striking in the most sensitive part of Arya's battered heart. “She wanted you away from the prince and to all seven hells with what you wanted.” Cupping Arya's face, his violet eyes burning bright, he declared, “You deserve all Seven Kingdoms, not this miserable rock that Renly Baratheon does not even care enough to rule.”

“And what, you and your men will give me all of Westeros?” Arya retorted. “I should shame House Stark and Baratheon, bring the wrath of the Iron Throne down upon me, all because the man I pay a dragon to every day thinks I am worth more?”

“No, you should do all of that because you know you are worth more.” Griff leaned forward, grasping her shoulders to keep her in place. “There is a queen inside of you, Arya Stark. Why do you insist on letting everyone else keep you becoming what you were destined to be?”

She jerked away, pressing her hands against his chest to try to force more space between them. “I do not believe in destiny, and I am no queen. I have brought enough embarrassment down upon House Stark, and I will not bring more by dropping my breeches for you.” Swinging up into her saddle, Arya declared, “I will not return here again. Our business has ended.”

“Arya -“

She did not look back as she drove Winter away from the little house with the red door, her hair flying over her shoulders at the punishing pace she set; the cold sea winds bit at her even through the heavy wool she wore. Her body was still singing with arousal, her skin feeling overly sensitive, and Arya cursed her traitorous body nearly as hard as she cursed Griff for upsetting the false balance of her life by hitting her with so many unhappy truths.

_He just wanted to fuck me_, Arya thought uncharitably as Storm's End rose in the distance. _Elia Sand said a man will say anything to into your smallclothes, and that is all it was. He wants my gold and my cunt, nothing more._

But the thoughts did not make her battered heart feel any better, not when Griff and his men were the only friends she had in the Stormlands, not when all she wanted was to let Griff do exactly what he wished before returning to her humdrum life within the walls of Storm's End.

As she rode into the gates, the first thing she noticed was how full the yard was; horses, litters, and supply carts were everywhere as well as soldiers in Baratheon and Lannister colors unloading them. Arya cautiously stopped Winter, her eyes taking everything in, and a cold ball settled in her stomach as she realized the king's court had come to Storm's End and had done so without any warning. And then she saw Cortnay Penrose, and Arya knew there _had_ been warning; it just hadn't been shared with her.
Arya immediately began to wonder how long it had been since court arrived; night was starting to blacken the sky, and she knew she had spent far too long lingering at Griff's table, laughing at Duck's tales and discussing Dorne with Lemore. She quickly handed Winter's reins to one of Renly's men, hurrying towards the castle to offer her apologies to the king. Certainly all of court was whispering about her already, Renly's wild bride who went out without escorts and returned after nightfall. For the first time, Arya hoped her family was not with the king, not wanting to see the disapproval in their eyes.

“Arya!”

Spinning on her heel, she saw Renly rushing towards her, his body tight with anxiety. He was dressed finely in green velvet, but there was something uncharacteristically unkempt about his appearance, as if he had been fidgeting with his clothing. Arya knew he had not been expected back at Storm's End for another moon, and an endless amount of questions started to rise in her throat.

“What is going on?” she managed to get out before Renly linked his arm through hers, all but dragging her through the halls towards the hall which held the high seat.

“Penrose wrote Robert about our unique arrangement,” Renly hissed, his hand biting into the flesh of her arm. “I was on my way back from the Reach when I received word. I sent you a raven to warn you what was coming - “

“I did not receive any raven,” she reported, cold fury starting to burn through her veins.

“Everyone arrived hours ago. They wanted to send out riders to find you, but I managed to convince them you'd be back soon. Where the hells were you?”

“Riding,” she lied, absently lifting a hand to try to get her hair to lay flat. She knew she undoubtedly looked a fright; her tunic smelled of sweat and was dirty for falling to the ground during her lessons while her riding leathers were battered and filthy. As they entered the chamber, Arya flinched when she saw it was not just King Robert awaiting her; it was the queen, her parents, Gendry, Sansa, and a member of the Kingsguard.

Her skill at curtsying had improved over the years, but her ability to do so without feeling irritation had not. Arya sank low to the ground, inclining her head in as much deference as she could stomach, before apologizing, “I am so sorry, Your Grace. I was not told of your coming.”

“That is all you have to say?” the queen drawled disdainfully. “We arrived hours ago to be met only by your castellan and then you finally arrive looking like a beggar?”

Clenching her fists even as she remained in her curtsy, Arya offered, “I am genuinely sorry, my queen. I meant no offense to you or the king.”

“Get up,” Robert barked gruffly, motioning for his wine to be refilled. As Arya complied, wincing at the cramp which was starting to form in her calf, Robert turned his eyes upon his brother and Arya. “I did not want to be here, but Cortnay Penrose has been sending me ravens practically daily cataloging your exploits.”

“Robert - “

“Shut up!” the king snapped, silencing Renly. “You are both well past the age where these sorts of activities can be overlooked. Houses Stark and Baratheon do not need to be the subjects of gossip from the bloody smallfolk!”

Renly was stiff beside Arya as he requested, “If we are being accused of things, I believe we are
entitled to know what it is.”

“What could I possibly say to the Lady of Storm's End?” Robert spat, gesturing emphatically towards Renly, who flushed with embarrassment and anger. “You send your wife to do your job, managing our family's seat and making the decisions while you ride about the Seven Kingdoms doing nothing! Mace Tyrell says you have spent nearly half your marriage at Highgarden!”

“I am an able Lord of Storm's End.”

“No, she is an able Lord of Storm's End!” the king roared, pointing to Arya. “By all accounts, she hears the grievances, she manages the accounts, she decides where the guards will be placed, and she brokers peace between holdfasts! You waste gold having armor made which you will never use while riding around my kingdoms with Loras Tyrell!”

Arya could feel the fury radiating from Renly's body, but it was the absolute humiliation in his eyes which made Arya speak out. She may have hated the way Renly had yet to follow through on his promise of taking her to the North, but she did not hate Renly; he may have been her husband in name only, but Renly was as good of a man as Ned Dayne had been and did not deserve to be berated before everyone.

“All that I have done at Storm's End, I have done on Renly's direction,” Arya lied, trying to force some sense of passivity into her voice. “He has given me ample instruction - “

The king snorted in disbelief. “Well, instruction you will no longer need because my brother is not going anywhere in the near future.” Gripping the arms of the high seat Arya usually sat, Robert proclaimed, “Until I say otherwise, you are not leaving the Stormlands. You will rule the Baratheon family's seat or I will give it to Stannis, and you can live out your days on Dragonstone. Do you understand me?” Not giving Renly a chance to respond, he ordered, “You are going to be the best lord the Stormlands has ever seen, you'll do your damnedest to get a child on your wife, and I will not see Loras Tyrell anywhere near here. Am I clear?!”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Renly choked out, emotion welling in his eyes.

Arya was expecting for the king to dismiss them; she nearly started when Robert turned his blazing blue eyes upon her. “As for you, it is time you start behaving like a lady. I do not know what the Daynes let you do but you're a Baratheon now. I will not hear another word from anyone about you dressing as a man, disappearing without escorts, and there will be no more rides on that damned Dornish horse! You will host wives for tea, smile pleasingly, and the only responsibility you will have is trying to give my brother an heir. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” she gritted through clenched teeth.

His voice deepening, an edge of undeniable threat in his words, Robert added, “As soon as we are done here, you will go see Maester Rhys for moon tea.”

“Moon tea? How am I to give Renly an heir if you are forcing me to drink moon tea?”

“Because I will not have you bringing some Tyroshi bastard into this castle.” Lumbering to his feet, the king threatened, “And if I ever hear of you sneaking off to see that bloody sellsword again, not even the love I bear your family will keep you from my wrath.”

Arya could not stop the tears of rage and humiliation which began to swim in her eyes. She could see her parents both flinch at the accusation, and Gendry dropped his gaze, face twisting unattractively; only Sansa looked at her, and it was the pity in her face which brought Arya's tears cresting over her
lids, spilling down her cheeks. An image of Griff flooded her mind, the sharply handsome features and lips which breathed fire into her body, and Arya wished she had just stayed at the house with the red door, had let Griff tumble her back on his bed and keep her there for as long as he wished; if she was going to be shamed before the people she loved, she would have preferred it to be for something she actually did.

*Laying with him was the first thing you have truly wanted in years, and you said no to protect the Baratheon name. And this is your reward.*

There would be no trip to Winterfell now, no visiting Jon on the Wall; there wouldn't even be everyday adventures now. All there was going to be was never-ending tedium with a man who would never lay a hand upon her. Arya would have screamed if she thought it would have made a bit of difference, but she knew from experience it would not. No one cared about a woman's screams, least of all the king.

“I did not do anything,” she managed before her voice broke. Swallowing quickly, trying to regain her composure, she repeated more firmly, “I did not do anything to bring shame upon your house.”

“All the two of you have brought down is shame,” Queen Cersei spoke up, her voice as immovable as the Wall. “If your king was less kind, he would dissolve this marriage, send your husband to the Wall, and send you to the silent sisters. You should thank him for his kindness.”

The words hung heavy in the air, and Arya knew she would never be able to force them past her lips even if she hadn't just been accused of being a whore before her parents. She saw Renly shift uncomfortably beside her before he thanked his older brother, and, when eyes fell on her, all Arya could do was glare through her tears.

“Thank your king,” Cersei ordered after an indeterminable amount of time.

“Mother,” Gendry began softly, but Arya refused to let him finish, not wanting to hear him try to defend her.

“Thank you for such kindness, Your Grace. I hope someday I am in the position to offer you the same kindness you have offered me.”

Arya saw her mother's eyes widen at her words, but something close to regret flashed across King Robert's face before he ordered her from the chamber. She tried to leave with as much dignity as she could summon, but tears were still rolling down her cheeks no matter how hard she tried to get them to stop. Vaguely she heard Renly saying her name, but Arya ignored him; there was too much unkindness in her body in that moment to risk speaking to anyone.

By the time Maester Rhys came to her chamber with the moon tea, Arya had changed into one of her many unworn gowns, her face scrubbed free of dirt. She hated Rhys with his leathery skin and judgmental eyes, always looking as if he smelled something foul. Arya swallowed the concoction, wincing at its aftertaste, and she resisted the urge to punch the maester when she saw how he checked the container to make sure she had drunk it all.

*Moon tea for a barren woman. It makes as much sense as new boots for a legless man.*

When the maester moved to leave, Arya saw her parents waiting to enter her chamber. Under different circumstances, Arya would have rushed towards her father, embraced him tightly and begged for details about her brothers and Winterfell; she would have withstood Catelyn's tutting over her wild hair before allowing her to unwind it, listening to the comforting rhythm of her voice. But both looked so dour and disappointed, Arya wished they were leagues away so she would not have
to face them.

“I did not do what the king accused me of,” she swore the moment the chamber door closed. “I broke no vows!”

“Even if that is true, you must see how it appears,” Catelyn reasoned. “What use would a lady have for a sellsword if not something improper?”

“He was teaching me to fight.”

A hint of a smile tugged at Ned’s lips but Catelyn only looked exhausted as she sighed, “Oh, Arya…”

“You have to get him to change his mind,” she implored her father. “Renly and I were supposed to go to the Wall to see Jon and - “

“I'm sorry, my girl, but Robert has very definite ideas on Renly staying here for the time being. If I could have swayed him, I would have done it long before we arrived here.”

The reality of the situation fully asserting itself, panic and desperation began to roar in Arya's chest. “I cannot do what he wants me to do. Hosting those simpering women and just sitting still, that's not me!”

“You can learn - “

“I do not want to learn!” Shaking with the effort it took not to grab her mother and pleading for her to understand, she exploded, “I have done everything you ever asked! I wed Ned so I would not break the stupid betrothal with the Daynes, and I did not fight marrying Renly when we all know there is no chance in seven hells he will ever get a child on me! The only thing I have ever asked is to be allowed to go home, and now the king is taking that too! Why can you not see that I am miserable here?""

“Arya, you must understand - “

She scoffed, giving her back to her parents as she crossed to stare out at Shipbreaker Bay. “I understand, Mother. I understand that you will never be able to understand because you are like Sansa and got the good match.” Casting stormy eyes over her shoulder, she bitterly drawled, “Mayhaps you should send a raven to Aunt Lysa, and she can explain it to you.”

Catelyn recoiled from the words as if a physical blow, but it gave no Arya pleasure. Instead she turned her eyes back upon the ocean crashing against the cliffs, wondering if this feeling of emptiness was what drove Ashara Dayne to leap from the Palestone Tower.

The future had never seemed so bleak.

Court had been at Storm’s End for nearly a fortnight before Gendry came to her in the godswood. Arya was never a particularly devout person; while Sansa would pray to the Seven and Bran found as much solace in the godswood as their father did, Arya preferred action to praying. But since Robert’s decree that she become a proper lady, Arya was allowed nowhere without an escort except the godswood. With no other options, Arya found herself feigning piety more than she ever had, taking Nymeria amongst the weirwoods and just sitting, listening to the wind through the leaves, the sounds so melodic they could almost be mistaken for words.

The day before, Arya was certain the trees were saying, “Run.” Today she only heard, “Dragons.”
“I’ve always loved the godswood,” Gendry confessed, bending down to ruffle Nymeria's ears. “Sometimes I think I like the Old Gods more than I do the Seven.”

“Best not let your mother hear that or she'll march you to the Great Sept of Baelor herself to remind you of your responsibilities.” When Gendry smiled, Arya could not resist throwing her voice in an uncanny impression of Cersei Lannister. “A king does not worship heathens, Gendry. Honestly, what are you thinking?”

His laughter rose amongst the whispering trees before he chimed in using his father's voice. “Gods be good, boy, you'll raise the Faith Militant if you start saying your prayers to trees!”

“Sansa would be horrified as well. She's always preferred a sept to a heart tree.” Arya lifted a hand to fidget with the net of Myrish lace which held her hair, a gift from her older sister. “She's been lighting candles to the Mother in hopes of giving you a son.”

A frown twisted his mouth for a moment before becoming stoic again. “She worries too much. Elinor can sit a throne as well as any son.”

Arya snorted, rolling her eyes. “Best not say that to your father either. You see how well he looks upon women who do not know their place.”

“You've run the Stormlands better than Renly could ever dream of; my father knows that. He's more angry at Renly than you.”

“And yet...”

Gendry was quiet for a moment, studying the bleeding face of the heart tree. And then he said, “You and the Tyroshi - “

“Don't.”

He winced at the ferocity of her word. “Arya - “

“I will not discuss this with you, so do not bother trying to sway me.”

For a moment, Arya thought he was going to push, but she saw the fight seem to drain from him as he looked at her. Finally he said, “He will not always be the king.”

“No,” Arya agreed, “but I shall always be your lady aunt.”

Gendry scoffed. “We both know you and Renly hardly have a real marriage. It could be set aside once my father is gone.”

“And then what, yet another husband is chosen for me? If I am lucky, I live out my days at Winterfell, trading one man telling me what to do for another? When Robert dies, life here will likely return to how it was: I will resume running the Stormlands and Renly will return to the Reach. Better yet, Penrose can run Storm's End while I go North and see my brothers.”

“And that is your plan?”

“I can spend time with Jon at the Wall, spend a few months in Winterfell. A ship could take me to the Westerlands to see Bran at Casterly Rock; my mother tells me that Tommen offered him a place there. After that, I can go back to Dorne. Allyria has offered to host me multiple times, and I have maintained a friendship with Elia Sand at Sunspear. Mayhaps I will even join Renly at Highgarden; everyone says Willas Tyrell breeds the best horses, and, since your father has stripped me of Winter,
I shall require a new horse.”

“Come back to court.”

“I cannot.”

“I know you get bored there - “

“Are you really so thick?” Pulling her cloak more tightly around her as the wind kicked up, she snapped, “Sansa does not want me there! She wants your attention focused on her, and I am sick and tired of everyone believing that I am fucking every man who crosses my path!”

“Since when do you care what people whisper about you?”

“Since I was ordered to drink moon tea in front of my parents! Since my sister can barely look at me without thinking I am making plans to seduce her husband! Since every one of those damned whispers has lead to me being stripped of everything I love!” Arya grabbed the full skirt of her green gown, jerking it away from her body. “This is it, Gendry! You cannot save me from being a woman!”

“No because you do not want saved.” There was a bitter taint to his words now, and it curdled Arya's stomach. “You act as if you are the only person in all of Westeros who has been made to do something they did not want. You did not want to be a lady? Well, I did not want to be a prince. Your mother wanted Brandon Stark, your father wanted Ashara Dayne, my father wanted Lyanna Stark, and my mother wanted to be king rather than a queen. The only difference between you and the rest of us is you continue to act as if you are the only one who has suffered for it!”

“Then leave me be! Go back to the castle and perfect Sansa, who has never uttered an unhappy word in her life, and leave me to the trees.”

“This is the bed you made!” Gendry shouted, face flush with fury. “I offered you a life, and you threw it back in my face!”

“You offered me a lady's life in another flavor; that is all!”

“What, and your sellsword offered you something better?” Gendry spat, disgust plain on his handsome face. “That's what you want, some baseborn bastard who will steal your gold and fuck you in the mud?”

It was the coldest insult Gendry ever leveled at her, and the rage which always simmered in her heart began to burn as brightly as wildfire. The words flew out of her mouth before her brain could temper them, and they landed with the biting force she intended.

“Better to be fucked by an honorable bastard than a dishonorable prince.”

Arya had never drawn a man's blood before; for all her practice with Needle and lessons with Griff, her blade was clean. But, as her words sank in, Gendry looked as if he had been run through with Ice, his face so twisted with hurt and offense Arya averted her eyes out of guilt. She felt an apology start to rise in her throat, instantly regretting injuring him this way, but Gendry gave her no chance. Instead he turned and left her, back as straight as iron, no hesitation in his steps.

And still the leaves sang, “Dragons, dragons, dragons.”

It was Sansa who told her of the tourney being planned to mark Gendry's twenty-fifth name day, the
court's last celebration before returning to King's Landing. While her sister discussed all the festivities King Robert was insisting upon, all Arya could think about was the cost to Storm's End: nearly 150,000 gold dragons would be spent when all was said and done, a cost Arya knew their coffers would feel. She did not have any true love for the Stormlands, but they were still hers by marriage the same way Starfall had once been hers; Arya knew she was not a good wife but she was an excellent manager of a household.

Sansa, of course, knew nothing of managing a household; it was Lord Littlefinger's duty to take care of her family's funds, and, should they run low, Lord Tywin would hand over gold to his grandson without hesitation. It gave Arya a peculiar sense of pride to know she could do something Sansa could not.

"Why are you so sour-faced? You always loved a tourney when we were younger."

Arya looked up from her embroidery, as haphazard and crooked as ever. Sansa sat on a soft velvet chair, her skirts an icy shade of blue which contrasted well with her coloring; Elinor, nearly six now, sat at her feet cradling a finely made doll with an ivory face, her auburn hair plaited and pinned as securely as her mother's. There was enough of Gendry in the child's face to keep her from being distinctively beautiful but Arya suppose she was a pleasant enough child, already well-schooled in her courtesies; if she were honest, Arya much preferred Rose, who was not comelier than her older sister but had mischief sparkling in her blue eyes.

"That is because I wished to be a knight."

Elinor's little nose wrinkled. "Girls cannot be knights, Aunt Arya."

"Yes, thank you, Elinor." Biting her lip to keep from cursing as her thread broke, Arya elaborated, "And now I understand what a tourney costs the lords who hold it. Storm's End cannot bear this sort of expense easily."

"That is a concern for Renly, not for you," Sansa gently reminded her. "I insist on having a new gown made for you for the occasion."

"I have dozens of gowns barely worn. I do not require a new one."

A flicker of irritation passed across Sansa's pretty face before dissipating. "This is a gift, Arya. I shall have a fine gown made for you, a gown befitting the Lady of Storm's End. Do you have a red gown?"

"No," she answered grudgingly, threading her needle again.

"I long to wear red, but it does not suit my coloring. Now that Alisa's hair is darkening, I suspect she will be able to wear Lannister crimson."

"Are you honestly talking about colors?" Arya could not help but ask, wincing at the sharp look Catelyn gave her from across the room.

Sansa's face soured temporarily, setting her embroidery down upon her lap. "I am sorry. Did you have a topic you would prefer more? I confess I have never quite mastered the art of conversation with you, given our differing interests. Please pick our topic."

Arya did not doubt her words would have been more pointed if their mother and Elinor were not present, and Arya suspected she was acting a bit of a brat; Sansa was frivolous and frustrating, but Arya knew her sister genuinely did not mean to offend her.
“How many events will take place at the tourney?” Arya asked, offering a weak smile when Sansa began to describe what details she learned from the queen.

It was an interesting skill, Arya decided, to learn to listen without hearing a thing.

After midday meal, Arya found herself carrying Rose out to the yard to watch the tourney grounds being erected. Her middle niece was the only one who seemed to bear her aunt any love at all; Elinor was a miniature of Sansa, loving songs and dolls, while Alisa was still barely more than a baby and an ill-tempered one at that. But Rose was happy and energetic, quick to talk to anyone and everyone, and she had earned chastisement from the queen a few days earlier for wrestling with Nymeria. Arya saw enough of herself in Rose that it made her rethink her unkind opinions towards children.

Balancing Rose on her hip, the little girl's arms around her neck, Arya described what each construction would be used for; she explained how a tilt was ridden, how a melee was fought, how you won the archery competition. Arya had not the faintest idea if Rose understood what she said, but the little girl listened eagerly and asked questions like an eager student.

“Elinor says Father is going to win the tourney.”

“He might,” Arya acknowledged. “He has won tourneys before and named your mother Queen of Love and Beauty.”

“Uncle Bran won a tourney once, and he gave the flowers to Aunt Meera.”

Arya had yet to meet her brother's wife; all she really knew of Meera Reed was that she was from the Neck and Sansa found her to be utterly unrefined.

“Any man can win a tourney if he rides well enough.”

“Can a lady win a tourney?”

“Ladies do not usually ride in tourneys. It is frowned upon.” Seeing the way the little girl's face fell, Arya added, “But Brienne of Tarth, she has ridden before; she may ride at this one since it is so close to Evenstar Hall. She is one of the best knights I have ever seen.”

“I wish I could be a knight, but Mother says I am a princess.” Rose rested her head against Arya's shoulder. “Father says I can have a pony on my next name day. Aunt Margaery has already asked which color I would like.”

“You will like riding.”

“Can you take me on your horse?” Lifting her head, her blue eyes swollen with hope, she added, “Father lets me ride with him sometimes.”

Arya knew it would drive Sansa to distraction if she did so; her sister wanted to raise proper princesses. But Rose looked so hungry for adventure, and Arya could recall how happy it once made her when Uncle Benjen raced her around Winterfell on his horse, his arms tight around her waist.

The stable boy looked unsure when Arya ordered him to saddle Winter, but the boy did not dare deny it; Rose bounced excitedly on her heels as Arya swung up into the saddle, her gown keeping her from doing it as gracefully as she once had. Rose giggled as Arya settled her small body in front of her, and Arya made sure to hold her securely in the circle of her arms as she urged Winter out into the yard. As Rose's laughter rang in her ears, Arya found herself blindsided with emotion as her throat and chest tightened with tears; she had not sat a horse since King Robert came to the Stormlands, and Arya did not realize how desperately she missed this.
“Go faster, Aunt Arya!” Rose urged, and Arya complied, sending Winter into a trot; the pace was maddeningly slow for Arya, who knew just what kind of speed Winter was capable of, but, for Rose, it felt like flying.

This is what having a child would feel like, Arya realized, Rose's back warm against her chest, the girl's small hands clutching the reins alongside Arya's, the sweet scent of the girl's hair in her nose. Arya never considered herself to be particularly maternal; she never cooed over babies in the cradle nor fantasized about what she would call her children. Even when she was pregnant, Arya was certain it was not something she particularly wanted; it was just something she had to do because she was a wife. But, as Rose giggled and cheered as they rode, Arya thought it would not have been so terrible to be a mother if her children were like Rose.

“What the bloody hells are you doing?” Robert roared as he, Ned, Renly, and Gendry exited the castle, spears and bows in their hands for hunting.

Arya immediately stopped Winter, clutching Rose a bit tighter. Her niece was oblivious to her grandfather's rage, grinning broadly at her grandfathers, uncle, and father.

“Look, Father! I'm riding!”

Gendry moved forward, reaching his hands out for her. “Yes, you are, sweetling.”

“I want a pony like this! Aunt Arya, will you ride horses with me when I get my pony?”

Arya struggled not to wince at the hopeful tone in her voice. “We shall see, my love.” She accepted her father's hand, helping her down from Winter without getting tangled in her skirts, and it seemed to strengthen her, having Ned Stark at her side.

“I thought I said you weren't to be on that Dornish beast again!”

Trying to keep her voice calm, not wanting to create a scene before Rose, Arya explained, “Rose wished to ride, and I do not trust another horse as I do Winter. You may ask anyone in the yard; we only came so far as this and were always in sight.”

“Aunt Arya wouldn't let us run,” Rose piped up, “even though I begged. She said I'm too little still.”

“It was harmless, Robert,” Renly pronounced, chucking Rose gently beneath her chin. “Why, you must have ridden with me like that half-a-hundred times when I was a child, and I know I rode with Tommen the same way. You're stabbing at shadows.”

There was something in Robert's eyes as he looked at her, something dark and lost which made Arya squirm; it was almost worse than when he'd look at her with longing in his face, the memory of Lyanna Stark blatant in every word or deed. This look was twisted up in desperation and impotency; it was the look of a man who could not control what was happening.

He wants to keep me where no one else can get to me, the maiden in the tower that he controls.

“I don't want you on that horse,” Robert said, his voice less gruff as his temper cooled. “You'll sell it.”

But Winter is the last thing I have which is truly mine. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“It can go to the winner of the tourney,” the king pronounced. “Older horse or not, a sand steed will be much desired.”
As Arya carried Rose back to her sisters, she prayed with everything she had that Gendry would win the tourney.

The snows melted in time for the tourney, but Arya knew this was not spring. There was still a lingering chill in the air, and she swore she could smell snow over the horizon, promising to return; when she shared her thoughts with her father, he smiled and pressed a kiss to the top of her head, declaring that she was correct and this was a false spring. As her maids laced her into the elegant crimson gown Sansa commissioned, Arya could already see the scores of men milling about; Prince Joffrey and Princess Margaery arrived earlier in the week for the tournament as well as Loras and Garlan Tyrell, most of House Martell, and even Lord Beric with Allyria. The men competing were all adorned in their finest armor, wanting to collect the purse of 50,000 dragons and her sand steed as well. Even Renly wore armor, intent on riding a tilt, and Arya dutifully gave him a favor to tie upon his lance.

“Lord Renly looks very fine in his armor,” Sansa offered as they had their midday meal. Her sister wore a dress of bright blue with Myrish lace, and she looked positively radiant as she nibbled at her food.

“Yes, Renly always looks fine.”

“Have you spoken to Maester Rhys about a tonic for fertility?”

_My fertility matters not a lick when neither of us can bring ourselves to even undress before the other._ “We are going to start to try once the castle is calm again.”

Dropping her voice as if to tell a secret, Sansa murmured, “I know there was unrest between the two of you before we came, but I am happy to see you two getting on so well now. I know we did not last part on the best of terms - “

“Sansa - “

“No, _please._” Taking a deep breath, Sansa continued, “I know we did not last part on the best of terms, but I truly meant you no harm. I honestly thought this would be a match which would serve you well. I do not want you to hate me.”

“I don’t,” Arya genuinely swore. “You may have made the suggestion, but it was only a matter of time.”

Sansa was quiet for a long beat, absently tapping an egg with a spoon to break its shell, before revealing, “He has never forgiven me for it, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gendry,” Sansa clarified. “The night your betrothal to Renly was announced, we had a terrible row, the worst we have ever had. He slept in his solar for weeks after your wedding. I was certain he would never forgive me. And then one night he came to me in his cups, as sad as I have ever seen him, and do you know what he said to me?”

“Oh course not.”

“She was my only friend.” Sansa lifted her gaze from her plate, and Arya thought Sansa appeared to have aged well-past her two-and-twenty years. “How does a prince surrounded by dozens of men not have a single friend?”
“The same way a lady can sit in a parlor and know not a single woman cares an ounce for her but will still smile to your face because you are the wife of her husband’s liege lord.”

Sansa nodded absently. “I sometimes believe I shall never understand Gendry in the same way I shall never understand you. Both of you are so damnably stubborn. But I do know he is still in love with you.”

It was the matter-of-fact way Sansa said it which surprised Arya more than anything. She was used to Sansa’s anger and disdain; this logical calm was disconcerting. “I believe you are mistaken.”

“You will always have a part of him I cannot touch; I have come to accept that. I can even accept that he requires your friendship to fulfill some emptiness in him which his brothers cannot fulfill. But the whispers...”

“I wish them to stop as well.” Sipping from her cup, Arya admitted, “I hated you for sending me here, I can confess that. But I swear to you on everything in this world, Gendry has never broken his vows to you, not with me. It is just idle gossip.”

“And the sellsword? Is that gossip as well?”

Arya felt herself blush brightly, hating her treacherous face. Tugging the edge of her lip between her teeth, worrying it gently, she finally managed, “I did not require moon tea.”

“But you conducted an affair?”

Arya shook her head, not sure how to explain Griff and his companions. Finally she decided upon, “He just made me feel things, is all.”

Her sister’s eyes grew wide in her head as she leaned forward, voice barely audible above the din of the hall. “Do you love him?”

“No, it was not...It was not how the king made it seem. But I...I loved the way he made me feel.”

“How did he make you feel?”

“Powerful,” was all Arya could say before Margaery sank down beside Sansa, smiling broadly as she recounted the events of the archery competition.

It was not until later, as Arya was watching the melee with Sansa at her side, that she realized this was the only time she ever truly felt as if she and Sansa were truly sisters.

The mystery knights arrived on the second day of the tilts as they always did, some clad in fine armor, others in armor which was ill-fitting. Next to Ser Loras, Gendry, Trystane Martell, and the other fine knights who had survived the first day of rides, none of the mystery knights seemed particularly intimidating. As Arya filed into the stands with Allyria Dayne and Arianne Martell, Sansa sitting in the royal box with the queen today, she expressed her disdain with the rather predictable showing.

“Oh, I think it may get interesting today,” Arianne said with a knowing smile. “Have you not seen the Dragon Knight?”

“The Dragon Knight?”

The Dornish princess pointed across the yard to where the mystery knights were assembled. Instantly
Arya saw precisely who Arianne was speaking of, having a conversation with another of the mystery knights. He was taller than most of the knights, though not so large as Lady Brienne or the Cleganes; though difficult to ascertain beneath his armor, Arya thought he was lean but clearly strong. Unlike his fellow mystery knights, the Dragon Knight wore fine, black armor which gleamed in the sunlight; his dragon's head helm was black as well with rubies inlaid for the eyes. A sword with a dragonbone pommel hung in a scabbard around his waist, and his shield bore a dragon before a blazing orange sun which reminded Arya of the midday sun in Dorne.

“They say he is the ghost of Rhaegar Targaryen, come to ride again,” Allyria whispered with a giggle.

“It is far more likely he is some rich lord's son hoping to get a knighting. With armor like that, he's probably a Hightower,” Arya replied.

“If he is Rhaegar's ghost, I cannot wait to see if he draws Gregor Clegane's name,” Arianne spat, sipping from her wine. “I would give every ounce of gold in Dorne to see the Mountain ridden down.”

After the first round, only the Dragon Knight and a man with a mammoth on his shield remained of the mystery knights, and the knight with the mammoth shield was quickly unseated by Trystane Martell in the second round. When the Dragon Knight pulled Ser Loras's name, Arya could hear men in the stands exchanging bets, many wagering their money on Loras Tyrell. As each man dipped their lance towards Robert before going to opposite ends of the field, Arya watched the Dragon Knight, finding something familiar about the man.

The crowd's cries of disbelief when the Dragon Knight easily unhorsed Ser Loras on the first pass echoed in the air; the Knight of the Flowers was incredibly well-liked throughout the kingdoms, and no one had ever been able to unseat him with such apparent ease.

“He is going to win,” Arya declared, surprising herself with the proclamation.

“You're certain?” Arianne asked, quirking an eyebrow. “You think he can beat the rest, even the prince?”

“Yes.”

Arianne gestured towards the man collecting bets, placing a purse full of gold upon the Dragon Knight. Turning her dark eyes upon Arya, she teased, “We had best hope you are correct or else my father is going to be quite angry with me.”

“Why would you bet all your coin?” Arya exclaimed in shock.

“You are better at predicting a tourney than a maegi.” Dropping her voice, her breath hot against Arya's ear, she added, “And mayhaps I would like to see a dragon knock a stag to the dirt.”

It was a curious thing, the enduring enmity between Houses Baratheon and Targaryen. In Winterfell, with Septa Mordane and Maester Luwin, she had been taught her histories, and those lessons always carefully laid out why Targaryen rule was horrible, why Rhaegar deserved to die on the Trident, why Robert Baratheon's ascension to the throne and Ned's role in it all was honorable. Only in Dorne did Arya truly begin to hear another side of the story, a story which was never whispered in the other kingdoms.

When she first came to Starfall, Allyria would tell her stories of her fallen siblings; she was barely more than a child when Arthur and Ashara died, but Ned's aunt told tales of her knightly brother and
beautiful sister as if she recalled everything with perfect clarity. Once she even let Arya hold Dawn before replacing it in its place of honor, waiting for use by the member of House Dayne worthy enough to swing it.

“Arthur once told me that the two greatest honors of his life was to wield Dawn and to wield it in service to his dearest friend.”

“But Rhaegar Targaryen was not honorable.”

Allyria had looked at her then, her violet eyes studying her with unsettling intensity, before replying, “Is that what they teach you in the North?”

Later, when she and Ned went to Sunspear, Elia Sand blatantly referred to Robert as “the Usurper.” She talked about the aunt she was named for, how her father still locked himself away on Princess Elia's name day, too overcome with grief; she discussed Rhaenys and Aegon's murders and swore vengeance on the Lannisters. Sometimes her sister or her mother would try to calm her down, but Elia was relentless in her hatred. On her last night in Sunspear, drunk on Dornish wine and swollen with questions, Arya had asked, “If you hate Robert so much, why not rebel?”

“So the Martells become usurpers? Besides, with Lannister gold funding him, Robert Baratheon will sit that throne until a Targaryen takes it back.”

“You think Aerys's children will cross the Narrow Sea with an army?”

“Only if there is justice in this world.”

As the Dragon Knight prepared to tilt against Trystane Martell, Arya wondered how many people in Westeros thought the same way as Elia Sand, how many Targaryen supporters still existed in the Seven Kingdoms.

When only Gendry and the Dragon Knight remained, Arya realized what was so familiar about the mystery knight. It was something so small, the way the mystery knight adjusted his grip on his lance, but Arya recognized it; it was the same adjustment Duck showed her using her practice sword, the one which was supposed to take pressure off your wrist when it ached. The Dragon Knight was too tall and lean to be Duck; the only other person Arya ever saw use the same grip was Griff.

She wished it did not make her stomach flutter in nervous anticipation to know Griff was so close.

Arya could not help but flinch when Gendry and Griff's lances connected solidly with the other's shield; she knew from sparring that Griff was strong, but Gendry possessed a massive amount of strength. Court was full of tales of Gendry and his hammer during the Ironborn Rebellion, how he had killed one on Euron Greyjoy's men with a blow so powerful, it pushed his chest out through his back. But Arya also knew Griff was faster, able to bring up his shield and pivot quickly enough to keep his seat, even as Gendry's lance shattered.

“Gods, he is strong,” Allyria observed as both men returned to their places to start again, Gendry being given a new lance.

“Are you certain I am not about to lose my gold?” Arianne japed.

Arya said nothing, her eyes refusing to leave the field.

The moment the tips of their lances passed, Arya knew with absolute certainty Gendry was going to be unseated; Griff's lance struck the crowned stag on the prince's shield at just the right angle, and Arya saw Gendry grasp at the reins before landing hard on the ground. Gasps and cheers mingled as
the Dragon Knight turned his horse back towards the prince instead of riding to retrieve the crown of winter roses to give to the Queen of Love and Beauty. As Griff slipped from his saddle, Arya heard the confused whispers amongst the spectators, but she knew what he was going to do; he had done it for her half-a-hundred times.

Griff extended his hand, helping Gendry back to his feet. The crowd roared its approval, and, as Gendry removed his helm, Arya could see the look of respect in his eyes for the Dragon Knight. She could not hear what words were being exchanged between the two men, but, after a moment, Griff reached up and removed his jeweled helm. His blue hair was sweat slicked and tight against his head, but his violet eyes and handsome features were just as Arya remembered them.

Arya had never heard an entire tourney go as silent as the dead before; she found her parents sitting before the royal box, and she could see her father's face was as pale as milk as he stared at Griff and Gendry, almost as if he was seeing a ghost.

So distracted by her father's appearance, Arya barely heard Allyria breathe, “It is uncanny,” before Arya felt something settling on her lap. Snapping her head, she found herself eye-to-eye with Griff, a crown of winter roses as blue as his hair once was resting on her legs.

“The godswood tonight,” he murmured, his voice so soft that his words were nearly carried away by the shocked whispers of the crowd, before turning his horse and riding away.

It was not until Arianne pressed a handkerchief against Arya's palm that she realized her tight grip on the crown of flowers had caused the thorns to dig into her skin and drawing blood.

“Do you know him?” Allyria asked as they rose, Arya determined to hide away in the castle before the king could begin shouting at her yet again.

“He's Griffin of Tyrosh.”

The Dornishwomen exchanged looks, heavy with subtext, before Arianne declared, “Well, you certainly have good taste.”

“Robert said I have to bed you tonight,” Renly reported as he entered Arya's bedchamber. “He said I'm not to leave your chambers until I've put a child in you.”

“He doesn't quite grasp what 'barren' means, does he?” she drawled, setting the book she was reading on her nightstand. Her body was tight with tension, anxious to escape to the godswood to see what it was Griff wanted with her, but Arya knew it would need to be much later before she could find out. The king was wroth over the Dragon Knight crowning her Queen of Love and Beauty, raging about insults to Baratheon honor, and Arianne whispered during the feast that, after receiving his purse and Winter, the Kingsguard had ordered Griff to leave the Stormlands.

“The only things my royal brother grasps is wineskins and his cock.” Renly tugged off his boots before climbing into bed beside her. They had feigned this enough times during their times together, and sometimes Arya even liked it when Renly would spend the evening in her bed; he could be incredibly funny when he wished to be.

“Such high esteem you keep him in.”

Renly smiled, stretching out on the mattress so he rested on his elbows near her feet. Reaching with one hand, he felt the fabric of her nightgown. “I quite like this. Makes you look so sweet and innocent.”
Arya halfheartedly kicked him in the shoulder. “Neither words which have ever been used to describe me. Much like modest and shy will never be used for you.”

He shrugged with a smile, fingers slipping around her ankle before venturing, “The Dragon Knight...”

“What of him?”

“Do you love him?”

“No,” she instantly answered. “I have told you before we did not have an affair.”

“Yes, and Loras and I are only the dearest of friends.” Renly shook his head with an affectionate smile. “Sometimes I believe you are the most difficult person to know. It is like you keep ten thousand secrets and do not wish to part with a single one.”

“Then I am like every other person in the Seven Kingdoms.” Arya shifted, propping herself up against the headboard. “Did you know my aunt?”

Surprise shone in Renly's eyes but he did not comment upon it. Instead he seemed to think for a moment before nodding. “I only met her once, and I was so small then, barely older than Elinor. At the time, I was so excited to be there, I barely cared at all to meet Robert's betrothed.”

“Be where?”

“Harrenhal, of course. It was the first time I had ever been to a tourney, and that was one so large. Robert introduced both Stannis and me to the Starks, showing off Lyanna the way he would have a prized destrier.”

“What was she like?”

Renly shrugged. “Pretty, I suppose. She was kind, and I remember she gave me extra sugared dough when I was told I had enough. Like I said, I was young.” Arya opened her mouth to reply when he added, “But I remember when Rhaegar gave her the flowers. I didn't understand at the time why everyone was so upset, but I remember the look on Robert's face.”

“What did it look like?”

“Like all the air was sucked from his lungs.” Meeting her gaze steadily, he added meaningfully, “The way Gendry looked today when your sellsword gave you the flowers.”

“Shut up!” she ordered, digging her heel into Renly's ribs. He grunted before capturing her legs, and Arya laughed as he wrestled with her; it reminded her of Robb and Jon, of being little again with no cares in the world. Renly caught her wrists, trying to pin her to the mattress, but Arya smoothly slid from beneath him, flipping his body as she caught him by surprise, sitting on his stomach with a smirk.

“I win!”

“You always win,” Renly complained good-naturedly, staring up at her with affection on his face. Arya blinked in confusion when he lifted a hand, gently cupping her cheek, his thumb stroking the line of her cheekbone.

“What?”
Renly playfully tweaked her nose. “I was just thinking that, if I had to be forced to take a wife, I'm glad that it is you.” He sat up, essentially holding Arya in his lap. “At least you are fun. Did you know Robert wanted me to marry one of Walder Frey's daughters? I would have taken the black first.”

“You would never take the black,” she argued, ruffling his hair the way Jon used to do to her. “The Night's Watch is not allowed to fuck.”

“That's because their cocks freeze off.” Renly leaned forward, his lips brushing against her forehead tenderly. “Feel pregnant yet?”

“With twins, no less.”

“Fabulous!” Playfully dumping her onto the mattress, Renly forced his feet back into his boots, preparing to leave. Arya rose on her knees, rumpling his shirt and loosening his ties, before pronouncing, “Now you look like you have fucked your wife well.”

“What would I do without you?” he quipped.

“Give Loras my best.”

A shadow descended over Renly's face, undoubtedly remembering that soon he and Ser Loras were going to be parted, and he nodded crisply before hurrying from her chamber. Arya tried to resume reading, but her adrenaline was flowing too strongly; by the time enough of Storm's End was in their beds, Arya was bursting with impatience, hands shaking in anticipation as she tried to lace her breeches.

In men's clothing, she looked very little like the Lady of Storm's End; enough layers hid the small swells of her breasts and camouflaged the curve of her hips. Only her hair gave her away, and Arya made sure to gather it tightly against her head, slicking it down with oil to make her look more like one of the many men who were still lingering at Storm's End following the tourney.

Tucking Needle into her belt loop, the dragonglass dagger hidden beneath her furs, Arya slipped unseen from the castle, heading towards the godswood. In the darkness, she could hear Nymeria and Lady singing, the full moon rousing their instincts, and Arya thought of Ghost, Grey Wind, Summer, and Shaggydog, of the pack her wolf had lost.

She found Griff before the heart tree, his destrier and Winter watering in the stream. Arya saw he had exchanged his fine tourney wear for his ordinary, patched clothing, his tourney sword replaced with his Valyrian steel. When he turned to look at her, Arya saw infinite sadness in his lilac eyes, and she wondered if the Kingsguard's order to flee was what caused it.

“You shouldn't have given me the flowers,” she said by way of greeting, reaching to rub Winter's side.

“Did you throw them away?”

“No, they're in my room,” Arya admitted, shivering as the leaves began to dance, the whispers of the trees starting again.

Griff stepped closer to her, face as serious as she had ever seen it. “If I don’t leave the Stormlands, the king has promised to have my head. There is a ship leaving for the Free Cities tonight, and I will be on it.”

Sorrow began to twist her insides. “So you have come to say goodbye.”

“No, I have come to ask you to come with me.” One hand finding purchase on her hip, the other
cradling her face, Griff entreated, “You would love Essos. It is nothing like here, with the rules and the limitations. You could be anything, anyone there. I know you do not believe that I possibly can, but I know you, Arya; your heart is the same as mine, and being beneath the thumb of a Baratheon for the rest of your life is no life at all.”

“I cannot just leave!”

“You would rather stay, let them dress you up in gowns you hate and give away what little you have which is not theirs? Come with me and I swear I will give you everything you have ever wanted.”

“I want to go home, and I will never be able to do that if I go with you.”

“Do you honestly believe that is an option if you stay with Renly Baratheon?” Drawing her nearer, his breath warm against her face, he insisted, “We could make a new home, the two of us. Duck can be our Master-At-Arms, Haldon will be our maester, Griff will be our castellan, and Lemore can be the septa to our children.”

“There can be no children - “

“There will be children,” Griff insisted. “I have seen it in a dream, Arya. We will have three, two daughters and a son.”

“It was just a dream.”

“It wasn't!” His kiss was firm but did not linger, and Arya felt as if her head was spinning. “We were destined to be together. Ours will be the song of ice and fire.”

“I cannot,” she began, her voice trailing off, resolve weakening.

“You will be free, Arya. Is that not what you want?”

Freedom...It was all she had ever wanted. How many times had she lamented her status as a girl to Jon Snow or begged Bran to escape to the Wall with her? How many times had she cursed Sansa for easily accepting whatever she was told to and vowing never to do the same? Yet here she was, everything she never wanted to be, and Griff was offering her the chance to be the person she wanted to be without any interference.

I will shame all of House Stark if I do this. They will never speak my name again, and I would not see them for the rest of my life.

They are already lost to you, a perfectly logical voice which sounded much like Bran pointed out. You will not be able to leave the Stormlands until the king is dead, and already they are starting to become strangers to you. Your mother has only been to the Riverlands a handful of times in nearly thirty years. Winterfell is not your home anymore.

Arya spared one last glance at the castle before nodding minutely, mounting Winter. She could hear Nymeria's howl like a siren song, trying to summon her back, but Arya knew Griff was right: this was the only way she would ever be free.

As they rode from the godswood, the leaves sang, “Queen, queen, queen.”
Arya loved the Free Cities with a fierceness she did not know existed. From the moment their ship docked in Braavos, Arya was certain this was where she was always meant to be, not locked up in some holdfast in Westeros feigning appropriate behavior. There was something about Braavos her companions did not like – Arya knew Old Griff began to make travel arrangements almost the moment they entered port – but Arya found herself marveling at everything: the fishermen, the pleasure barges, the House of Black and White, and most especially the Titan looming over the islands.

“The Braavosi believe there is only one god,” Griff explained as they entered the House of Black and White, “and that is the god of death. When someone wishes to die, they can come here and make that offering to the god. And, of course, if you are prepared to pay the price, there are always the Faceless Men.”

Arya watched as an old man, shriveled and hobbled, drank something across the room. He appeared to be younger than Old Nan, and Arya wondered what drove someone to come here and ask for death. She was never devout in the Faith, but Arya knew hardly anyone prayed to the Stranger; she could not imagine Death being the only god.

“Want to make an offering?” Griff teased in a whisper.

“Not today.”

They were walking near the water's edge, Arya feasting on all of the sights, when Griff chuckled. She turned her eyes on him expectantly, waiting for the explanation, and he shrugged, shaking blue hair from his eyes.

“You look at everything as if it is magical.”

“I have never seen anything,” she said by way of defense. “Do you know what girls get to do in Westeros? It's all sewing and dancing and curtsies. I have only seen as much of the Seven Kingdoms as I have because my husband died. If Ned hadn't been killed by the Ironborn, I would have stayed in Dorne the rest of my life.”

“You never talk about him,” Griff pointed out after a moment. “Was he your truest love?”

Arya shook her head, the sea air scattering her hair. “No, Ned was a good man, but, even after being married for years, we were never quite...comfortable with each other, I suppose. He was kind and gentle, but I do not think he knew what to make of me. I think he thought that, if we had children, it would make us closer and calm me some, but I could not do even that.”

“They never quickened?”

It was the queerest thing; when the maesters and her mother asked about the lost babies, Arya could answer as many questions as needed without feeling a thing. But hearing Griff, who continued to insist they were destined to be together and destined to have children together, ask the questions made Arya feel ashamed.

“No,” she bit out shortly, keeping her eyes on the horizon, hoping he would understand she did not wish to discuss her failings.

Arya tensed slightly as Griff stepped behind her, slipping his arms around her waist, his lips against
her ear as they watched the Narrow Sea lap at the shore. “Do you see the ship with the silk sails?”

She found it easily, the well-built trading vessel with sails made of multicolored silk. “Yes.”

“Our children's eyes will be the same color purple as that silk.” His large hands settling against the curve of her stomach, he continued, voice as soft and lilting as Nan's during a storytelling session, “Our daughter will come first, and she will be fierce. I have seen it, my love, and our daughter will be a warrior so great, Queen Nymeria herself would tremble.”

“Griff...”

“And our son, he will be honorable and wise; he will bring men together and convince enemies to lay down their swords and live in peace. But our youngest, our second daughter, she will be the one who the singers will write songs about, the one who will be made of pure Valyrian steel. She will push the darkness back and bring light to the world.” Tightening his hold on her, Griff brushed a kiss against the side of her head. “I have seen it, Arya. I know you do not believe me, but it will come to be.”

“I cannot marry you,” she declared, reiterating the argument she made during their entire crossing of the sea.

“Your marriage to Renly was never consummated. It could be set aside and you know it.”

Not turning to look him in the eye, enjoying the temporary pleasure that the solidity of his embrace offered, Arya drawled, “Then, by all means, write the High Septon, tell him where we are, and we can receive our dispensation in no time.”

Griff pulled away, his body tight with tension, and Arya knew she had upset him. From the moment they boarded Cinnamon Wind, Griff begged her to marry him, to share his bed; even as Old Griff glowered and raged at his son for bringing her, Griff insisted it was right. And Arya wanted to be his wife and take him to bed, wanted it more than she had wanted anything since she was a child, but the part of her which would always be in Winterfell told her it was wrong.

No matter how far she fled, Renly Baratheon was still her husband and any of Griff's children she managed to bear would be bastards should she ever return to Westeros.

“I will never understand why you insist on clinging to the things which enslave you and slapping away those which would free you,” Griff pronounced, and Arya recoiled from the sting of his words.

Their return to the inn was done in silence.

Arya had never shared quarters with someone until Lemore. When they were very small, her mother tried to put her and Sansa in a room together, reasoning that she and Lysa loved being together, but the plan only lasted a week before she and Sansa were separated, their fighting having driven their father to distraction. Even at court, when it was commonplace for ladies to share beds, Arya always slept alone, none of her sister's ladies ever wanting the pleasure of her company. Once, when she was very little, she tried to share Jon's room, but her brother explained it was not proper for brothers and sisters to do so.

Lemore did not wear her septa's robes in Braavos, having exchanged them for plain gowns. When she dressed, Arya noticed the spindly white lines around her midsection, the same lines Sansa complained of after bearing her children, and Arya nearly asked about them; everyone knew septas were not allowed to lay with men, let alone have children. In gowns, Arya saw just how beautiful Lemore actually was; even nearing fifty, Lemore's body was slender with soft curves, her blonde hair...
always neatly arranged. It was not until they nearly reached Braavos that Arya realized the roots of Lemore's hair was as dark as Arya's own, dye keeping Lemore blonde in the same way it kept Griff's hair blue.

The night of her latest disagreement with Griff, Arya was stretched out on the bed as Lemore began to brush her dyed locks. As a child, Arya used to love watching Catelyn take down her thick, auburn hair, working it until it surrounded her shoulders like a cape; Arya lacked the patience to ever do the same to hers, and, as Lemore carefully tended to her hair, Arya suddenly longed to see her mother.

“You're staring.”

“I'm sorry,” Arya said more from instinct than genuine apology.

“What's wrong, sweetling? Did you and Griff quarrel again?”

Sitting up on the lumpy inn mattress, Arya fiddled with the bottom of her tunic before blurting out, “Are you Griff's mother?”

A hint of a sad smile teased at Lemore's lips but never flowered. Setting down her comb, Lemore turned, meeting Arya's gaze steadily. “Did I bring him into this world? No. Have I raised him since the cradle? Yes. He has not told you this story?”

“He always says he will explain things some day.”

This time Lemore did smile. Settling onto the bed beside Arya, she said, “Well, a man cannot expect you to marry him if he is not honest, though I suspect Griff and I have not done the best at teaching him that particular lesson.” Smoothing her hands over her skirt, Lemore offered, “I can tell you this story if you wish to hear it. But I warn you: you may not like it.”

“I can handle it,” Arya promised.

Taking a deep breath, Lemore began, “When I was very young, I lived in Dorne with my brothers. My entire life I was told how beautiful I was, how special, and it made me vain and selfish. With one brother the heir to our house and the other in service to King Aerys, my father decided to send me to serve as a companion to our liege lord's only daughter. Do you know who that was?”

Arya thought for a moment before blinking in surprise. “Elia Martell was the only daughter of Dorne.”

Lemore nodded, her smile full of infinite sadness. “Yes, Princess Elia. She was nothing like me; though beautiful, she was thoughtful, soft-spoken, and unbearably kind. I was certain it would be torture to remain at her side, but I came to love her ferociously, dearer to me than even my own blood. When her betrothal to Prince Rhaegar was announced, she begged me to come with her to court, and I was so very eager to leave Dorne, to experience everything. Their wedding was the grandest event I ever saw, and I could hardly believe my best friend was going to be my queen.”

Thinking of Sansa and the jewels which she was now draped in, Arya smirked. “I understand.”

“Even then, long before the Rebellion, Aerys was already half-mad, and, as Rhaegar grew older, the king became madder. He was deathly afraid Rhaegar would seek to overthrow him, especially once Elia gave Rhaegar an heir, but it was not his nature. Many things have been said about Rhaegar Targaryen, some of them deserved and some not, but all will agree that Rhaegar only ever wanted what was best for House Targaryen.”

“Were you there, the day he named my aunt Queen of Love and Beauty?”
“Oh, yes. It seemed like everyone in the Seven Kingdoms was there, including your house. All of
Elia's ladies were swooning for Brandon Stark, the wild wolf that he was.”

“Did you?”

Lemore's face became infinitely sad as she confessed, “I preferred your father.”

“You knew my father?” Arya gasped.

“I knew them all, my dear: your father, your uncle, Robert Baratheon. I had even met Catelyn Tully
once. We were all little more than children then, playing games we did not understand. And, of
course, after Harrenhal, everyone in the realm knew of Lyanna Stark. Not a single person could have
identified her before that tourney, but no one would ever forget her name afterward.”

“Everyone says I am like her.”

“Do they?” Lemore tilted her head as if considering. “You have her looks, that is plain, but
Lyanna...She was a bit wild, but there was a dreaminess in her you do not possess. All of Ned's
practicality and ability to see what is true has been gifted to you, and Lyanna sorely needed that.”

“If you were Elia's lady, how did you come to know my aunt so well?”

“That is part of the story,” Lemore said, a touch of chastisement in her voice. “As I was saying, after
Harrenhal, Elia knew Rhaegar wanted Lyanna Stark. There was never great love in Elia's marriage;
respect and affection, certainly, but never passion. And Rhaegar insisted there needed to be a third
child, a child Elia would never be able to bear. When he told Elia of his plans to bring Lyanna into
their marriage like the Targaryen kings of old, all she asked of him was a promise that Aegon would
come before any of Lyanna's sons in the line of succession.”

“Wait...Elia knew?”

Lemore nodded. “Elia and Rhaegar loved each other in their own ways, but Elia would have done
anything for the prince and princess. She could suffer the embarrassment of another queen if it meant
protecting her children, and she trusted Rhaegar to protect their children.”

“But if Elia knew, if Lyanna went with him voluntarily, then why - “

“Because it was to be kept a secret until they were married, until Lyanna was swelling with a child.
No one expected Brandon to ride into King's Landing calling for Rhaegar's head; no one thought the
Mad King would burn Rickard Stark alive and start demanding heads. And certainly no one
expected for Jon Arryn, the most peace loving man in the Seven Kingdoms, to call his banners.” Her
violet eyes locking with the grey of Arya's, she declared, “The Rebellion was just as unkind to those
who swore fealty to the Iron Throne as it was to the rebels who fought for it.”

“What does this have to do with Griff?”

“I am getting to that, my dear.” Folding her hands over her midsection, Lemore explained, “My
parents insisted I return to Dorne, but Elia was essentially a hostage in the Keep. I pleaded to be
allowed to stay and I would have, but then I found out I was pregnant. The moment my brother
learned of it, he vowed to put me on a horse and send me to Dorne, making me vow to never reveal
the father, who had turned rebel during the war. And the night before I was to leave, Elia came to my
chambers through a hidden passageway with Aegon in her arms. 'You must take him,' she begged
me. 'He must be kept safe in case Rhaegar falls.' She explained how the Spider found a common boy
who had Aegon's look to take his place and once the war was over, Aegon could return. It broke her
heart to not be able to send Rhaenys away as well, but she was too old and people would know the
difference. So I did what I had always done: I served the woman who was to be my queen.”

For a moment Arya could not breathe as her brain puzzled out precisely what Lemore was telling her. Finally, her voice sounding uncharacteristically small, she asked, “Are you telling me that Griff is Aegon Targaryen?”

“The sixth of his name,” Lemore confirmed.

Arya was silent for an indeterminable length, the weight of everything crushing her from all sides. She had fled her marriage, her family, and her country with a Targaryen. Even if she returned to Westeros, even if her family forgave her, the Iron Throne never would. Robert still raged about the Targaryens, and Arya knew from listening to conversations not meant for her ears that the king was constantly plotting how to eliminate Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen from the face of the earth even though they were no threat. No Targaryen was allowed to live under the reign of King Robert.

“What happened to your baby?” Arya found herself asking even as her mind reeled.

“She stayed with my parents, who claimed her as their own; my mother had a stillborn daughter weeks before I gave birth, and we simply claimed the stillborn was the child I carried. Even her father thought she died, which was for the best. He was newly married by that time, and his honor was about to take a brutal pounding as it was. And so, once Robert was proclaimed king, I boarded a ship with Aegon and made for Pentos.”

“What did people think became of you?”

“They thought I killed myself from grief. The only ones who knew differently were my parents, who knew of Aegon, and they never told a soul.”

Realization dawned immediately. “You're Ashara Dayne.”

“Once I was,” she admitted, weariness creeping into her eyes. “But I have been Septa Lemore for more of my life than I ever was Ashara Dayne, so who does that actually make me?”

“If you're Ashara, then Allyria is your daughter.” Sickness roiled in her stomach. “Who was her father?”

The older woman sighed heavily. “You know who her father is.”

Arya got off of the bed, pacing the creaking floor for a moment before exploding, “If Allyria Dayne is the child my father had with you, then who is Jon's mother? Everyone has always said it was you!”

“Is this an answer you truly want, Arya? Think hard,” Ashara urged her, “because this is knowledge which cannot be unlearned.”

“How could it possibly be worse than what you have already told me?!”

Beautiful face pinching in regret, Ashara nodded absently. Finally, she said, “Ned came to Starfall to return Dawn to me. He traveled with the crannogman who fought with him at the Tower of Joy, and he carried a baby in his arms. I summoned Wylla, a wet nurse in our service, to care for the baby while Ned and I talked. He saw Aegon and knew what I had done, but he was still so raw from what the Lannisters did to Rhaenys and Elia. I started to explain, to beg him to keep it from Robert, and Ned started to cry. I was so stunned and then he told me that the baby was Lyanna's, the third child Rhaegar wanted so desperately.”
Arya felt lightheaded as she perched on the edge of a chair.

“He swore to Lyanna that he would protect her son, keep him hidden so he could live a happy life free of the Iron Throne. The baby had the Stark look; there was not a drop of Rhaegar to him. But Aegon...Ned swore to me he would never tell anyone of Aegon if I would never tell anyone of Jon, and then he left to go North to your lady mother.”

“That is why he never told Jon,” Arya mused aloud. “It was too dangerous.”

“Arya, you must understand - “

“Why were you in the Stormlands?” she demanded, her anger starting to rise again. “If everything was so dangerous, why come to Storm’s End?” When Ashara said nothing, Arya felt overwhelming rage rising within her. Getting to her feet, she threw open the door of their room and hurried downstairs to where Griff - Aegon, she reminded herself - was having a drink with Haldon, Duck, and Old Griff.

“Arya!” Aegon greeted with a grin. “Join us - “

“Tell me you did not beg me to come with you because you want revenge, she wished to plead. Tell me you had no idea who I was and, once you did, you loved me too much. Tell me I did not betray everyone I loved and pissed away my honor for a game.

“I wanted to tell you,” he began.

“Then you should have told me!”

Aegon lifted his face towards the sky, the moonlight making his skin luminescent. Closing his eyes for a moment, he finally said, “I have never been called by my name. I was nearly two-and-ten before Ashara and Jon told me I even had another name. The entirety of my life has been spent acting like I am Griff of Tyrosh while trying to remember I am really Aegon Targaryen, a boy who died twenty-six years ago.”

“Why did you come to Storm’s End?”

“Because it was my duty.” Aegon looked at her, his face twisted in a complicated mixture of pain and anger. “When I had my fourteenth name day, I was summoned to Pentos for a wedding. It was the first time I ever met my aunt or uncle. While Daenerys married Khal Drogo, Viserys told me about the Rebellion, about my family. He leaned across the table and told me what was done to my sister, how Gregor Clegane bashed in the head of the boy who was supposed to be me before raping my mother with that poor boy’s blood still on his hands. ‘They have made us beggars when we are gods,’ Viserys said to me. And I believed it.”

“So you came to Westeros to fulfill your destiny?” Arya growled.

“When Dany married the khal, it was supposed to be so Viserys could return to the Seven Kingdoms with an army. My survival pushed him back in succession, and he was enraged. For all of his threats,
Viserys will not kinslay, and the Dothraki swore no promise to put me on the Iron Throne. My existence took his throne and his army, and he sold Dany for nothing."

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“They killed my family, Arya!” Aegon shouted, startling her with the thick emotion in his words. “My mother, my father, my grandparents, my sister... They thought they killed me! What am I to do, spend the rest of my life living with nothing because the Usurper took everything?!”

“I cannot - “

“What would you do if you were me?” Aegon challenged, seizing her shoulders tightly. “If someone put your entire family to sword, took Winterfell and the North, took even your name, what would you do?”

“I would kill them all,” Arya answered without hesitation.

Releasing his hold on her, Aegon flexed his hands as if he wished to grab her again before gritting out, “I am the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms, and I cannot even use my own name. I went to Westeros to see King Robert, to see the man who destroyed my family, and then I found...”

“Found what?”

Aegon laughed mirthlessly. “I found a fat, old man who turned a prosperous kingdom into a debtor’s nightmare. I found Tywin Lannister to be a miserly bastard and the evil Eddard Stark to be a good man who is doing his best to hold the realm together. I found that, for every bit of knowledge Viserys tried to bestow upon me, only few were true, and I found there are no smallfolk sewing dragon banners in hopes of our triumphant return.” Face softening, he murmured, “And then I found Eddard Stark’s daughter in a godswood, so beautiful and free that I understood what must have driven my father to pursue your aunt.”

“Stop.” Crossing her arms across her chest, hurt swelling in her chest, she snapped, “You lied to me!”

“But what difference does it make if I am Aegon Targaryen or Griff of Tyrosh? The man I am has not changed, only the name.”

Tears slipped from Arya’s eyes, burning their way down her cheeks. Aegon reached out, brushing them away with his thumb, and she wanted to pull away, to slap him, to run him through with Needle; but what was worse was that she didn’t truly want that. She wanted him to hold her and comfort her, to press kisses to her mouth and swear he would never tell her a lie again.

You are as stupid as Lyanna ever was.

“I love you,” Aegon swore, cupping her face between his palms, his face more open than Arya had ever seen it. “I have loved you from the moment you showed up at our house and called me craven, and I know you love me, Arya, I know it. We were meant to find each other.”

“I have to go home,” she whimpered, tears falling freely now. “I cannot put my father through this again.”

“You are already gone,” he pointed out, a hint of desperation to his words now. “Connington says they all believe we have run off together, and all they know is I’m a sellsword. They will never know who I truly am.”
“Until you charge into the kingdoms with your uncle to take back the Iron Throne!”

“If I swear to you that I will never make a claim for the throne, will you stay?” Her eyes widening at his words, Aegon rushed on, “I will swear it, to the old gods and the new if you wish it. All I want is you. Let Viserys have all Seven Kingdoms if that’s what he wants.”

There had been a time, be it ever so brief, when Arya harbored a secret hope Gendry would make the same offer. She would lie in her bed in Winterfell and imagine Gendry returning to the North, declaring he had denied his birthright, given up the throne, and was content to live out his days as an armorer if only she would join him. In her fantasies, they lived the rest of their days at Winterfell, Gendry working with Mikken in the forge while she helped to run Winterfell.

But Gendry never made the offer and Arya never wanted to be a queen, so here she was, on the streets of Braavos with another prince who was willing to give her everything she ever wanted.

”Go as far away from my husband as it takes for him to forget he ever knew Arya Stark,” Sansa once said to her. Arya wondered how far she would have to go before she forgot Gendry Baratheon.

“You will never pursue the Iron Throne?”

“Never,” Aegon vowed.

They would never forgive me anyway, Arya rationalized as she nodded, allowing Aegon to take her into his arms, his mouth seeking hers.

A fortnight later, as Arya Stark made vows of marriage to Aegon Targaryen before Jon Connington, Ashara Dayne, Haldon Halfmaester, and Rolly Duckfield, she knew she was as well and truly orphaned as her new husband.

Aegon wanted her with a passion which was almost violent. In those first months of marriage, as they traveled from Braavos to Lorath and on to Lys, Arya felt as if she spent more time out of her clothes than in them, Aegon's hands always reaching for her, his mouth constantly coaxing her into pleasure. At first it embarrassed her, the way Connington would glare at her as Aegon would tug her towards their cabin on the ship or Duck would smirk knowingly; she was always taught that what a lord and lady did together was private and should be conducted as such. When she was newly married in Dorne, Ned blushed every time he came to her rooms during that first year, and seldom did he linger in her bed, both of them unsure what to do once or how to behave once they were done. Towards the end of their marriage, they were more comfortable with each other, but never was there real passion between her and Ned.

With Aegon, it took next to nothing for the passion between them to spark. Arya found herself eagerly meeting every kiss, arching into every touch; she could hardly breathe some days, so hungry and desperate for her husband, sinking her teeth into his shoulder or the pillow to muffle her cries. If she allowed herself to think of home, she knew Sansa would think she was wanton and shameful, but Arya Stark of Winterfell died the moment she left Storm's End and the Arya she was now reveled in the absolute freedom she possessed.

“I know what you're doing,” Arya gasped one morning as the sun began to filter in through the small window of their cabin, rising and falling atop Aegon's body.

Aegon laughed breathlessly, his hands gliding up her sides, encouraging her movements. “I should certainly hope so.”

She slapped lightly at his chest, moaning as he palmed her breast. “You cannot get a child on me. It
Arya cried out in surprise as Aegon suddenly flipped her onto her back, catching one of her legs behind the knee, holding her leg high against his chest as he stroked into her. “I shall be most happy to prove you wrong.”

They were in Lys two months before Arya realized she was pregnant. Her moon blood had never come regularly, so Arya did not consider it odd when two moons passed without bleeding. It was only when nausea began to nearly incapacitate her, her breasts so tender to touch she cried when Aegon cupped one, that she realized what was happening inside her body. She did not want to tell her husband, waiting for the bleeding to start as it always had; the longest of her pregnancies had not even lasted four moons, and Aegon so fervently believed she would bear his children.

Only Ashara noticed the differences in her body, brewing her tea to help with her sickness. As Arya emptied the contents of her stomach into a basin, Ashara sat beside her, rubbing her back soothingly; the gentleness of the older woman’s hands made Arya start to cry, a sharp longing for Catelyn piercing her heart.

“He will hate me when I bleed,” she whimpered into Ashara’s lap, letting the woman card her fingers through Arya’s long, damp hair.

“You won’t bleed, sweetling,” Ashara tried to comfort her. “And even if you do, Aegon will not love you any less. He did not marry you for your womb.”

“I could not give Ned a baby, and it made things so difficult between us. I do not want - “

“Hush,” Ashara murmured, pressing a kiss to Arya’s forehead. “Just rest. I will pray enough for the both of us.”

She was nearly four moons into her pregnancy when the swelling of her stomach could not be hidden from her husband any longer, her belly starting to round from the child growing inside. Arya was barely able to finish her sentence before Aegon was on his feet, laughing in excitement before shouting out the news to everyone. He bought everyone in the Lyseni inn drinks to celebrate his first child, and Arya wished he would stop, still terrified she would lose this child as she had the first three.

Their ship made port in Pentos when the baby quickened. So startled by the flutter of the child in her womb, Arya gasped, grasping her stomach and stilling in her tracks, causing Haldon to crash into her back. Aegon immediately stopped, holding her elbow and demanding with panic in his voice, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Arya was surprised to feel tears on her cheeks. “It moved. The baby moved.”

Pure happiness shone in Aegon’s eyes. “Of course she did. Didn’t I tell you she is a warrior?”

For the first time, Arya knew unequivocally she was going to be a mother. As they rode towards the mansion of some friend of Aegon’s, Arya found Jon Connington watching her with narrowed eyes. Aegon was laughing at something Duck said, the two men riding ahead to lead the way, and Arya was surprised when Connington brought his horse next to hers and advised, “This is not Westeros, Your Grace. You would do well to remember that.”

She hated how Connington refused to call her anything but “Your Grace” now that she knew Aegon’s identity; with all their secrets in the open, Arya saw how everyone, even Ashara, deferred to Aegon, referring to him as “our king” and “Your Grace.” As far as her companions were concerned,
Aegon was the King of the Seven Kingdoms and she, the queen.

“I do not know what you mean, Lord Connington.”

Jon's eyes darkened considerably as he gritted out, voice low enough so Aegon could not overhear, “Do not play the confused lady with me; it insults us both.”

“Then what - "

"Viserys Targaryen has spent nearly thirty years waiting for the return of his family to the Iron Throne. An intemperate youth became an unbalanced man, but Aegon loves him well despite counsel to do otherwise. Viserys spent fourteen years believing himself to be the rightful king, and he will stop at nothing to put Aegon on the throne with himself as Hand."

“Aegon will not try for the throne.”

Connington glared at her. “Be that as it may, Viserys is still Aegon's heir. When he sees that you are carrying the next Targaryen prince or princess, you will become an enemy, and Viserys is a vicious enemy to have.”

Gripping Winter's reins a bit tighter, Arya snapped, “I assure you, Lord Connington, I am no less vicious as an enemy than the Beggar King.”

Arya thought she may have imagined it, but she could have sworn there was respect in Jon Connington's eyes.

As the mansion rose before them, guards in pointed hats everywhere, Arya urged Winter forward until she had sidled up next to Ashara. “Who lives here?”

There was a twist of distaste to her mouth but Ashara's words were utterly bland. “Magister Illyrio Mopatis. He is a friend of Lord Varys's. When we first fled Dorne, Illyrio hosted us until Aegon was about seven.”

“Why does Varys want the Targaryens as kings?”

“I have long since stopped trying to discern the motivations of men when it comes to the game of thrones.” Ashara brushed a stray lock of hair from her eyes with a sigh. “But Aegon is fond of him, and he has offered his home as a safe place to deliver your child.”

“Are there dangerous places for me to have my child?”

Ashara looked at her for a long beat, a hint of sadness in her face. “You carry the rightful heir to the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms, my dear. Already there are whispers about Aegon's existence and soon they will reach Robert, who has made his feelings for dragonspawn well-known.”

Cold fury filled her body at what Ashara was suggesting. “Let him come. I am not Elia Martell, and my sword cuts as well as theirs.”

Illyrio Mopatis was a terribly fat man; even in fine silks with rings upon every finger, Arya could not see anything but a fleshy man sweating in the warm spring afternoon. He inclined his head rather than take the knee, and Arya suspected it was because he would not be able to get back to his feet if he went to the ground. The man beside him was tall and very thin, almost no muscle to him; he was outfitted as richly as Illyrio, his silver hair well-kept and cut neatly to his chin, but there was a coldness in his eyes which Arya instantly distrustful.
This was Viserys Targaryen, and he was looking at her as if she was the vilest evil he had ever seen.

Aegon embraced his uncle tightly, clapping him upon the back, and, even with his hair still blue, Arya could see the resemblance between them. Her husband was more comely, taller, and well-muscled but there was a shrewdness in Viserys's face which Aegon lacked. In the months since leaving Storm's End, Arya was surprised to find Aegon trusted with surprising freedom, especially when it came to what little family and friends he had. She had overheard enough of the fights between Aegon and Connington to know that Connington did not think Viserys was trustworthy. Only the night before she had heard Connington entreat, “If you must ally yourself with anyone, it should be Daenerys!”

Arya was far more interested in Daenerys Targaryen than Viserys. She remembered reading about the Dothraki in a book of Maester Luwin's once when she was young; when he found Arya with it, he snatched it away and said it was inappropriate reading for ladies. In retrospect, Arya knew it was the illustrations rather than the words which concerned the maester.

“So this is your bride,” Viserys drawled, displeasure written plainly on his face. “And you've got a child on her as well. How wonderful.”

“Viserys - “ Illyrio began.

“In case you have forgotten,” the exiled prince rushed on, “things did not end well for House Targaryen the last time a Targaryen took a Stark from a Baratheon. I had hoped you would be smart enough to not let your cock get you into trouble.”

Arya bristled at the words, but Aegon was already retorting, the hint of threat in his tone, “And I had hoped you would be smart enough to not insult my wife.”

Viserys looked at the both of them for a moment, lilac eyes flickering back and forth, before sighing, “Well, I suppose trading one Stark queen for another will help the transition when we take the throne.”

Arya decided in that moment that she despised Viserys Targaryen.

The larger her stomach became, the more Arya longed for her mother and even for Sansa. Illyrio was a wonderful host and treated her nothing but kindly, Aegon was happier being in a place he did not have to hide, and Ashara provided her as much support as any mother would, but Arya wanted Catelyn's hands smoothing hair back from her forehead, wanted irritatingly upbeat Sansa there to tell her everything was wonderful. As her child grew, so did Arya's homesickness, some days crippled with longing for her father, Robb, Bran, Rickon, and most especially Jon Snow.

*He may not be my true brother, but I will never love him less for it. And when I see him again, I will tell him what Ashara told me so he can know that his mother did want him.*

There was a fountain in the yard, a young bravo with his sword drawn poised above the water, and Arya found herself preferring to spend her days near the water than inside listening to Viserys and Illyrio prattle on about birthrights. Her stomach was too large for her to ride, her back screaming in pain from even walking, and Arya anxiously awaited the baby's arrival.

Aegon came to her at midday bearing a plate of fruit and cheese with a jug of iced honey milk. She smiled in thanks, gratefully devouring the food, and Aegon settled his hands on the small of her back, massaging the ache away. Arya moaned in relief, leaning back to fully put herself in his arms, and Aegon complied, bearing her weight against his chest as his hands settled on her belly.
Immediately the baby began to dance, and her husband chuckled.

“She knows it is me.”

“If only she would come out and meet you.”

Aegon pressed a kiss to her temple. “I know you are uncomfortable, but it will be worth it.”

“You must think me so ungrateful. Three babies lost and now, when I’m finally able to carry one, all I have done is complain.”

“No,” he argued softly, “I think you are the most amazing woman I have ever seen, and I feel so blessed that you are my wife and the mother of my child.”

“You have to say that so I do not bury my dagger in your chest while you sleep.” Snuggling closer to him, she confessed in a tiny voice, “I miss my family.”

“I know.” As the baby kicked more powerfully against his palms, Aegon asked, “Do you hate me for taking you away?”

“You did not take me anywhere. And I certainly would not be having a child if I had stayed in Storm's End. I just...” Toying with the cuffs of his shirt, trying to find the words to describe what she was feeling to a man who had never known his parents or siblings, Arya finally settled on, “Every time I see something new or exciting, I wish Bran or Jon was here. Every time I am lonely, I reach for Nymeria only to find she isn't there. I love you and I love our child, but it is like I killed Arya Stark to become Arya Targaryen.”

“Oh, I hope that is not true because I fell in love with Arya Stark. I want our daughters to be like Arya Stark. And some day I hope to take you home, which I cannot do with anyone but Arya Stark.” Tears began to swim in Arya's eyes as Aegon pressed one hand to the rise of her stomach, his other arm sliding around her shoulders to hold her tightly against him. “You are my winter bride, my direwolf; promise me you will never try to become a dragon.”

“And if our children are more direwolf than dragon?”

“Then they shall be the fiercest pack of wolves to ever roam the earth.”

In the end, they were both wrong. After nearly two days worth of labor, their daughter emerged from Arya's body shrieking at the indignity of it all. Once Aegon said all of their children would have eyes as purple as his own, but the baby's eyes were a deep brown, wide and surprisingly alert for a newborn; a cap of silky black hair covered the baby's head, and her skin was a warm shade of copper Arya recognized from her time at Sunspear.

“She is a viper,” Ashara laughed through her tears, cleaning the baby thoroughly as Haldon saw to Arya, bundling the baby tightly in the soft blanket of crimson and black she worked on during Arya's pregnancy.

When summoned to her room, Aegon cradled their daughter carefully in his arms, eyes shining with emotion, and Arya could see there was even a peculiar emotion flashing over Viserys's usually unpleasant face. Arya watched as Ashara stood on her toes, brushing a kiss to Aegon's cheek before sweeping a touch over the baby's head.

“Your sister looked much the same when she was born.”

“Rhaenys,” Aegon sighed, a combination of sadness and joy twisting his features, and, as he lifted
his eyes, Arya nodded minutely, already knowing the question.

Against Arya's wishes, Illyrio held a grand celebration for the birth of Princess Rhaenys Targaryen, inviting the other magisters and even the prince of Pentos, feasting and dancing taking place until the early hours of the morning. Aegon assured Arya that his old friend only wanted to honor their daughter, rationalizing it could also serve as their wedding feast, but Arya saw it for what it was: an announcement.

Illyrio Mopatis announced to the world that Prince Aegon Targaryen was alive, wed, and now had a healthy heir, and Arya knew word would reach King's Landing, would reach Robert. She may not have known the king well, but she knew the double insult of fleeing with a Targaryen and bearing his child would earn her his eternal enmity, would make she and Rhaenys targets of the Iron Throne until there was no choice but to retaliate to protect themselves.

Arya had no use for the game of thrones, but she would be damned to all seven hells before she would allow her and her child to be used as pawns in it.

Daenerys Targaryen, khaleesi of the Dothraki, rode onto the grounds of Illyrio's estate with her khalasar six moons after Rhaenys's birth perched atop a horse as silver as the hair which flowed over her shoulders. Arya did not know what she had been expecting Aegon's mysterious aunt to be like, but it was certainly not this.

When standing upon the ground, Arya saw Daenerys barely reached Viserys's shoulder. Her silver hair was bound in a thick, oiled braid which hung over her shoulders, two bells tinkling as she moved; her eyes were as violet as Viserys's and Aegon's, but her skin was not as fair, the sun having darkened it. She wore leather riding pants and a painted vest in the Dothraki fashion, enough skin on display to scandalize even the whores of Westeros, but there was still something regal about her. Arya knew from Aegon that Daenerys was nearly two years younger than he, that she had been traded in marriage to Khal Drogo at thirteen and bore his son, and that she and Viserys were often combative with each other, but this small woman did not appear intimidating, especially when she allowed Aegon to scoop her off of her feet like a child.

Now that Aegon washed the blue dye from his hair, Arya could hardly tell where his silver hair ended and Daenerys's began as their heads inclined towards each other as if to whisper secrets. Aegon spoke of Daenerys with such great affection, his aunt who, like him, remembered nothing of their family, and Arya thought of Jon Snow on the Wall, thousands of leagues away, the brother she loved the best who was truly Aegon's brother.

"We shall visit him some day," Aegon swore one night as they lied in bed, Rhaenys between them. "Our family will be whole again."

Pulling back from Aegon, Daenerys made her greetings to Illyrio and Jon Connington before pressing a cool kiss to Viserys's cheek. "I am happy to see you are well, brother."

Viserys said nothing.

When Daenerys turned to Arya, she immediately beamed at Rhaenys, who was wide-eyed and staring at her great-aunt. "Oh, Aegon, she is beautiful. I had thought she would look like us, but she must take after your mother." Stroking the smooth skin of Rhaenys's arm, the khaleesi lifted her gaze towards Arya. "And you must be Arya Stark."

"I am happy to meet you, Princess Daenerys."
With a small roll of her eyes, she waved forward a pair of men from the group. “I insist you call me Dany. We are family now.” Resting her hand upon the arm of a tall Dothraki boy, she introduced, “This is my son Rhaego and my most loyal knight, Ser Jorah Mormont.”

“Mormont? Of Bear Island?”

The bald man nodded. “I once was the Lord of Bear Island, Your Grace, until my exile.”

Arya searched her memory for a mention of Jorah Mormont but found nothing. “I am quite familiar with the women of Bear Island. Dacey Mormont is one of my brother’s most loyal bannermen. They fought well during the Second Ironborn Rebellion.”

If Jorah appreciated the compliment, he gave no indication, and Arya found herself swallowing nervously. She was never much good at pleasantries and courtesies; that was always Sansa’s forte. But whether she liked it or not, to these people, Arya was the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, and she wanted to make a positive impression. She thought of how her mother used to greet her father’s men at Winterfell, how quiet and dignified she always seemed.

Quiet and dignified was not Arya’s way; it was why she had never wanted to be queen.

Rhaego moved forward, his serious face softening as he looked upon his baby cousin. Arya saw his eyes were Targaryen purple, startling against his dark features, and, though barely three-and-ten, she could already tell he was powerfully strong. “It is an honor to meet you, Queen Arya.”

She tried not to shift uncomfortably beneath the title, but it did not sit well with her. Still she smiled weakly and offered a courtesy in reply, rubbing a soothing hand against Rhaenys’s back as she began to fuss.

As Illyrio insisted they head inside for food and drinks, Arya found herself hanging back with Ashara, bestowing soft kisses to Rhaenys’s silky hair. The older woman wrapped an arm around Arya’s shoulders, squeezing her lightly, and, for a moment, Arya pretended Ashara was her mother.

“All a bit much?”

“I was not supposed to be a queen,” was all Arya could manage. “Sansa...” She inhaled the sweet scent of her daughter, her small face finding the crook of her shoulder to rest. “I wanted adventures.”

“I guarantee you, sweetling, that with the Targaryens, adventures is all you’ll have, for they know not how to live in peace.”

Arya could feel the rapid heartbeat of her Targaryen daughter against her chest and shivered. Adventures were fine for her, the she-wolf of Winterfell, Ned Stark’s incorrigible younger daughter; she did not just welcome adventure but ran at it full-speed.

But peace was all any mother wanted for their children, and Arya prayed Rhaenys would never know the upheaval of her father’s life.

At night, she was a wolf: howling, prowling, deadly. She still carried the broken leather around her neck from where the men had tried to pin her and failed. No man could contain her; she was unstoppable.

The water of the Trident tasted fresher than the waters further south. Here the forests were thick and full of her smaller cousins. They hunted as a pack, but they could never be her true pack. Two of her brothers were in the North, one was with the lions, and her sister allowed the men to hold her; only
her smallest brother was here and sometimes she screamed to the moon for him but he never answered.

No one ever answered. They had forgotten about her, their wild sister.

Tonight she and her cousins felled a stag, slow and fat. She tore into its belly, taking the choicest meat before leaving it to her pack mates, the blood warm in her mouth. Her stomach was full but her body still cried out for exertion; there was no fun in killing something so easily. She wanted a fight, hungered for it; none of her smaller cousins could best her.

The noise was small but she heard it. There, through the trees, was another stag, this one younger, faster. She took off without hesitation, chasing it through the trees, saliva building in her mouth. Leaping with all of her might, she opened her jaws, certain they would close around the young stag's hind leg, but a sudden burst of speed sent her prey loping into the night, leaving her angry and disappointed.

She howled into the black sky but, as always, no one answered.

Dany and Aegon were riding when Viserys came to Arya in her chambers. Having just bathed Rhaenys, Arya was pressing kisses to her soft belly, her own laughter mingling with Rhaenys's giggles, when she looked up to find the Beggar King watching from the doorway. Quickly getting to her feet, flustered at being caught so unguarded, she managed, “Do you need something?”

“Oh, I was hoping we could talk. I feel like in all of your time here, we have not had a true conversation.” Arya watched as he stalked across the room, perching on the opposite end of her bed. His fingers brushed against Rhaenys's skin, but the gesture hardly seemed affectionate. “You know, I remember when Elia birthed Rhaenys. What I remember most is how disappointed my father was that she was not a boy.”

“Viserys, I do not - “

“Aegon's birth made everyone much happier. A perfect heir for the perfect prince. Obviously you never knew my brother, but he was an extraordinary man.” Viserys's face darkened. “And then he destroyed a 300-year-old dynasty for some Northern slut's cunt.”

Arya recoiled from the words, her fury immediate and all-encompassing. “Don't you ever - “

“Shut up, you stupid whore!” Viserys snapped, startling Arya with the venom in his voice. “You think I am going to let you do to House Targaryen what your aunt did? I have waited twenty-five years to go home, and I will not you ruin that. Aegon will sit the Iron Throne or we will all die trying, but, when I die, it will be in Westeros. If you get in my way, you will wake the dragon and there will not be words for what I will do to you. Do you understand me?”

“I understand you.” Coming around the bed, Arya saw Viserys blink in surprise, clearly not expecting her to approach him. “Now let me be clear. My husband may love you, but I see you for exactly what you are. Mayhaps your threats and talk of waking the dragon scares others, but I am no silly woman. I am the blood of the wolf, Winterfell, and the First Children, and if you try to do harm to me, I will make what Jaime Lannister did to your father seem like a pleasant alternative. Am I clear?”

Viserys stared at her with startled eyes, obviously trying to gather his words, when Aegon entered the room, stripping off his top shirt, stopping when he saw Viserys. “Oh, am I interrupting?”

“Not at all,” Arya lied smoothly, scooping Rhaenys off of the bed. “Viserys was simply keeping me
company while I tended to the baby. I was telling him of the North.”

Aegon smiled, reaching out for Rhaenys who squealed in delight at the sight of him. “Do you mind if I steal my wife from you, Uncle?”

“Of course not. I shall see you at dinner.”

The moment the door to the chamber closed, Arya said to Aegon, “I do not want to stay here any longer.”

Her husband did not look up from Rhaenys, who was scooting her way up his chest to try to reach his hair. “Connington thinks - “

“I do not care what Connington thinks!” she interrupted, already tired of this argument. “You promised me before Rhaenys was born we would not stay in Pentos indefinitely, that you would still show me the Free Cities. Well, we have been here nearly a year, and the khalasar is returning to the Dothraki Sea in a fortnight. I wish to go with them.”

He laughed in disbelief. “You wish to ride with Dany's khalasar? Are you mad?”

“I am an excellent rider, and women with babies ride as well. Rhaego told me they're going to Vaes Dothrak. If we truly wish to leave, we can always board a ship.”

“You are an excellent rider, but the others are not.”

“Then they can ride in a cart!” Frustration mounting, Arya complained, “If I wanted to sit in a manse all day, I would have remained in Storm's End.”

Aegon sighed, closing his eyes for a moment before admitting, “Dany said you hated it here. You should have told me.”

“And say what, I hate the only place in the world you feel safe?” Arya crossed to the windows, staring out at Pentos. Finally she confessed, “They do not like me.”

“Of course they - “

“No, Aegon, they don't.” Wrapping her arms tightly around her middle, her eyes never wavering from the landscape, she stated, “They look at me and see my aunt. I am the reason you do not wish to pursue what is rightfully yours, and they all blame me for it.”

“I would rather have you than the throne.”

“That is what worries them.” She turned to face him, her heart heavy. “They hid you your entire life, teaching you what you would need to rule so you could avenge your family. And I do not begrudge you your vengeance; if what was done to your family was done to mine, I would burn the world to the ground. But you won't take your vengeance because of me.”

“I won't take my vengeance because it would get us nowhere,” he countered, sitting up with Rhaenys tight against his chest. “Let us say I do what was always planned. I take the Golden Company, Dany's khalasar, and whatever other sellswords Illyrio's gold can purchase, and I march them into the Seven Kingdoms. Then I do what Viserys has always wanted me to do. I wipe out Houses Stark, Lannister, and Baratheon. What do I do then, Arya? Do I march into the Red Keep and do to your sister and her girls what was done to my mother and sister? Where does it end?”

“You truly do not want the throne?”"
“You and our children is all I want,” Aegon swore. Rising to place Rhaenys in her cradle, he tugged at Arya's hips and implored, “Come here and I will show you.”

Later, as Aegon napped beside her, Arya wondered if he was being honest with her. If anyone had done to House Stark what had been done to House Targaryen, Arya did not doubt she would go to the ends of the earth to avenge them. She would beg, borrow, steal, murder, sell her soul to the Faceless Men, anything to see those who wronged her were punished.

Arya was beginning to suspect Aegon was a much better person than she was.

Viserys exploded when Aegon announced they were going to accompany Daenerys to Vaes Dothrak. Even Daenerys, who usually wore such a placid expression, flinched back from her brother's rage as he leaped to his feet, shouting her displeasure. Arya saw Connington watching Viserys with wary eyes, and Duck's hand fell to the handle of his dagger, poised and ready.

“You're the King of the Seven Kingdoms and you're going to go marching through the grass with savages?!”

Rhaego and Daenerys both bristled at the slur, but Aegon remained in his chair, sipping his wine. “I have seen the Seven Kingdoms, Uncle, and there is no want for a Targaryen king there. The people may not love Robert, but they adore Prince Gendry, who is a good man. Our house's time has passed.”

Viserys turned purple with rage. “Did she tell you that?” he spat, pointing at Arya. “Everyone in the world knows she was fucking the Usurper's son before she ever moved on to you - “

“That is enough!” Aegon shouted, pounding the table with his fist, the dishes all jumping from the force of the blow. “If I ever hear you speak of my wife that way again, I will tear the tongue from your mouth!”

“Why don't we all calm down?” Illyrio suggested, clearly trying to alleviate the sharp tension.

But Viserys would not be pacified. “You are just going to let the Usurper sit upon our throne, his reign financed by the man who ordered your mother raped and murdered, who had your sister run through half-a-hundred times?”

“Stop this,” Daenerys ordered. “You are a disgrace to your parents' memory and to House Targaryen. Wander the damned grass all you wish with your wolf bitch, for you are clearly not a dragon!”

With Viserys's departure, a heavy silence fell over the room. When the meal was done, Aegon disappeared with Connington and Duck, and Arya found herself being invited to join Daenerys for an evening walk. As the moon turned Dany's hair to silver, the khaleesi said, “You must forgive my brother. He is harsh and he is cruel, but he only wishes to go home.”

“Don't we all?”

Daenerys's smile had the faintest air of mocking. “You chose your exile, Arya. If Willem Darry had not spirited us away from Dragonstone, we would have died as well. Viserys was only nine when the Rebellion ended our family, and I do not think Aegon or I will ever truly understand what it has been like for him. My parents, Rhaegar, Elia, Rhaenys, they are just names to us, stories we have been told, but they were real to Viserys. Even when I was small, he made sure to tell me tales of them so I would understand why the Iron Throne was ours by rights.”
Arya shifted uncomfortably beneath Daenerys's gentle gaze. “I am sorry for what happened to your mother and brother, to Aegon's mother and sister, but your father - “

“Was a mad man,” she cut in. “I understand that. Viserys said it was only vile stories told by the Usurper, but I have seen madness in my brother. With absolute power, undoubtedly it would have grown as it had with my father.” Her face hardening, Dany continued, “But what Jaime Lannister did to my father is a disgrace and Robert Baratheon sitting on his throne makes me ill. We do not deserve to die in exile, beggars and sellswords and khaleesis. We are the blood of the dragon, and the dragon does not cower before any man or beast.”

“My sister is Prince Gendry's wife,” Arya softly shared. “Her daughters are my nieces. My father is the Hand to the king, and my brother Bran is the truest friend of Prince Tommen. By going to war, you ask me to stand idly by and let the people I love be slaughtered.”

“I ask nothing,” Dany argued. “Should Aegon have need of my khalasar, he will have it. Should he need the gold to buy 50,000 swords, I will find him it. Do not misunderstand, Arya: my clothing, my language, and my son may be Dothraki, but I am the dragon's daughter.”

“If you want Westeros so badly, why not ride for it yourself? Why bother with Aegon at all? That was the plan originally, was it not?”

“No man will follow Aerys's son while Rhaegar's son is an option.” Daenerys stopped, meeting Arya's gaze unwaveringly. “I do not wish House Stark ill. I have spent enough time talking with Lady Ashara to know what spurred your father's treason to the throne. And I see you love my nephew well and you birthed a beautiful daughter for him. You call your sister the future queen, but you are the true Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Hiding in the Dothraki Sea with my khalasar will not make Robert Baratheon forget that.”

Aegon spent their last nights in Pentos in his solar, locked behind the doors with Illyrio, Viserys, Daenerys, Connington, Duck, and Haldon; Ashara kept Arya company, doting upon Rhaenys as if the baby was her trueborn granddaughter, but she did not provide Arya distraction. If there was one thing Arya could identify, it was being dismissed.

Whatever House Targaryen was planning, Arya Stark was not to be a party to it.

There was peace in the Dothraki Sea Arya had not found since Winterfell. As far as the eye could see there was grass swaying in the breeze, grass of every color, some as tall as ponies; seated atop Winter, Rhaenys bundled against her chest in some Dothraki contraption, Arya felt as if the entire world was available to her.

“You ride well, my lady,” Ser Jorah complimented as the khalasar moved slowly towards Vaes Dothrak. They were still a half-day's ride from the city, and, though she loved to ride, Arya was anxious to be able to rest her sore legs.

“Thank you, Ser Jorah.”

“And how is the little princess today?”

Arya glanced down at Rhaenys, who blinked up at her with the bottomless brown eyes which seemed to already hold infinite knowledge. “Happy as can be expected.”

They rode in silence for about a league when Arya asked, “Ser Jorah, why were you exiled?”

The bear of a man was quiet for a moment before admitting, “I attempted to sell men who were
bound for the Wall to slavers. Your father would have taken my head had I not fled.”

“It is a crime to sell slaves.”

“You do not think there are slaves in the kingdoms, lady?”

“Only wives.”

Jorah laughed, a short, brusque sound. Arya saw Daenerys glance over at them, a flicker of jealousy flashing over her face before dissipating; she knew from her conversations with Daenerys that Khal Drogo died when she was still swelling with Rhaego, and Arya knew better than anyone what loneliness could do to a person. There were certainly worse choices Daenerys Targaryen could make than sharing a bed with her sworn shield.

When the Dothraki city came into view, Arya gasped aloud, stunned by the sight of a place so contrary to everything she knew. Rhaenys began to wiggle in her carrier, and Arya kissed her sweaty forehead, brushing her daughter's thick hair from her brow.

“I know you are too small to recognize this, but you are seeing something few women ever will,” Arya murmured, urging Winter to keep pace with the khalasar. “I once thought I was lucky for having seen four of the Seven Kingdoms, but you will see the entire world, my girl. And I shall never tell you no simply because you were born a woman.”

Rhaenys blinked as if she understood, snuggling into Arya's chest. Her daughter was nearing her first name day, already pulling herself upright on two feet whenever possible, and Aegon laughed that Rhaenys would be the first baby to ever run her first steps. It made Arya ache to know her daughter, so smart and willful, would never know her grandparents, uncles, or aunt; she thought of Sansa's girls, doted upon within the Red Keep, and wished Rhaenys would know that sort of love.

“Is it how you imagined?” Aegon asked as he helped her down from Winter, Arya's legs screaming with soreness.

“I do not know what I imagined,” Arya admitted, “but it certainly was not this. There's...I've never seen anything like it in my life.”

Aegon smiled, unwinding the fabric which kept Rhaenys fastened to her chest. Immediately she began to reach for her father, and Arya thought of how happy the sight of Ned made her as a child, how much she loved to be swept up into his arms and carried on his shoulders. Sansa had always been their mother's daughter, but Arya, Arya was always Ned's.

“I promised you adventures, and I always keep my promises.”

_A Lannister always pays his debts_, Gendry used to say with a sarcastic roll of his eyes, the maxim of his mother's family amusing him. If she tried, she could remember the way he'd smirk when he said the words, the irreverence in his tone which drove Queen Cersei to distraction.

She missed Gendry. She would never be able to admit it aloud, but the mere idea of Aegon and his sellswords riding into King's Landing to kill him gave Arya nightmares.

“You will be treated as the king and queen you are,” Daenerys assured them after explaining how no blood could be shed while in Vaes Dothrak. “And you shall be my honored guests for as long as you wish to remain with us.”

Arya was embarrassed to confess that life was harder in _Vaes Dothrak_ than she expected. For all of her playing at being anything but a lady, she had never slept outside before, thin tents protecting
them from the elements, only pillows and furs on the ground to serve as beds. Aegon smiled knowingly those first few weeks in the city as she tried to find her way, waking in the morning with knots in her back from the hard ground, learning to enjoy the horseflesh they served; Daenerys had clothing in the Dothraki fashion made for her, and, though never particularly modest, Arya blushed like a maiden the first time she wore her painted vest with nothing beneath it.

“If you wish, we can always ride for Volantis and take a ship back to Pentos,” Aegon offered after a moon with the Dothraki.

“No,” Arya stubbornly argued, lacing up her vest after nursing Rhaenys. “I wanted to come here and I will remain here.”

“There is no shame in returning to civilization.”

Huffing angrily, Arya quickly wove her hair into a loose braid. “You frustrate me to no end!”

She found Rhaego with some other Dothraki boys of his age. Marching up to the young prince, his friends’ eyes widening at her brazenness, Arya declared, “I need to learn to speak Dothraki. Will you help me?”

By the time her stomach began to swell again, Arya was able to hold entire conversations in Dothraki while Aegon could only look at her in amazement.

Arya swore she saw respect in Connington's eyes, but the man would not pay her a compliment if the world was ending.

Her son entered the world in the dead of night, as quiet and peaceful as a godswood. Where Rhaenys had shrieked and wailed, announcing to the world that she was there and would not be ignored, her boy calmly looked around with lilac eyes and easily allowed himself to be readied for his mother's arms. Ashara mopped Arya's brow with a cool cloth, her words soft and comforting as Arya collapsed back onto her elbows, the strength leaving her body. While her labor with Rhaenys was twice as long, her son had been turned the wrong way in the womb, requiring Haldon to turn him; Arya was certain she was going to die before ever birthing her child, the pain more intense than any she could ever remember, and all she could think of was Lyanna Stark.

“Rest, child,” Ashara murmured, slipping another pillow beneath Arya's head. “Your son is here and healthy. Just sleep, my girl. I will see to him.”

The fever came on two days later. Arya awaking to a throbbing head, her body wet with sweat. Daenerys's handmaids immediately fetched Haldon, and Arya could read the worry in his eyes even as he cleansed her with cool water. She swallowed the herbs the halfmaester gave her but almost immediately they came up, her vomit decorating her bed. When Ashara and Aegon entered the birthing tent, Arya vaguely saw her husband's face, the tight concern on his face, and she murmured, “Where's my son?”

“With the wet nurse, my love,” Aegon answered, stroking her soaked hair tenderly. “He is a good, strong boy.”

“A name...”

“I have been calling him Aemon.”

“The Dragonknight,” she whispered, remembering Old Nan's stories, how Sansa would plead to hear about Ser Aemon and Queen Naerys.
She closed her eyes as Aegon and Haldon began to talk, her husband sounding progressively more distressed. Arya wanted to open her eyes, assure Aegon that she would be fine, but it felt as if her body would not cooperate with her mind.

“I want to go home,” Arya managed before sleep took her.

She had not been here in so long, but she remembered the way to the pen where her sister was kept. During the day, men prowled, their bows at the ready to harm her, but night hid her better, allowed her to creep and sneak. Her smaller cousins waited in the Riverlands, but she wanted her sister. Her little brother had gone away to join their other brother with the lions, and she could not feel them anymore.

Her sister was tied near the horses, and they all began to panic at the sight of her. She had no time for horses, not tonight. At the end of the stables was her sister, tethered with a strap, and immediately she bent to gnaw at the leather to free her sister, who jerked her head and bared her teeth. Her stupid sister did not even understand she was trapped. The men had tricked her, made her think she was free when she wasn't.

The leather came apart in her mouth, but her sister did not budge. She nudged at her sister's ribs with the flat of her head, but all her sister did was snap at her with jaws as powerful as the ones in her own mouth. If she was one of her smaller cousins, she would have pinned her sister to the ground to show her who was in charge, but that was not their way.

Men were coming closer, shouting at the horses, and she ran, her powerful legs carrying her away from her stupid sister. One of the men tried to hit her but she was too fast, too strong. As she ran from the city, she hoped her sister would follow, but the only ones like her were far away.

All she wanted was her pack to be whole again.

When Arya woke, she felt as though her mouth was as dry as the Dornish deserts. She tried to sit up, struggling to raise herself, but her arms felt weaker than silk. As she tried, the Dothraki woman seated beside her pallet gasped, immediately calling out the flaps of the tent, her voice high and urgent. Arya tried to discern what she was saying, her brain feeling fogged; she thought the woman was shouting, “Alive! Alive!” but Arya could not raise her head from the pillows to ask why her livelihood was so remarkable.

Aegon was the first through the entryway, Haldon quickly following with Daenerys, and Arya felt his tears fall onto her face as he pressed anxious kisses against her skin. Haldon nudged him away, pressing tentatively against her belly and breasts; Arya wanted to protest the treatment, but she could see from the intense expressions on the man's face he was checking for something.

“I'm thirsty,” Arya managed, and Aegon instantly was raising water to her lips, carefully ladling it past her lips. She felt as if she had not drank anything for months and soon Aegon exchanged the water for mare's milk.

“You gave us quite a fright,” Daenerys said, a kind expression on her beautiful face.

“Did I bleed?”

“You have been asleep for nearly two moons,” Aegon revealed, brushing hair away from Arya's face. “Only milk and honey has kept you alive.”
“Two moons?” she echoed, mind racing. “What happened?”

“Birthing fever,” Haldon answered. “We gave you every remedy I knew and a few Dothraki ones as well, but nothing seemed to break the fever. As the khaleesi said, Your Grace: we were all concerned for you.”

“The baby...”

“He is fine,” Aegon quickly assured her, kissing her forehead. “I have never seen a babe so strong and healthy, and Rhaenys has not let him out of her sight.”

Haldon swore the infection had passed, but it weakened her considerably. It was weeks before Arya was able to stand and even then only with assistance; the first time she held Aemon in her arms, Ashara had to keep her hands beneath his body, Arya's strength so tremulous she feared she would drop him.

If Rhaenys was a Martell, Aemon was pure Targaryen, bright lilac eyes and silver hair as soft as feathers atop his head. Whereas Rhaenys had always been a demanding baby, Aemon was as peaceful as a septon; even when hungry or wet, he barely did more than whimper. Of course, he rarely had a chance to do even that, for everyone was quick to pick up the little prince and satisfy his wants. Ashara teased that no baby was ever so beloved, so cherished as sweet Aemon.

“I have seen many babies in my life, but none which so sweet a temperament. Aegon was a happy child in the cradle, but he was always so quick to let you know when he was displeased. Did your mother ever say what sort of babe you were?”

Robb once told her that, after she was born, he and Jon called her “little monster,” for all she did was scream for the first few moons of her life. If anyone had inherited her temperament, it was high-spirited, willful Rhaenys.

“I feel like a cripple,” Arya complained one evening as Aegon carried her to sit outside beneath the moon, her legs having been exhausted by her insistence to walk unassisted earlier in the day.

“You are still recovering. You do not have to exert yourself every day.”

As he settled her gently in the soft blue grass, sinking down beside her with a skin of fermented mare's milk, Arya groused, “I hate to sit still.”

“And I hate to see you still,” Aegon countered, “which is why you must let your strength return rather than risk your infection recurring.” Wrapping an arm around her much slimmer shoulders, he whispered, “I could hardly breathe when you were asleep.”

Arya laid down, resting her head in his lap; Aegon's fingers instantly began to card through her thinned hair. “My brother Bran used to climb everything: trees, Winterfell's walls, anything he could get purchase on. When he was seven, he slipped when a stone broke and fell so far. For a fortnight he slept, and Maester Luwin swore he would never walk again but Bran insisted he would. It took him over a year but soon he was running as quickly as he ever had, shimmying up the walls and driving my mother mad. He was knighted during the Ironborn Rebellion.”

“I would like to meet him some day.”

“Sometimes Aemon reminds me of him. I think it is because he is so peaceful. Bran was always the most relaxed man.”

“I confess I'm jealous. I look at our children sometimes and I wonder if they are like my parents, my
sister, but I have not a single memory of them."

"What is your first memory?"

A warm smile stretched across his face. "Ashara playing with me in this light snow. It was before we met Connington, back when it was only us and Illyrio. Sometimes at night I would climb into her bed, and she would hold me tight against her chest. She always smelled of cinnamon, and she would sing me songs."

"You love her well."

"She is the only mother I have ever known. She gave up her entire life for me. I always swore that, if I became king, I would treat her as if she was the queen mother. Rhaenys is already calling her grandmother. Or, at least, I think she's calling her grandmother. She speaks more Dothraki than Common Tongue, and half of the time I can't understand a word of it."

Arya chuckled, turning her eyes up towards the stars. She tried to imagine the horror on Sansa's face should her three prim daughters ever meet Rhaenys with her dirty feet, brash manner, and thickly accented Common Tongue. "I fear I may be teaching her all the wrong lessons."

"You are a wonderful mother, the sort who sees who her children are and lets them be it. Rhaenys and Aemon will never grow to be like us, hiding who they are or having to pretend to be someone they are not. If our daughter wishes to swing a sword, we will teach her; if our son wishes to become a septon, we will allow it."

"And if they grow to want to be the princess and prince they are told they are?"

Aegon looked down at her, fire in purple eyes. "Then I will win them a throne."

She held his gaze for a long moment, trying to ascertain how deeply his sentiment was felt. Finally she queried, "Are all of you still plotting how to take back the Iron Throne?"

"We do not have to discuss this now - "

"Aegon."

He tugged a bit on her hair, a pinch of pain shooting through her scalp. Finally he said, "Robert has offered a lordship and lands to any man who brings him my head. Gods only know what he would give someone for you or the children."

"You mean to invade," Arya interpreted.

"I mean to never let what happened to my family to ours. If I have to take that cursed throne to do it, so be it."

"You swore to me - "

"Then my honor is bruised but better it than your body after Gregor Clegane finds you!" he fiercely spat. He urged Arya to sit up, getting to his feet. For a moment he paced back and forth before exploding, "You will never understand what it is like to have everything taken from you, to be stripped of even your name! I am the rightful king!"

"You sound like Viserys," she accused.

Aegon's face twisted in fury, an expression she had seen a scant few times and only when their fights
became tremendous. “I am Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm! I am the blood of old Valyria, of Aegon the Conqueror, the son of Prince Rhaegar and Princess Elia, and I will not pretend that I am anything else any longer!”

“But you promised me - “

“I will not have our children wandering the Free Cities as beggars, dying their hair and answering to false names! I will give them a legacy, the one my mother died to protect, and I will never understand why you would deprive them of it!”

“But I will not murder my family so that ours can sit on thrones!”

Aegon threw the skin of mare’s milk to the ground, angrier than Arya could ever remember seeing him. “Do not pretend as if it is your family you are so concerned over! I know it is him! You must have called his name half-a-hundred times in your fever, crying for him as if he was going to come save you.”

“This has nothing to do with Gendry,” she swore, half-believing the lie even as she flushed in embarrassment at having called out his name. “I gave up my family for you. I married you. I had children with you.”

“But you still dream of him.”

“I cannot control a fever dream, Aegon! You cannot hold me responsible for something so ridiculous!”

Aegon knelt before her, and Arya was shocked to see tears coursing down his cheeks. Clasping her face in his palms, he entreated, “You must understand: I am all that’s left of them. Robert, the Lannisters, they murdered them all, and I lived for a reason. It cannot be so I could fight other men’s wars for gold.”

Her heart breaking, Arya felt tears of her own welling. “Please do not ask this of me. Do not make me choose.”

Sorrow and resignation filled his face. “I am not asking, Arya. Once your strength has returned, you and Ashara are taking the children back to Pentos, and I am taking my armies west. A king does not ask his queen before he does what needs to be done.”

I am not your queen. I will never be your queen. “Take me back to my tent please.”

That evening, as Rhaenys and Aemon slept beside her, Arya plotted. She loved Aegon; Arya did not doubt that. He was the first man she truly loved as a woman, the first man she chose, and she would have lived happily enough in the Free Cities with him and their children. All she had needed was for him to maintain his promise, to forget the useless Iron Throne which had done nothing but wreak havoc on both of their lives.

Arya never wanted a crown and wanted one for her children even less.

I am a Stark of Winterfell, she recited to herself as she drifted off to sleep, Rhaenys's warm breath against her face. I am born of snow and ice, the daughter of Eddard Stark. This is not my place, and the dragons will swallow me whole.

That night she did not dream one of her wolf dreams; instead she dreamed of the skulls beneath the Red Keep, massive jaws opening wide as fire burnt her alive.
Aemon’s first name day came and went before Arya's strength fully returned to her. They were the most frustrating months of Arya's life, her body never feeling so unwieldy, her balance and coordination seeming to be the last to return. When she finally sat Winter after so long, Arya felt as if she was learning to ride all over again; Ser Jorah made her start with an old mare before gradually working her way back to Winter. Even then Arya found herself nearly thrown the first time, clutching the reins with a hint of desperation, horribly embarrassed when Connington had to calm her horse and help her down.

“You can ride my pony,” Rhaenys offered, her Dothraki impeccable and earning Rhaego’s amused chuckle. If Rhaenys adored Aegon, she positively worshiped Rhaego, never venturing far from her cousin’s side. Only the night before she had proudly announced that she was going to marry Rhaego and become his khaleesi.

“No, I can do this,” Arya assured her, swinging herself into the saddle again. “And then we will ride together.”

It bothered Arya that Rhaenys only knew her as weak, only saw her as someone who needed others to help her around, who had to ride in the carts like an invalid. She wanted her daughter to know she was strong, that she was a direwolf of the North who sat a horse better than any of her brothers, who was wild and fearless.

Arya needed her children to know she was Arya Stark of Winterfell, not some impotent queen to be moved about like a piece on a cyvasse board.

When Aegon announced they would ride for Volantis in a fortnight so she and Ashara could board the ship to return them to Illyrio, Arya nodded, feigning compliance more than she ever had. She ate at the feast held in their honor, watched the men battle and the women dance, discussed weapons with Daenerys’s bloodriders and teased Rhaego; for the first time in her life, she was as comely and proper as Sansa, the sort of lady who would make a fine queen.

Aegon smiled at her with such love in his eyes, it almost made her regret what she was going to do. He came to her tent that night, the children staying with Ashara, and Arya trembled as he removed her clothing, at the slow, tender way he tended to her. As he moved above her, their hips moving in tandem, Arya felt tears hit her suddenly, spilling down her cheeks so quickly she could not hold them back. Aegon whispered her name, his lips catching each drop, assuring her they would see each other again; there was no doubt in Arya’s mind he loved her with everything he had, and it broke her heart all the more.

I could have been the greatest wife to you if you had only kept your word, she wanted to sob. We could have raised our children and grown old together. If you had forgotten about the damned Iron Throne, life could have been a song.

But life was not a song. Arya knew that better than anyone.

Rhaenys clung to her father at the docks, sobbing and pleading to remain with him, fighting like all seven hells were chasing her; only after Aegon removed the chain he wore, the one with a pendant which bore the sigil of House Targaryen, and placed it around her throat with a promise to see her soon did Rhaenys go into Ashara’s arms. Aemon stared at his father placidly as Aegon pressed a kiss to his forehead, and Aegon removed the dagger at his hip, the ruby-encrusted Valyrian steel which Illyrio gave him as a wedding present, pressing it into Arya's hand and making her promise to give it to Aemon should something go wrong.
“Should I fall,” Aegon said as Arya balanced Aemon on her hip, “Viserys and Daenerys will keep the charge. Connington has my words; you are to be regent until Aemon comes of age. I know you think he hates you, but he would be a true and loyal Hand.”

“We do not need to discuss this now.”

“When else will we discuss it?” Aegon kissed her softly. “You have the best instincts of anyone I have ever met. As long as you trust them, you will be the grandest queen the Seven Kingdoms has ever known.”

She struggled to nod. “I will do my best.”

Aegon turned, gesturing for one of the Dothraki men to bring something to him. For a moment Arya thought it was Blackfyre, Aegon’s blade, but the hilt was different, more elegant somehow. As her husband withdrew it from its sheath, Arya instantly knew it was something else entirely.

“Aemon the Dragonknight carried this blade,” Aegon explained, a smile playing at his lips. “It was originally Visenya Targaryen’s, used when she helped the first Aegon conquer the kingdoms. You know its name?”

“Dark Sister,” Arya supplied, genuine awe in her voice.

He nodded. “I do not know how Illyrio came by it, but he did. And I want you to have it.”

Instantly she shook her head. “No, it should be carried by a Targaryen - “

“You are a Targaryen now,” Aegon cut in. “You are my wife, now and forever. I carry Aegon’s sword, and I wish for you to carry his wife’s. If trouble should find you, your Needle will not be enough.”

Standing still as Aegon fastened it around her waist, Arya found herself short of breath. “I love you. Please never forget that.”

“Never,” Aegon swore, his kiss lasting longer, a touch of desperation to it. Pulling back, brushing one parting kiss against Aemon’s brow, he playfully ordered, “Now get on that ship or I will never let you go.”

Rhaenys insisted on remaining on deck until her father disappeared from sight. It was only when the sea was all which surrounded them that Arya broke, sobbing pitifully, clutching Aemon to her. She cried tears she did not know she had and, when she thought she ran empty, they began again. Ashara took the children to her cabin, leaving Arya to her grief, but nothing could make it abate.

Why you could not keep your promise?

Ashara came to her when the children were asleep, her beautiful face looking at her knowingly. “We are not going to Pentos, are we?”

There was no point in lying; she would find out soon enough. “When our ship docks in Braavos, the children and I will be changing ships. You do not have to accompany us.”

“I love those children as if they were my own blood.”

“As you love Aegon.”

For a moment Ashara was quiet. Then she asked, “Do you plan on betraying Aegon’s plans to King
Robert?”

“Of course not!”

Her smile was bitter. “I am quite familiar with the lengths a mother will go to in order to protect her children. What happens in Braavos?”

“I buy us passage to the only man I trust to keep us safe.”

“And where will we find this man?”

“Castle Black.”
The storm arose from nowhere, tossing about their ship as if it was a toy. Arya held Aemon tightly against her chest as Rhaenys clung to Ashara, her scared crying the most pitiful sound Arya could ever heard. Though no one was saying it, Arya knew they were in real danger, that the ship was taking a horrible beating. Ashara was singing in a soft, deceptively calm voice, songs about Targaryens long since dead; Rhaenys always loved to hear about her family's heritage, pleading to hear about all the women who came before her: Queen Rhaenys, Queen Visenya, Queen Alysanne, Daena the Defiant, even Shiera Seastar. But, while the songs were calming Aemon, his little hands loosening their grip on Arya's tunic, Rhaenys continued to cry, fully aware of the danger they were in.

“The boat is going to break!” her daughter sobbed, clinging to Ashara with all of her limbs, her face brightly flushed red and soaked from tears. At nearly four, Rhaenys was already taller than most children her age with a surprising amount of strength in her body, the result of playing aggressively with the other children in Vaes Dothrak. Since leaving Volantis, her daughter wanted little to do with Arya, blaming her for being parted from Aegon; Rhaenys spent her days clutching her father's necklace, trailing after Ashara, and driving the ship's crew to distraction by being underfoot.

Arya thought of Shipbreaker Bay in the Stormlands, of the massive storms which used to rage there, and suppressed a shudder. “It is not going to break, sweetling. The captain knows what he is doing.”

“I want Father!” Rhaenys wailed, and, as she began to cry even harder, Aemon began to lift his voice to join with hers, always so sensitive to his beloved sister's moods. They were never far from each other, her son and daughter, the very best of friends; Rhaenys fiercely loved her younger brother and Aemon always sought his sister for comfort before seeking Arya or Ashara.

Arya reached for Rhaenys, passing Aemon to Ashara in a move practiced over the past three moons at sea. Kissing away the hot tears on her crumpled face, Arya confessed, “I want him as well, my girl. But soon we will be with your Uncle Jon, safe and sound, and, if the Gods are good, we will see your father soon.”

It was not a lie; she did miss Aegon. Some nights she longed for him so acutely, she could hardly breathe, sickened with grief and shame. When she first conceived of this plan, preferring to ride out the coming war with someone she trusted rather than someone who so obviously had a vested interest in the outcome, Arya did not think of what it would be like for Aegon to hear word she and the children never arrived in Pentos. Arya still felt anger at Aegon for breaking his promise, for putting her family in danger, but her love for the man she knew him to be did not waver.

Arya had already lost one husband to war; she knew the costs. But this was not the Ironborn Rebellion; in this war, Arya wished for both sides to win, for Aegon to reclaim what he had lost and for Gendry to survive, and she knew that could not happen.

“I want to go home,” Rhaenys whimpered, and Arya almost pointed out that they did not have a home, only the kindness of friends and family. It took her a moment to realize Rhaenys meant Vaes Dothrak, the only home she had ever known.

“So do I, my love. So do I.”

The crew member came into the cabin, bracing himself against the door frame, soaked to the bone. “We've taken hits, m'lady. We have to dock in Gulltown or we'll capsize!” Arya knew there must be fear on her face for the man quickly added, “Do not worry, m'lady. War hasn’t come to the Vale.
yet.”

Arya knew tales of war were being told whenever they went into port. In the Stepstones, there were stories about dragons gathering in Volantis; in Braavos, as Arya sought out the ship to take them North, sailors whispered about dragons landing in the Stormlands. There had been no word since then, moons having passed without stepping off of *Titan's Terror*, but Arya said as many prayers for Renly at Storm's End as she did for Aegon.

Dawn was breaking as they made port in Gulltown, and, as the rain continued to pound, Arya came above deck, Rhaenys in her arms, Aemon asleep on Ashara's shoulder. A few silver stags convinced one of the crew members to carry their trunks to an inn, but, even as Arya handed over enough coin for a room, she realized the gold in purse was running low. If *Titan's Terror* was no longer seaworthy, Arya was not sure she would be able to afford another ship to take them on to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.

As the children slept curled around each other, Arya and Ashara changed into dry clothing. Ashara nudged the children over, dropping kisses to the tops of their heads, before sighing, “Does anyone know you in the Vale?”

Arya shook her head. “No, but I think it would be best if we stay in the room until we sail again.”

“Do we have the gold for that?”

“There are things we can sell should we run out,” Arya replied, knowing full well that the meager possessions they had which would bring them much money would also draw attention to them. She would never sell Aegon's dagger or Dark Sister; her Dothraki garb and leathers might fetch a few coins for the novelty of it, but the arakh Rhaego had given her would certainly fetch a decent price. But Arya knew that which would gain them the most money, what would purchase them a fleet of ships, was what rested in the trunk Daenerys had given her.

Ashara was the one who explained what the three, multicolored rocks were. “Those are dragons' eggs. I met a red priest from Asshai once who had one. Three...Men would sell their souls to possess them.”

“They are just stone,” Arya said in confusion, running her fingers over the petrified scales.

“But once they were dragons, and many men still believe they can wake dragons from stone. Illyrio gave those to Daenerys as a wedding present. It is peculiar she would give them to you.”

“Mayhaps she wants me to keep them safe.”

Ashara had smile wryly at that. “A Targaryen does not part with dragon eggs without a reason, my dear. She has given you three eggs, and Aegon has always said you would have three children. Daenerys likely means for each egg to belong to one of your children.”

Arya had not told Ashara of the child which had quickened in her belly as they sailed past Dragonstone. The sea journey was weighing heavily on all of them, and Arya knew the moment she admitted she was pregnant, Ashara would attempt to convince her going to the Wall was a poor plan. There was enough tension and fear in Arya as it was; she only now started to feel as if she was herself again, fully recovered from Aemon's birth nearly two years past, and the idea of going to the birthing bed again terrified her. Arya knew they needed to be at the Wall before she was unable to hide the bulge of the baby any longer, and they needed to do it as quickly as possible.

The storms did not abate for two days, and, on the third day, Arya awoke to Rhaenys shaking her
shoulder. Blinking sleep from her eyes, Rhaenys whispered, “Mother, someone is knocking.”

Instantly awake, Arya slipped from her bed, pulling her discarded tunic over her head before casting a glance towards her daughter, now sitting up on her knees. Ashara was still asleep, Aemon curled around her body, and, after determining there was no way for the caller to see her son’s decidedly Targaryen looks, Arya opened the door.

The very last person on earth Arya expected to be on the other side of the door was Loras Tyrell. The years had been kind to the Knight of the Flowers. His brown curls still framed his handsome face, his skin was still as smooth as a maid’s, and, though Arya knew he was nearly thirty now, he did not look a day over eight-and-ten. Though he was wearing leather and ringmail, he still seemed to be as richly dressed as the last time Arya had seen him all those years ago at the tourney held at Storm’s End. But it was not his attire which concerned Arya; it was the sword he wore at his hip.

Loras inclined his head in deference before saying with a bit of a jape in his voice, “I do not know whether to call you Lady Baratheon or Lady Targaryen.”

“She is the queen,” Rhaenys piped up helpfully from the bed, and Arya threw a cold look at her daughter as Ashara began to stir upon the bed.

Loras smirked. “A thousand pardons, my small lady.” Turning his eyes upon Arya, he said, dropping his voice, “It is not safe for you any longer. You need to come with me now.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because I mean you no harm.” Seeing the hesitation on her face, Loras offered, “Renly sent me. Your captain bragged of carrying the dragon queen; Robert is sending men for you. Renly knew I was in the Vale appealing to Robert Arryn; he said I am to put you on a ship.” When Arya still did not move, he removed a piece of parchment from his pocket. “If you cannot trust me, trust Renly.”

Unfolding the parchment, reading Renly’s familiar hand confirming all which Loras said, Arya moved to look at Ashara, now sitting upright with Aemon in her lap. “Gather everything you can. We must leave now.”

Loras was accompanied by a small retinue of men; Arya recognized them as Renly’s companions, the ones he used to teasingly refer to as his rainbow guard. As they carried the two trunks which held all of their worldly possessions, Arya saw the looks the men were giving her and her children, looks thick with judgment and disdain.

“Aren’t you certain you can trust these men?” Ashara murmured as she pulled Rhaenys’ cloak tighter around the girl’s body.

“No,” Arya admitted, “but I trust Renly, and he trusts them.” Tugging Aemon’s hood further down to cover his silver hair, she added, “And if Robert does know where we are, I would rather be a prisoner with these men than a prisoner with Gregor Clegane.”

Ashara sighed, her shoulders sagging, and Arya realized for the first time just how tired Ashara seemed to be. She had already lived through one rebellion with an ill-fated queen; Arya felt ashamed to be making her start all over again.

“What’s happening in the south?” Arya asked Loras as the rains began to fall again.

“The dragons landed in the Stormlands a moon ago. They captured Griffin’s Roost and began to lay siege to Storm’s End. Renly tried to broker peace with your sellsword prince, but the only terms he
would agree to was surrendering the castle, which Renly would not do. Dorne declared for the dragons; their men are marching north. And there are rumors that Asha Greyjoy is willing to commit Pyke's ships to their cause."

"Is Renly safe?"

Concern flickered over Loras's face. "He says he is fine and that the Targaryens have not been cruel in their dealings."

Guilt filling her chest, Arya said, "I never meant - "

"Renly holds no anger towards you," Loras cut in, tension obvious in his body, "and so it is pointless for me to hold any."

As the ships came into view, Arya dropped her voice to ask, "How is my family and the prince?"

Something close to pity flashed in Loras Tyrell's eyes. "They are fine. Your lady mother is at Winterfell with Jeyne Westerling and her children. Bran remains at Casterly Rock and Rickon, at Riverrun. Robb has called his banners, but they have not marched south yet. The Hand remains by the king's side, but there are rumors he only remains there to make sure you are not put to sword. Princess Sansa is safe in the Holdfast with the children; she has a boy about your son's age now, did you know that?"

Arya shook her head, a sad smile playing at her lips. Sansa had finally gotten her boy as Arya always knew she would. "And Prince Gendry?"

"My lady - "

"Please, ser."

Loras sighed, muttering something which was carried off by the breeze. Finally he admitted, "The prince prepares to march south and put down the rebellion. I've never known the prince to have a taste for war, but your dragon has awakened a beast within him. They say his rage at Aegon Targaryen puts Robert's hatred towards Rhaegar to shame."

There was a knowing expression on Loras's face which made Arya burn with shame. It would do nothing to explain to Renly's paramour that this was not what she wanted, that she had pleaded with Aegon not to invade, that she had done everything she could to put to rest the feelings she and Gendry held for each other. She was the wife of the dragon, the mother of his children, and never had Arya brought shame to Sansa's marriage bed no matter how much she wanted to lie with the prince.

But Arya knew he would not believe her. No one ever did.

The ship Loras brought them to had black sails and was sturdily built. As his men carried their trunks aboard, Arya looked at the captain, a man of an age with her father who fingers were shortened. When she asked for his name, he said he had no name and did not want hers either. As Ashara took the children down to the cabin they were provided, Arya realized this was a smuggler's ship; she wondered how the Tyrells or Baratheons knew smugglers.

"I do not need to know where you are going," Loras stated. "In fact, I'd prefer not to know. I honestly hope nothing ill befalls your children."

Arya was well-aware of how he left her out of his well wishes. "Thank you for your assistance."
His companions returned from below deck, walking off of the ship to mount their horses. Loras did not move, so Arya did not either, knowing the man had something else to add.

“Renly loved you as a sister,” he eventually divulged, “and he has never wished you ill for even a moment, not even when Robert berated him for letting you flee. He made me swear an oath that I would not let any harm befall you or your children, so I have kept it. But I must say, Lady Arya, you are the most selfish woman I have ever had the displeasure of meeting, and good men are dying for your folly.”

Emotion threatened to rise in her throat, but Arya refused to allow it; she needed to be as hard as stone to survive this conversation. “I am sorry you feel that way, Ser Loras.”

He clenched his jaw tightly, a muscle in his cheek leaping, before relenting, “Is there any message you would have me carry south?”

There were a thousand messages she wanted to relay, apologies and pleas and declarations, but Arya knew they would fall upon deaf ears. Her father may not want to see her killed for treason, but that did not mean he was likely to forget the shame she had brought on House Stark. How many times had she heard Ned Stark speak of honor and sneer at those who so carelessly tossed it away?

“I have no messages.”

Loras nodded curtly before disembarking the ship. As they left port, the wind swelling the black sails, Arya watched as Loras Tyrell and his men rode away. The Knight of the Flowers had not been unduly cruel; Arya understood why he hated her the way he did. His assistance was provided only because he loved Renly, and Arya sincerely hoped no one learned of his actions; Loras Tyrell did not deserve punishment for serving the man Arya had not loved well enough.

The coast of Gulltown was almost out of sight when Arya saw the red Lannister banners riding along the water’s edge.

Arya began to sob the moment she saw the Wall.

It was silly, she knew; from the moment they left Volantis, this was the goal: get to the Wall, to Jon Snow. But it was more than that as well. From the moment Jon left so long ago, all Arya wanted was to see him again, to go to the Wall with Bran and see their brother. How many times had Jon or Robb or Bran called her the Queen of the wildlings? How many times had she fantasized about running North and going beyond the Wall? Of course, she wouldn’t need to go beyond the Wall now. Arya knew wildlings had settled on the Gift years earlier, earning Jon the anger of Northern lords; she did not imagine the wildlings would be that different from the Dothraki, and she and her children were hardly used to luxury.

“What is this place?” Rhaenys asked as the nameless captain’s men carried their trunks from the ship, leaving their passengers to stand before the castle with little more than a grunt to part.

“This is the Wall.”

“Is Father here?”

“No,” Arya managed, wiping her face free of tears as men in black began to approach them.

Ashara carried a feverish Aemon in her arms, and Arya tried to hide her fear for her son as best she could; when Rhaenys developed a fever on the crossing from Braavos, she had recovered relatively quickly. But the sickness was lingering with Aemon and now a cough began to shake his small
chest. At night, when the others slept, Arya would rest her hands on the swelling of her belly, on the child who would arrive in little more than three moons, and she wondered what would happen to her children if she died birthing this babe.

The man who approached was horribly ugly, his face pock marked with a nose which had obviously been broken. He looked at the four of them, and Arya knew how strange they must look: Ashara in her septa's robes, Arya in men's clothing, Rhaenys in Dothraki garb, and Aemon in a nightdress, bundled in the blanket of Targaryen colors which was once his sister's.

“Welcome to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, my lady,” the man greeted roughly. “I am Cotter Pyke. I do not know what your captain told you, but this is not a port of a city. My men can take you to Last Hearth -”

“I am where I wish to be,” Arya interrupted, trying to force steel into her voice. “I am Arya Stark of Winterfell, and I have come to see your Lord Commander.”

When Cotter Pyke said nothing, Rhaenys piped up in her thickly accented Common Tongue, “She is the queen! You have to listen to her!”

It was strange, how a child's words could remind Arya of so much. She had no use for crowns and the Night's Watch took no part, but they still respected the monarchy. When Cotter Pyke said nothing, Arya snapped in a voice she had heard Daenerys use, “I am Arya Stark, wife of King Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his Name, and I command you to take me to Castle Black to see Jon Snow!”

“It is a long, hard ride, Your Grace,” Pyke replied, “and that is without children.”

“We are excellent riders, ser, so please provide us with horses.”

Ashara looked at her with an amused expression, but Arya did not reply, watching as men loaded a small cart and horses were brought. Arya lifted Rhaenys onto the saddle in front of Ashara, knowing Rhaenys was already comfortable enough on a horse to not give Ashara too much trouble; but, as one of the Night's Watch handed Aemon to Arya after she was mounted, Arya knew it was going to be more difficult to hold Aemon and still ride as hard as needed. He was too large to be swaddled against her chest the way Rhaenys once was and too ill-feeling to hold tightly to her. Grasping the reins with Aemon as tightly against her body as possible, Arya urged the horse to go.

It took two days to reach Castle Black at the pace they were forced to keep, and Arya's anxiety about Aemon only increased as his fever began to burn hotter. When Castle Black came into view, Arya felt her entire body relax, knowing that after six long months she was finally where she knew they would be safe. Men were in the training yard, looking at them oddly, and, as Arya slid down from her saddle, she saw Ghost loping out from the trees.

Rhaenys cried out in fear, clinging to Ashara as the large direwolf approached, but Arya bent immediately, allowing the wolf's rough tongue to lick at her face. Aemon, weak and tired as he was, reached out a small hand to touch Ghost's fur, smiling as the wolf turned his affections upon her son. For a moment, as she buried her face in Ghost's pelt, she felt like a Stark of Winterfell again.

“Ghost!”

Arya instantly looked up at the sound of Jon's voice, tears flooding her eyes even as she grinned. Her brother's smile was wide, and Arya instantly began to rush towards him, trying to move as quickly as she could even with the added weight of her belly. Jon hugged her tightly, and Arya buried her face in his neck, sobs and laughs mingling as they held each other, a reunion sixteen years in the making.
It felt strange to be nearly the same height as Jon, to not have her feet dangling in the air as they embraced; in her memory, she and Jon were always children rather than Lord Commander and runaway queen.

“Gods be good, Arya, I thought you were dead,” he whispered against her ear, pressing a firm kiss against her hair.

“I couldn't send word. I'm sorry - “

“No, don't be sorry.” Jon pulled back, clasping her face between his palms; Arya felt calmer looking into a face so much like her own. “I am so happy you are here.”

Remembering herself, she blurted out, “My son needs a maester.”

Jon nodded, his face softening as he took in the sight of her children, both of whom were now petting Ghost as if he was their most beloved pet. “Let us get you settled in.”

As the men of the Night's Watch began to carry the trunks into the castle, Arya realized that, for the first time in years, she actually felt home.

Samwell Tarly could not look her in the eyes as he explained the tea he brewed to help with Aemon's sickness. Under different circumstances, it would have amused Arya, but she was too concerned about the heat of Aemon's skin to truly care much about the maester. Neither he nor Arya could convince Aemon to drink it; only Rhaenys, brought in by Ashara, was able to coax her brother into swallowing it down, her soft voice wheedling in Dothraki, the only language she and Aemon ever spoke to each other. Sometimes Arya caught herself lapsing into the language, having spent two years of her life speaking it more than the Common Tongue, and Arya knew Rhaenys's grasp of the Common Tongue was not particularly strong, her daughter often forgetting words and replacing them with Dothraki.

“I will stay with him,” Ashara offered, brushing Arya's hair from her forehead. “Get something to eat and talk with your brother.”

Rhaenys bounced on the balls of her feet at the mention of food, and Arya nodded. Maester Sam volunteered to take them to Jon's quarters for supper, and, as Rhaenys ran ahead, eager to run after so many months upon a ship, Arya asked, “Have you ever delivered a baby, Sam?”

The maester blushed red “The only women here at the wildlings, Your Grace, and they do not like maesters.”

“Arya,” she corrected, wrinkling her nose at the title. “And if a woman is having a child, who is the best of the wildlings to act as midwife?”

“Probably Val.” His eyes darting to Arya's midsection, several layers of fabric providing enough camouflage to make a man unsure, before venturing, “You are with child?”

“I will likely be in the birthing bed within three moons. Could you introduce me to this Val?”

Maester Sam nodded, his multiple chins jiggling with the motion. They were nearly to Jon's quarters when he said, “Maester Aemon has delivered children.”

Arya froze. “Maester Aemon?”

“He has been the maester at Castle Black for most of his life; he lost his sight years ago and his age
has made him to weak to move about, but his mind is sharp. I could ask him for instruction, and I am sure he would want to meet you.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Because he is Aemon Targaryen, Your - Arya. His father was King Maekar.” The discomfort drained from his face and was replaced by soft affection. “Your husband's arrival in the south filled him with such life.”

“I would like to see him,” Arya said. “You will take me to him?”

Sam nodded before leaving her and Rhaenys with Jon, who had set a table heaping with food. Arya felt her mouth water at the scents, and Rhaenys stared in confusion at some of the dishes, more used to horse and salted fish than capon and lamprey. Jon teased her daughter as she picked at everything, particularly enjoying the candied nuts, and Rhaenys amused him by telling tales of Rhaego, Aegon, Duck, and her playmates in Vaes Dothrak. Arya listened and laughed as Jon recounted stories of their childhoods for Rhaenys, but her laughter stopped when Rhaenys pointed to the blade of Valyrian steel resting against the wall.

“My father has a sword like that. It is called Blackfyre. Does yours have a name?”

“Longclaw.”

“My father is the king,” Rhaenys continued, pride obvious in her voice, “and I am a princess. But Father said I can still be a knight like Ser Jorah if I want.”

“I am certain you will be a fine knight,” Jon swore, smiling at Arya over Rhaenys's head.

“Are you finished with your food?” When Rhaenys nodded, Arya wiped her messy hands and face, her daughter fighting the process the entire time. The moment Arya finished, Rhaenys hopped from her chair, crossing the room to play with Ghost.

“She reminds me of you as a child,” Jon murmured, pouring them both more wine.

“If the Gods are kind, they will give her better sense.” Avoiding Jon's eyes, she whispered, “Does everyone hate me?”

“Hate you? Arya, we were terrified. When Robb sent the raven which said you went missing from Storm's End, we all thought you ran off with some sellsword. It was dishonorable but you would hardly have been the first. But when word reached that he was Aegon Targaryen, we thought mayhaps it was revenge, a Targaryen stealing another Stark. Robb was half-mad, trying to convince Father to let him invade the Free Cities to take you back, and Prince Gendry was offering up the soldiers to make it happen. It wasn't until we heard you were pregnant that tempers began to cool.”

“Cool? Robert placed a bounty on Aegon's head!”

“You know how King Robert feels about Targaryens,” Jon reasoned. “What did you expect? I am certainly not saying it was right, but you had to have known what sorts of consequences could arise.”

Instinctively Arya's hands move to rest on her stomach, at the dragon sleeping inside of her. Jon's eyes followed the movement, realization shining there, but he said nothing. After a moment, Arya sighed, “I always thought I was so much smarter than Sansa. Stupid Sansa who always did what she was told and never wanted anything for herself.” Tear began to trickle down her cheeks. “I loved him so much, Jon. Even after he told me who he was, even after I knew what it would mean, I loved him more than was smart. I never wanted a husband and I was certain I did not want children, but
with Aegon, I did.”

Jon moved forward, reaching for her hand and clasping it tightly. “Arya…”

“He promised me he would never come for the Iron Throne. It was the only reason I agreed to the marriage. I just wanted to be free of it: the throne, the king, the expectations of it all. I just wanted to be free.” A slightly hysterical laugh burst from her chest. “And it could kill us all.”

Jon’s grip on her hand increased. “As long as you are here, no harm will come to you or your children.”


Face darkening, Jon pronounced, “If Robert Baratheon wants you, he will have 10,000 Free Folk he will need to cut through in order to reach you.”

“Free Folk? Do you mean wildlings?”

A smile cracked Jon’s face as he leaned back in his chair. “When you’re ready, I’ll take you to them. I know Mance will want to meet you.”

“The King-Beyond-the-Wall?”

He nodded in amusement, sipping his wine as he let his eyes wander towards Rhaenys, who was trying to get Ghost to offer his paw for a shake. The mixture of affection and regret on his Stark face broke Arya’s heart; she had always believed Jon would be a wonderful father if only his vows allowed it. And, as he continued to look upon her daughter, Arya thought of the story Ashara told her so long ago in that Braavosi inn, the one which turned the world upside down.

_You are not Ned Stark’s bastard, she wanted to say. Ned Stark’s bastard is Allyria Dayne, though there is nothing in her features to hint at that. You have the Stark look because Lyanna was your mother and Rhaegar Targaryen was your father, and they were wed and in love. You were wanted, Jon, and you deserve more than to waste your life on this Wall because my mother did not want you in Winterfell any longer._

Instead she said, “The septa I arrived with, she is the one who raised Aegon in the Free Cities. She used to serve Princess Elia before the rebellion.”

“A brave woman,” Jon acknowledged.

“She is Ashara Dayne.” He froze, looking as young as he ever had, and Arya hated herself for stating, “She is not your mother. But she will tell you who is if you want to know.”

“Do you know?”

Arya nodded, wincing slightly as the baby kicked powerfully against her ribs. “But it is better if she explains it.” Reading the unease in his face, Arya rose, hugging him to her chest tightly. “You are my brother, now and always.”

Hours later, when Jon came to the chamber Arya was given, his face wet with tears, Arya held him as if he was one of her children. Arya had never seen a man-grown so distraught, his world blown apart, and she wished she could say or do something to make it better. That night Jon Snow slept beside her as he had half-a-hundred times at Winterfell, both of them grateful for the presence of the other.
It was the first truly peaceful night's sleep Arya had since she was a child.

Sam took Arya to Maester Aemon on her fourth day at Castle Black, finding her in Aemon’s room with Rhaenys and Ashara. He checked Aemon's fever, declaring her son to be on the mend, before asking Arya if she would like to meet the elderly maester. Quickly nodding, Arya followed Sam to a chamber on the ground level of the castle, a room which Arya determined to be the warmest she had found thus far at Castle Black. She felt sweat start to form on her forehead, but the man seated up in bed still had furs atop his legs and a thick woolen shirt on his body.

He was small and shriveled, easily older than even Old Nan; there was no hair left atop his head and his eyes were clouded as if with milk. Sam told her he was well over a hundred-years-old, the oldest man in the Seven Kingdoms, but his hearing and mind were sharp as ever. Even as the door opened, Maester Aemon called, “Is that you, Sam? Have you brought me a visitor?”

“I have, Maester,” Sam answered, a genuine smile spreading across his fleshy face. “Might I present to you Queen Arya, wife of King Aegon.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to correct Sam until she saw the pure happiness which seemed to radiate from the old maester's face as he grinned. “Forgive me, Your Grace, for I cannot bow, but I am honored you have come to see me.”

“It is I who should bow to you, Maester Aemon,” Arya replied, remembering the courtly courtesies she once tried so hard to forget. “Thank you for receiving me.”

He reached a gnarled hand over, patting the chair beside his bed. Arya crossed, obediently sitting, and Sam smiled at her before leaving them. She saw a tall tower of book rested on the desk in the room, likely read to him by Sam or his steward, but there was nothing remarkable in the room, nothing which telegraphed precisely who this maester was.

“I confess I do not know a polite way to ask these questions of you, Queen Arya, so I hope you will not judge me harshly. But I have so many questions.”

“You can ask me anything, and, please, just call me by my name.”

Maester Aemon smiled. “You are as uncomfortable with your title as your brother is with his. Starks have always wielded power well, but you do not wear it well at all.”

“That is likely true.”

“A small baby. Have you thought of a name for the child yet?”

“A small baby. Have you thought of a name for the child yet?”

“At the very least I should not be considered a failure against the Lannisters.”

“No, I think you very strong. I have lived through many wars, and I have found that, while the men swing the swords, it is the women and the children who pay the costs.” Aemon's hands twitched a bit as he folded them in his lap. “I used to correspond with Prince Rhaegar. His poor wife and child certainly paid the price when the Lannisters came.”
Arya said nothing; the lingering presence of Elia Martell and the first Rhaenys Targaryen haunted Arya every day.

“What is he like, your Aegon?”

She was quiet for a moment, trying to find the right words only to realize they all seemed woefully inadequate. Finally she settled on, “He is friendly and kind, but he has a temper as well. Some days I wanted to kiss him and other days I wanted to shake him. He is a wonderful father, and he always treated me well.” Trying to force down her bitterness, she said, “He is very close to his aunt and uncle and loves his men. He is good with a sword. And he has taught our daughter to be very proud of House Targaryen.”

Aemon nodded as he listened. After a moment, he revealed, “It is a curious thing, being the son of a king, particularly a Targaryen king. For 300 years, our house ruled, and I fear I took for granted it would always be that way. When Aerys was killed...when everyone was killed...” He turned as if to look at Arya, though she knew he could not see a thing. “House Stark is an old and noble house as well, the Kings of Winter. For you to imagine your house to fall is to imagine the very unraveling of the world. That is how it felt when word reached the Wall that my entire family was erased.”

“I am sorry.”

“I never imagined I would live to see my house rise again. You have delivered dragons back to the earth, sweet girl.”

His declaration tightened Arya's chest. “If you would like, I could bring my children to see you. My son even shares your name.”

“Oh, I would like that,” Maester Aemon sighed. “It has been so long since I have known another dragon.”

It was strange, Arya thought as she the warm cell, how she never truly understood what it meant to be a Targaryen until seeing the look of absolute hope on the face of Maester Aemon.

Arya did not know what she expected wildlings to look like, but the childish part of her still buried deep inside was disappointed to see how civilized they appeared. Every man in the North told stories of wildlings, how they were vicious animals who would rape and murder without conscience; even her father had a story or two of wildlings who made it to Winterfell and toiled with the smallfolk. But the large assembly of people wore more clothing than the Dothraki did, and, though a few men had unkempt hair and beards as well as physical deformities from fights, none were particularly fearsome to behold. The only sight which genuinely wrought a gasp from Arya's lips was the giant who lumbered across the yard.

“That's Wun Wun,” Jon offered with a smile. “He is relatively harmless, but he only speaks the Old Tongue. Should you need to speak with him, it could get tricky.”

“Lord Crow!” a man bellowed, drawing Arya's attention. He was a broad man with a white beard, and, though his voice was deep and gruff, the man was grinning. “Don't tell us all this time you've been keeping a spearwife of your own in that castle o' yours!”

Stilling their horses, Arya allowed Jon to help her down from her mount. “You'll watch your mouth, Tormund. This is my sister.”

“Sister? I thought you crows hatched from eggs!”
Both men laughed before Jon said, “Arya, this is Tormund Giantsbane. Tormund, this is Arya.”

“A pleasure to meet you, girl.” Tormund pointed to her middle. “You looking for Val then?”

“Is she with Mance?”

“Most likely.” Arya started slightly as Tormund threw a thick arm around her shoulders. “Well, c'mon, girl, let's find Val before your brother breaks down in tears. You know he's sweet on Val, don't you?”

Arya smirked as Jon flushed red as a maid. “No, he didn't mention that.”

“Oh, he loves her something fierce,” Tormund confided in a teasing tone, his eyes sparkling with laughter as he eyed Jon. “He pretends like he doesn't 'cause of those bloody vows he made, but he wants to make her belly big as yours.”

“Shut up,” Jon ordered good-naturedly, still pink as could be, and Arya laughed to see stoic Jon so out of sorts.

“I'm only speaking the truth.” Lowering his voice to a loud whisper, he continued, “There's a reason Jarl hated your brother, and it wasn't because of his fine, black cloak. Why, I don't even think Val would fight if he came to steal her, but your brother's too fucking stupid to do so.”

“Watch your language in front of the lady, Tormund,” a man seated outside a tent chastised, his fingers playing over the strings of an instrument. “You're speaking to the Dragon Queen.”

“Mance,” Jon greeted, and Arya could not believe this man was the King-Beyond-the-Wall, this unimposing man who was plucking out the notes to The Dornishman's Wife without so much as glancing at the instrument.

“So this is your sister, the queen,” Mance Rayder drawled, his eyes taking Arya in. “The only queen I've ever seen before was Cersei Lannister, and you look so little like a queen.”

“Well, I've seen a half-dozen kings, and you are certainly the saddest looking of them all,” Arya retorted, holding her belly as the baby flipped inside her. “And I consider it a compliment to not be a thing like Cersei.”

Mance smirked as Tormund chuckled before rising to his feet. He gave a bow with was equal parts mocking and intrigued before gesturing for them to follow him into the tent. Arya saw a handful of wildling women milling about but her eyes were instantly drawn to the willowy blonde who wore a gown rather than pants. Without being told, Arya knew this must be the infamous Val, and she could certainly see why Jon was allegedly in love with her: she was easily one of the most beautiful women Arya had ever seen.

“Have you brought me one of your men's buried treasure, Lord Snow?” Val queried with a soft smile.

“He has brought us his queenly sister,” Mance corrected. “This is Queen Arya. She is the one wed to the southern dragon.”

“Dragons,” Val scoffed as she crossed to stand before Arya. “Do you fashion yourself a dragon?”

“No, I am a direwolf, and Maester Sam says I require your services.”

Val exchanged a weighted look with Jon, one whose meaning Arya could not fully puzzle out,
before the wildling woman placed her hands upon Arya's belly, kneading and poking with hands which were less than gentle. She inhaled sharply but did not protest, letting the older woman do what she needed. After a moment, Val pulled back, a frown twisting her mouth.

"Is this your first child?"

"My third."

"It's turned the wrong way. If the birthing starts, fat Sam is not going to be able to help you. I'd offer to come with you to the castle, but I am not welcome there."

"You stabbed two of my men," Jon reminded her mildly.

"They deserved it," Val countered dismissively. "You'll need to stay here if you want me to deliver the babe."

"She cannot stay here," Jon objected.

"Why not?" Arya asked. "I'm not some useless lady. I have been all around the world - "

"But you are pregnant."

"And I gave birth to Aemon in a tent in the Dothraki Sea," she snapped, suddenly irritated with her brother. "I can certainly have this one in a tent as well. We'll ride back to Castle Black for the children and Ashara - "

"You should not ride," Val interrupted. "Lord Snow can fetch your children. You will need to remain abed if you do not want to risk twisting the babe up even worse."

Her displeasure must have shown on her face, for Tormund threw his arm around her shoulders again and cried, "Now don't fret, wolf girl! I'll keep you company!"

By nightfall, a tent was erected for Arya and her family, an honorary wildling until the baby was born. As the children and Ashara slept, Arya silently cried into her pillow, longing for Bran who was always supposed to come with her to meet the wildlings.

The celebration for the wedding of one of Tormund's sons was in full swing when the first sharp pain ripped through Arya's stomach. Ashara had pinned open the flaps of their tent so Arya could see what was going on, and, as the fires burned and the wildlings danced, Arya could make out the familiar forms of the people who became her friends over the past two moons: Mance, Tormund, Val, Dalla, the children Rhaenys called her friends, the women who thought Aemon's silver hair was lucky, the men who had fallen into the habit of calling her "Lady Snow" since Jon visited her nearly every day. Jon was out there now with some of his men, sharing mead and brokering deals to keep the wall fortified; Ashara was dancing with some of the wildlings, and, as firelight flickered over her face, Arya saw the shadow of the girl she must have been, the one her father loved dearly enough to conceive a child with, the girl who died thirty years ago. Even Rhaenys was dancing about with Aemon and Mance's boys, though their dancing seemed to involve more of flinging each other about than actual steps.

Arya tried to shout only to have her voice drowned out by the beating of drums and the fervent singing of the guests. As pain radiated through her body, Arya managed to get to her feet, grasping her stomach as she stumbled towards the celebration. She managed a dozen steps from the tent when another birth pain hit, sending her to her knees, her hands slamming into the ground in an attempt to catch herself. Waiting until the pulsating pain stopped, Arya rolled onto her back, gasping from the
The drums stopped, and she heard people shouting, calling her name. As Jon and Tormund bent to carry her back into the tent, Arya noticed that the sky was bleeding, a bright stripe of red cutting through the blackness.

After having struggled through deliveries with Rhaenys and Aemon, Arya was stunned at how quickly this was baby was coming. She could see fear and panic in Jon's eyes, and, if the pain was not so severe, Arya would have laughed; whenever Catelyn gave birth, they were always spirited away by Old Nan or Jory, only being brought to her rooms when the baby had arrived, safe and sound. Arya could still remember when Rickon was born, how small and wrinkled he was, how she did not fully understand _how_ Rickon came to be. While Robb and Jon stood by the bed and Sansa and Bran climbed in beside Catelyn to see their newest brother, Arya slid into Ned's lap, uninterested in babies even then.

She missed her father. Sometimes she missed him most of all.

As Val began to rush the men from the tent, Arya rose up and grabbed Jon by the wrist. Voice tight with pain, she gasped, “If something happens to me, you have to keep the children safe.”

“I will,” Jon swore.

“And tell everyone I'm sorry. I never meant - “

“Arya, I don't - “

“Promise me, Jon! Promise me!”

Her brother squeezed her hand tightly, quickly nodding. “I promise. I promise.”

Val moved over to Jon as Dalla and Ashara helped remove Arya's smallothes and readied for the birth. The blonde woman laid a hand on Jon's shoulder, her usually fierce expression replaced with something soft. “Don't worry, Lord Crow. I'll keep her alive.” When Jon did not move, indecision on his face, Val took hold of his face, forcing him to look at her. “If you want to be a help, go calm the little dragons.”

Arya shouted as another sharp pain ripped through her, her eyes closing from the force of it; she could feel Ashara take her hand, urging her to breathe, and Arya exhaled sharply as she felt Val move between her legs, her hands cool as she tested Arya's progress. As the pain began to pass, Ashara mopped her brow with a damp cloth, and Arya heard Val and Dalla speaking back and forth in the Old Tongue, both of their voices urgent. For a moment Arya wished Rhaenys was there to tell her what was being said; in only two moons, her daughter had picked up enough of the Old Tongue to chatter with Mance's sons and even Wun Wun. Tormund liked to tease Arya that there was more Free Folk blood in Rhaenys's veins than blood of the dragon, but it was more than that.

Rhaenys spoke of being a princess because Aegon called her that; she knew her father was the king and her mother was the queen, but she had no real understanding of what that meant, not in Westeros. Daenerys was a _khaleesi_ who rode horses in painted vests with an _arakh_ on her hip; Dalla was a queen who spoke roughly and freely while carrying a dirk between her breasts. Rhaenys's life had been spent in _Vaes Dothrak_, at sea, and now on the Wall. She had no concept of what it meant to be a lady in the Seven Kingdoms and thought her lessons from the boys she preferred to play with were preparations to be a princess.

At five, her daughter knew more freedom than Arya ever had.
“I have to turn the baby,” Val informed her, “or else you're both going to die. It's going to hurt and I can't promise you the baby will be born with breath. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she panted through clenched teeth, grasping Ashara's hand even tighter as she rose up, bracing for the pain.

Arya bit her lip, tasting iron on her tongue, as Val's hand slipped inside her body. She could feel the movement inside her stomach, the burning and sharp aches as Val adjusted the baby, and Arya tried to breathe deeply, tried to think of anything but what was happening: the way Nymeria used to curl up against her body, the smell of the sea at Starfall as she'd race Winter up and down the coast, the singing leaves in the godswood at Storm's End, the feel of Theon's bow in her hands as her father's ward taught her how to shoot, the sight of Bran climbing through her window for the first time after his fall, the taste of the blood oranges she and Sansa once stole from the kitchen at Winterfell.

_I used to have a family and friends as well. I was Arya Stark of Winterfell, the daughter of Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully. I had three trueborn brothers and a sister as well as one natural-brother. I was the wife of Edric Dayne, whom I never loved well enough, and then I was the wife of Renly Baratheon, whom I loved as a brother. I was the Lady of Starfall and the Lady of Storm's End, but I was always accused of never being a lady at all. Once I loved a man who was going to be king, so I refused to marry him even though it broke my heart. But if I die in this tent, all I will be remembered as is a traitor._

From start to finish, it took only two hours to bring her daughter into the world, the baby whimpering but never fully crying. Arya ached as Val cleaned her with warm water and applied a poultice to her torn flesh, but her eyes were on the baby Dalla readied, swaddling her tightly as Ashara wiped at the tears on both her and Arya's faces. The baby was small as Maester Aemon had predicted, the hair on her head as silver as her father's, but, when she opened her eyes, they were as grey as Arya's own, the eyes of a Stark.

“It is good luck to be born beneath the falling, red star,” Dalla informed her as she placed the baby girl in Arya's arms. “Children born beneath it are powerful and strong.”

“You're as strong as a mammoth, Lady Crow,” Val teased as she rinsed the blood from her hands. “I've seen many ladies waste away in the birthing bed with a twisted child.”

“I do not have time to die,” Arya rasped, staring down into her daughter's face.

“Have you chosen a name?” Ashara murmured, running a finger down the smooth skin of the baby's cheek.

“Alysanne.”

Someday she hoped Aegon would be able to meet the child he did not even know they conceived, but Arya knew better than anyone how unpredictable war could be.

Maester Aemon's arms shook for a moment when Arya placed Alysanne there, but soon they turned sure. Arya smiled when she saw the amazement on the man's face, at the light touch of his fingers on her daughter's face as he traced her features. Though she had decided to remain with the wildlings on the Gift, her children preferring the company of the other children to the men of the Night's Watch, Sam's message that Aemon was not likely to survive to the next moon lead Arya to insist on riding to Castle Black to introduce Maester Aemon to her daughter.

“What color is her hair and her eyes?”
“Her hair is silver like Aegon's, but her eyes are grey like mine.”

“The first Alysanne was a kind and gracious queen. You know her song?”

Arya did though she never much cared for sad songs. “I hope this Alysanne will know happier times. Dalla says she will be lucky since she was born beneath the comet.”

“The dragon has three heads,” Aemon murmured, his voice so soft Arya almost missed his words.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, my dear. It was only an old story.” Pressing a kiss to Alysanne's forehead, Aemon divulged, “I have not held a child since I left King's Landing all those years ago. There were so many children then, so many Targaryens. Now there are but a handful of us. After Rhaegar fell, I never imagined there to be more of my house.” Arya was startled to see tears in his clouded eyes. “Thank you, Arya.”

“Maester Aemon -“

“Your children will play great roles in what is to come. Houses Targaryen and Stark, ice and fire, they are powerful forces. It has been foretold...” His voice tapered off as he extended his arms, motioning for Arya to take the baby. As she moved to do so, Aemon grasped her wrist with surprising accuracy and declared, “They will wake the dragons from stone.”

Arya thought of Viserys and his claims of waking the dragon, of the massive skulls hidden away in the Red Keep, and shivered; she was not sure she would ever be fully comfortable with dragons.

It was not until a fortnight later, after the funeral for Maester Aemon, that Arya even remembered the petrified dragon eggs hidden away in her trunk, the brightly colored stone scales. She lifted the cream colored egg, weighing it in her hands, running her hands over the rough texture. It was not until Aemon toddled over to her, setting his small hand upon the egg and declaring, “Mine,” that Arya wondered if these eggs were to her children what the direwolves had been to her family.

Immediately Arya dismissed it. After all, everyone knew dragons died out long before even Maester Aemon was born.

“Do you ever regret taking the black?”

Jon looked up from Alysanne, whom he was tickling as she giggled and squirmed. Rhaenys and Aemon slept soundly on their pallets across the tent, Ashara having gone with Val to help deliver a child, and Jon arrived shortly after nightfall with sweet Dornish wine. As Arya watched him interact with her children, blatantly doting and far lighter than he was when acting as Lord Commander, regret over his inability to be a father swelled in her chest.

“Sometimes,” he admitted, making Alysanne squeal as he suddenly peppered kisses to her round stomach. “I wish I had done what Father said and waited until I was old enough to truly understand what I was giving up.”

“You would have been a wonderful father.”

“But I did not want to pass a bastard's name to my children.” Lifting Alysanne from the fur they were sitting upon, Jon sighed, “Robb was the Lord of Winterfell. If I had been trueborn, mayhaps I could have been a knight like Bran or Rickon, but I was a Snow, not a Stark. There was never a place for me.”
Arya thought of Edric Storm, opening her mouth to protest, before finally settling on, “But you weren't a bastard, not really.”

His hand brushed over the silken silver of Alysanne's hair. “I used to wonder about my mother, about Ashara. Was she beautiful? Did she love me? Did she know where I was? Did Father love her? Why did he dishonor my mother and himself to make me? I even pretended sometimes that I was our father's true son; you and I look so much alike, it wasn't so hard. At least until your lady mother looked at me; then I remembered.”

“Jon - “

“I never imagined she was Lyanna,” he rushed on, staring down into Alysanne's happy face. “I think about her statue in the crypts now, about the stories, about Rhaegar, and all I can do is get angry.”

“Angry?” she echoed in surprise.

“What Rhaegar and Lyanna did was selfish,” Jon stated flatly. “He knew Lyanna was betrothed to Robert and Lyanna knew what it would bring dishonor to her house. Even if Elia Martell knew what they were doing, even if the rebellion hadn't started, they still hurt an infinite amount of people.”

“They were in love,” Arya offered.

“And while that would have brought peace to me as a child, as a man it shows how reckless they were. Aerys was mad and should have been deposed, but imagine what a different world it would be if the rebellion had not happened. Our grandfather, our uncle, they would have lived to be old men rather than have been burned alive and strangled. I am sorry I was never able to know my parents, but I do not know if I will ever be able to forgive them for bringing me into a world where I had to be hidden as a bastard for fear I would be put to death.”

Arya was quiet for a long time, the words rolling around in her head as she watched Jon crossed the tent, setting Alysanne in the cradle one of the men had made for her. In a small voice, feeling more chastened by Jon's speech than she had by Loras Tyrell's indictment so many months ago, she asked, “Do you think I'm selfish?”

Realization dawned on Jon's face, regret twisting his features. Arya expected him to lie or apologize; instead he countered, “Do you want the truth?”

“Yes,” she answered, certain she didn't.

“I love you and your children; I would die to defend you all if it would keep you from suffering the same fate as Rhaegar's wife and child. But what you did, the part you played...The Targaryens were going to invade whether you married Aegon or not; I truly believe that. But you knew who he was, what he wanted to do - “

“He swore he would never - “

“Did you honestly believe that?” Jon challenged. “Do you honestly believe any man would not avenge what was done to his family? Our sister is married to the prince, Arya. What becomes of Sansa and her children?”

“Aegon would never - “

“I am not saying he will kill them,” he corrected. “But what will happen? Will he send them to exile, to wander the Free Cities as beggars as he did? Will he take all Baratheon and Lannister holdings? Joffrey's children, Myrcella's children, Tommen's children, what of them? What of our father, who
will never betray Robert?"

“Stop,” Arya whispered as tears began to well.

“They should never have married you to Renly, that is true, but what you did broke their hearts. And while you may not have played a role in this war, you gave Aegon heirs, more children who have to be hidden to keep them safe.” Jon shook his head, his dark curls cascading into his eyes. “So, yes, Arya, I think you and Aegon were selfish. No matter who wins this war, you will lose, and that will be no one’s fault but your own.”

“I never wanted this,” was all she could manage through her tears.

“That’s the problem, Arya,” Jon said softly, compassion painted on his handsome Stark face. “Life isn’t always about what you want.”

Arya woke up to the feel of a child climbing beneath her sleeping furs. She knew the sun had not risen yet, the tent still cloaked in darkness, but she could hear voices outside, the hunters going out in hopes of felling a few deer. Since coming to the Wall, Aemon frequently slept beside her, tucking his body tightly against her own, but Arya knew it was Rhaenys curling around her, which surprised her. Even as a baby, Rhaenys rarely sought out the bed of anyone but her brother, the two always sleeping better when they were beside each other. Arya remembered sleeping the same way with Bran when they were small, back before they were each given their own chambers.

“What’s wrong, sweetling?” Arya murmured as Rhaenys tucked her face into her mother's shoulder, her dark ringlets brushing against Arya's face.

“Is Father dead?”

Instantly awake, Arya pulled back, lifting Rhaenys's face so she could look into her brown eyes. Where Alysanne was her happy child and Aemon was her serious boy, Rhaenys was always her fearless girl, the one who climbed to the tops of trees and would strike a boy twice her size if he dared to glower at her brother; to see such sadness on Rhaenys's face was heartbreaking.

“Why would you ask me that?”

She shrugged. “It's been so long since we saw him, since before Alysanne came. And Qarl said sometimes fathers go away and never come back because bad men kill them.”

“Sometimes they do,” Arya allowed, “but your father is a dragon. Do you remember the stories he used to tell you about the dragons?”

“The first Aegon and his sisters rode dragons, and the dragons breathed fire. No one could beat the dragons.”

“That’s right.” Cupping her daughter's face, forcing strength into her voice, Arya stressed, “No one can beat a dragon, Rhaenys, and your father is the last true dragon. Do you know the words of House Targaryen?”

“Fire and blood,” she supplied.

“Fire and blood, yes, but you are more than just Targaryen. You are Targaryen and Martell, Stark and Tully. The blood of four of the greatest houses in Westeros flows through your veins, and you must remember that you are only ever as strong as your pack.”
“My pack? Like the wolves?”

Arya smiled. “Your father is a dragon, but I am a wolf, a she-wolf of Winterfell, and my father always said that the lone wolf dies but the pack survives. Aemon, Alysanne, Uncle Jon, Grandmother Ashara, your father and me, we are your pack, and when someone hurts your pack, you do whatever it takes to protect them.”

“I already do that. When Pate pushed Aemon, I protected him,” Rhaenys reminded her.

“Yes, you did.” Smoothing the curls back from her face, Arya swore, “You are the great love of your father's life. When you were born, he smiled so brightly, it dimmed the sun. I do not believe he set you in your cradle for the first few weeks after you were born, and, when he did, he sat beside it to stare upon you. No father has ever loved a daughter the way your father loves you, and he will fight every man in the Seven Kingdoms to get back to you.”

“Do you promise?”

It was a dangerous promise to make; Arya knew there was a very real chance that they would never see Aegon again. But still she promised, the words as much for Rhaenys as they were for herself.

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Arya was making a cake for Alysanne’s name day, Rhaenys and Aemon bringing her berries to help flavor it, when Jon rode into the settlement, a piece of parchment in his hand. Her heart dropped into her stomach, fear for her husband, fear for her family, fear for Gendry pumping through her veins. She told the children to go find Ashara or Val, trying to stop her hands from shaking as she set down the bowl and berries, rising unsteadily to her feet.

“The war is over,” Jon announced, handing the letter to her.

“Who sits the throne?” she asked, terrified of the response, unsure which response she wanted.

He performed a half-bow. “Your Grace.”

Unfolding the parchment, Arya saw it was written in Robb’s hand and bore a broken direwolf seal. Her brother wrote of how King Robert died of sweating sickness a fortnight earlier, how the Reach had changed loyalties from Baratheon to Targaryen, how their forces combined with Dorne and the Golden Company laid siege to King’s Landing. The siege had only ended when Gendry surrendered, apparently afraid for the smallfolk when a ship of Dothraki screamers landed. Anyone who bent the knee and laid down their weapons was spared; the heads of Jaime Lannister, Tywin Lannister, Gregor Clegane, and Amory Lorch were perched upon spikes above the Red Keep for their crimes against House Targaryen. All lords of the great houses were being summoned to swear their fealty, and there was talk of new Wardens being named.

It was the last line which stole Arya’s breath: *There has been no sign of Arya or her children since the hint of a rumor in the Vale over a year ago. Talk still persists she must have been on the ship which sank. Jeyne writes that Mother spends her days in the sept praying for a sign, and Aegon is offering gold to anyone who can bring her to him. I believe she may well be gone, Jon.*

“I have to go south,” she immediately declared. “I have to go - “

“I have already made arrangements for you to sail from Eastwatch,” Jon cut in, a sad smile playing at his lips. “Though I am not sending you without protection. I cannot send the Night’s Watch, but I will not let you sail without a few of the Free Folk as shields.”

“You cannot come?”
There was genuine sorrow in Jon's face as he shook his head. “I am the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, my vows made before the heart tree, and I cannot break them no matter how much happiness it would bring me.”

“You don't belong here,” Arya blurted out, the parchment crunching in her hand. “You should be at Winterfell or at court, you should be married to Val with children of your own - “

“Arya.” He pulled her into a tight embrace, his voice strained against her ear. “I can't.”

That was the difference between her and Jon, she supposed: Jon would always honor his vows at the cost of his own happiness while she was too impetuous to keep hers.

In the end, six spearwives, two of Tormund's sons, Tormund, Val, and Mance volunteered to go south with Arya and her children. Arya suspected Jon requested Val come along, knowing she and Mance would be able to help balance out the brashness of the others, but more so he knew Arya considered Val to be a friend, a rarity in her life now.

Jon saw them as far as Eastwatch, Ghost padding silently at his side, and Arya knew she hugged him too tightly, struggling to keep the tears from falling, a battle she lost when Rhaenys and Aemon squeezed him enthusiastically and Jon kissed Alysanne's smiling face. Ashara embraced Jon for a moment before pulling back, clasping his face between her hands the way she did with Arya's children.

“You are the best parts of them,” she declared, “and I am honored people believe you to be my son.”

“Thank you, Lady Ashara.”

A peculiar smile twisted Ashara's mouth. “No one has called me that in a very long time. I suppose I must get used to that again.”

Arya held Jon a final time, swearing to carry his well-wishes to their family, before forcing herself to board the ship. She remembered the last time she and Jon parted all those years ago at Winterfell; then she had clung to him so tightly, Ned had to pry her hands from his cloak, Uncle Benjen snapping for Jon to get on his horse. The moment Ned put her down, she ran after the horses shouting Jon's name before collapsing on the kingsroad in tears; Ned carried her back in silence, stroking her hair comfortably the entire time.

But she was not a child any longer, and Arya knew the Wall was not her place.

Of course, she did not think King's Landing was her place either, but that did not matter.

“This is what the kneelers fight for?” Val drawled disdainfully as they disembarked the ship, her nose wrinkling at the pungent smell of Flea Bottom and the Blackwater.

“There are prettier kingdoms than this,” Arya assured her, shifting a sleeping Alysanne to her opposite shoulder, Aemon held aloft in Val's arms. Rhaenys held Ashara's hand, but Arya could see her daughter itching to run and explore.

“Where are the trees?” Tormund asked, his loud voice carrying and drawing stares from the other people on the docks. With his gold bracelets, clothing made of pelts, and heavy facial hair, Tormund Giantsbane was certainly not a man who could be missed. When Arya had suggested he may want to wear something more appropriate to the south, he had laughed and declared he would wear his best when meeting the dragon king.
“In the Riverlands, the Stormlands, and the Reach.”

“I’ll keep the North,” Tormund declared as if he owned the whole of it, and even Mance smiled at the man's words.

Members of the Golden Company were patrolling the streets in place of the City Watch, and Arya found she barely recognized the city as it was. It had been so long since she had last been in King's Landing, nearly seven years, and war was unkind. Though King's Landing was not burned like some of the villages Arya glimpsed off the coast, it was obvious the smallfolk were not sure what to make of their new king. There was something like a hush in the streets, almost as if they did not even want to raise their voices and risk angering Aegon. It made Arya wonder what happened during the war, what her husband's army did to inspire such fear.

*What was it Connington used to say about the Targaryens? Greatness or madness, it was always one or the other.*

The men guarding the entrance to the Red Keep were Dothraki, large and fierce, and Arya nearly laughed when Rhaenys greeted them enthusiastically as if she had known them her entire life; there were 40,000 men in Daenerys's khalasar, most of whom Rhaenys never met, but Arya knew her daughter missed Vaes Dothrak, knew she still considered it to be home. The guards smiled in surprise at Rhaenys before returning her greetings. It took Arya a moment to remember the Dothraki words she needed, but she did, she saw the instant recognition in the men's eyes.

“I am the wife of the king and these are his children. We wish to enter.”

Eyes turned upon them as they entered the Keep, but Arya knew no one recognized her; she was never a favorite at court and, in doeskin pants and a tunic, she looked nothing like the Arya Stark who attended Princess Sansa or wed Lord Renly. In the company of eleven wildlings, three children, and a soiled septa, Arya was certain she looked like a beggar.

“Duck!” Rhaenys cried, breaking free of Ashara's grasp and charging towards the man, now outfitted in the white cloak and armor of the Kingsguard. Arya saw the genuine disbelief on her old friend's face before he bent to pick up her daughter, returning the little girl's embrace.

“You seem to have grown twice your size since we parted,” Duck reported, his voice as jolly as it ever was when interacting with the children.

“I missed you!”

“And we have missed you.” Eyes locking with Arya's, he stressed, “All of you.”

Arya flushed under the perceived judgment before requesting, “Would it be possible for you to find food and lodgings for my companions? We have had a long trip and they acted as our protectors.”

Setting Rhaenys upon her feet, he stopped a passing servant, directing her to take Mance, Tormund, and the others to the kitchens for food before placing them in open rooms in the Hand's tower. Only Val remained, silent evaluating the interactions between the men, rubbing Aemon's back when he whimpered. Arya suspected Val was silently cataloging each and every word to report back to Jon, his spy in the south.

“The king is in the great hall hearing grievances and requests,” Duck informed them. “I can take you to his solar to wait until he is finished.”

“I have been told the realm believes we have all perished, including my husband,” Arya replied. “I am sure he will forgive us the interruption.”
“Your Grace, I believe it would be best - “

“You heard your queen, Rolly,” Ashara cut in, her voice thick with chastisement.

*I am truly the queen now*, Arya realized as Duck nodded, leading them towards the great hall. *It is not what I wanted but it is what has come to be.*

She could see Aegon on the Iron Throne, Viserys behind his right shoulder, Jon Connington at his left; Arya recognized the great lords of Westeros in the room as well as the ladies, all in their finest to stand before the king. Her eyes scanned the room and found Ned and her brothers standing near one wall, all wearing solemn faces, and Arya's heart ached with such ferocity, it nearly shattered. The air rushed from her lungs as Bran suddenly looked at her, his eyes widening in shock; she saw him grasp Robb's arm, pointing towards her, and then the eyes of her family were upon her, four familiar faces twisted up in happiness and disbelief.

It was at that moment Rhaenys caught sight of Aegon, shouted, “Father!” and began to charge the Iron Throne, running as if all seven hells were after her. The man from the Westerlands who was speaking nearly lost his footing as Rhaenys blew past him, leaping into Aegon's arms as he began to rise from the throne. Arya felt tears threaten to overwhelm her as she saw the desperate way her husband and daughter were clinging to each other, but she knew now more than ever she had to be as stoic as her father.

She reached for Aemon, Val transferring the boy into Arya's arms, and Arya began to make the long walk to the Iron Throne, Aemon on one shoulder and Alysanne on the other. The murmurs of the lords echoed in the hall, whispers becoming shouts, but Arya refused to look anywhere but forward, at Aegon. She heard Connington dismissing the lords and ladies, heard the shuffle of their footsteps, and Arya sunk her teeth into her lip to keep from shouting for her family to stay.

Aegon's eyes shone with emotion as Aemon reached for him, setting Rhaenys on her feet only to have her cling to his leg. As his arms enclosed their son, he ran a hand down Alysanne's back.

“And who is this?” he asked, a smile in his voice.

“That's Alysanne,” Rhaenys supplied.

“Alysanne,” Aegon repeated, a touch of awe in his voice as their youngest daughter lifted her head to look at him before burying her face back into Arya's neck with a giggle. “It would seem I have missed much while campaigning.”

A single tear escaped Arya's eye as Aegon cupped the side of her face. Bringing his face close to hers, he whispered, “Why did you run?”

“Because I was not going to put my children in the hands of Illyrio, not when there were better options.”

“They told me you were dead.” A smile heavy with respect and amusement crossed his face. “I told them if they thought that, they did not know you at all.”

His mouth was warm and firm against hers and, though Arya had spent nearly two years of her life loving and hating him in equal measure, she still leaned into it, so grateful to know the ones she loved were safe, that her *children* were safe she could barely stand it.

“I would like to see my family,” she murmured when the kiss broke.

“Soon,” Aegon promised, grinning broadly. “Let's get you all settled in first, and you can tell me of
“Your adventures these past few years.”

“There are matters to attend - “ Viserys began.

“They can wait,” Aegon stated firmly. “My family has been returned to me, and that requires celebration.”

The hatred in Viserys's glare told Arya her old enemy was an enemy still.

They were only a handful of steps from the great hall when Gendry and Lord Varys exited a room, both stopping in their tracks at the sight of her. For a moment all she and Gendry could do was stare at each other, his blue eyes so swollen with words unspoken, and then Arya's stomach dropped as he took the knee.

“Welcome back to court, Your Grace.”

It was the clipped coolness of his courtesy which finally brought forth Arya's tears.

Aegon may have let Gendry Baratheon live, but Arya knew the prince she loved, the prince who was her dearest friend, was well-and-truly dead to Arya Targaryen.
Arya's hands shook as she opened the door to her father's solar, her chest burning as if she had remained under water too long. Only a few hours had passed since her arrival at court, but all Arya could think about was Ned, Robb, Bran, and Rickon waiting somewhere in the castle. She smiled through a forced conversation with Daenerys, bathed and donned the first gown she had worn since her wedding day, and supped with Aegon and the children, but her thoughts never drifted far from her family lingering somewhere in the Red Keep.

Aegon explained the structure of court under his rule: Connington was his Hand, Viserys and Daenerys holding places on the small council, Duck was a member of the Kingsguard, and Haldon was serving as Aegon's personal maester. Lord Varys and Lord Baelish still maintained positions with the council, and, as a show of goodwill towards House Baratheon, Gendry was given the remaining seat upon the council.

“He is as honorable as you always said,” Aegon told her as he balanced Rhaenys on his knee while they ate. “His mad mother wanted to raze all of King's Landing with wildfire before ever giving it to me, but he put his own mother into a black cell to keep the peace. She's a prisoner now at Casterly Rock. But I have to say, what Gendry has done to help hold the realm together is admirable.”

“My sister,” Arya began, unsure how to finish the sentence.

“Your sister and her children are safe,” Aegon assured her. “I've allowed them to keep their rooms in Maegor's Holdfast until something more permanent can be found. She's quite polite.”

Arya wished the smile on her lips was less bitter. “Yes, Sansa was always courteous to a fault.”

“Your father has been kind as well,” Aegon continued. “There was some initial resistance as there was with everyone, but he and Robb have been instrumental in arranging the loyalty of the North. And your brother Bran, he fought valiantly in the Westerlands; he held Casterly Rock when Tommen took a wound, and he held the siege until Gendry conceded.”

“And Rickon?”

Aegon's face tightened momentarily before admitting, “Things are a bit slower moving with him.”

She thought of the last time she saw Rickon, of how he had gotten into his cups at her wedding to Renly and ended up nearly brawling with both of the Redwyne twins. If she had a drop of wolf's blood, Rickon had nothing but the blood of the wolf.

Arya thought of that now as she entered the solar, her heart in her throat.

Her father, brothers, and sister were seated around the table, and all rose as she entered. Arya was startled by how much everyone seemed to have aged; when she realized it had been almost six years since she last saw them made her ache. There was silver in Robb's beard now; Bran bore a scar on his forehead and Rickon, who always seemed so young, was now broader than them all. Sansa was still beautiful, far more beautiful than Arya ever was, but she could read the sadness in Sansa's blue eyes, undoubtedly the result of having her entire life blown apart by her sister's husband. But it was Ned, now bearing his weight upon a cane, which drove home the reality of Arya's situation: she did not know her family anymore.

“I'm sorry,” Arya blurted out, suddenly overwhelmed with tears. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry. If I had known what was going to happen - “
“Hush,” Ned ordered as he hobbled forward, enfolding her in his arms as tightly as he had when she was child. Arya buried her face in his chest, inhaling the scent of home as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Just hush, girl. Oh, gods be good...”

Arya clung to him, her anchor in this storm, and she never wanted to raise her face from his chest, never wanted to leave his embrace. From the moment she left Storm's End, she longed for her family, to be as small as Rhaenys and held in her father's lap, assured of the goodness and safety of the world by the man she trusted above all. Sometimes, when Rhaenys was particularly ornery with her but would immediately bend to Aegon's soft requests, Arya thought of Ned and Catelyn at Winterfell and all the rejection her mother must have felt when Arya always chose her father over her.

Bran embraced her next, squeezing her even tighter than Ned had. “I saw your wildlings earlier,” he said with a laugh in his voice. “Did you go beyond the Wall?”

“Jon wouldn't let me. Besides, we were supposed to do it together, remember?”

Bran pulled back, eyes wet his emotion. “King and Queen of the wildlings.”

Robb and Rickon both hugged her tightly, but Sansa remained at a distance, her face cool and poised. Arya hesitated, unsure how to proceed, when Sansa stepped forward, a light, polite kiss brushed against Arya's cheek.

“Welcome back, Your Grace.”

Arya recoiled from the title, wincing as if it was a blade in her ribs, and Sansa's eyes darkened. For a moment, she tried to figure out what to say to her sister, the queen she usurped, but Arya found there were no words; all Sansa had ever wanted was to be a queen, an office she held for only a fortnight, and for her children to be princes and princesses, which they no longer were. Arya knew Gendry never much cared if he was king or not; the only reason he hadn't abdicated was to spare the realm from Joffrey as their king. But Sansa...A crown was all Sansa ever dreamed of having.

“Arya,” Arya began, hoping the words would come to her only to be left wanting.

Her sister's poise did not falter as she said, “I am sure you've had a long journey and such matters are not yet at hand, but my children's septa is happy to see to your children as well. Prince Viserys approached me about it, and, I can assure you, Septa Glynnis is kind.”

Certain she was misunderstanding, certain Sansa could not possibly be speaking of septas and Viserys's wishes after everything which had happened, all Arya could manage was, “My children do not keep the Seven.”

“What do you mean?” Sansa asked in surprise. “You have not taught your children the Faith?”

Trying not to scoff at the ridiculousness of the conversation, Arya replied, “We keep the Old Gods. What does it matter?”

“What does it matter?” Sansa echoed, an edge to her voice which made all of their brothers shift uncomfortably at whatever was about to happen. Arya saw her father opening his mouth to still Sansa's words, but her sister was suddenly flush with an anger Arya recognized often in herself. “It matters because you are now the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms! It matters because your children are now heirs to the Iron Throne! It matters because the realm and the Faith will not stand for the rulers of the kingdom saying their prayers before trees, especially not when the king and queen are more used to savages than good people!”

“Arya,” Ned warned as Arya snapped, “You have no idea what you are talking about! The
Dothraki and the wildlings are honest, which is more than I can say for courtiers.”

“Honest?” Sansa repeated. “You are going to lecture me about honesty? What would you know about honesty?”

“Sansa,” Robb said, moving forward to lay a hand upon their sister’s shoulder only to be shook off.

“You have broken every vow you have ever made!” Sansa cried, furious tears filling her eyes. “You broke your marriage vows to Renly, you shamed our family, you hid away from the husband you claim to love and stole his children, and your children now will hold what was meant to belong to mine, so do not stand there and lecture me on honesty!”

“That’s enough!” Ned snapped, his voice as deep and stern as it ever was.

But for the first time, Sansa did not heed their father's words. “No, it will never be enough. Let everyone else forgive you and fall at your feet, bowing to the Dragon Queen, but you remember every time you wear your crown, you stole it from your own blood.”

The words hung in the air, thick and poisonous, almost as if even Ned Stark did not want to touch them. There was such fury on Sansa’s face, a sense of betrayal which ran deeper than any of their past arguments; Sansa was angry for herself or for Gendry but for her children, the three little nieces Arya was once so puzzled by and the nephew Arya did not know. Arya knew what it was like to be willing to die to protect your children, and Aegon's ascension to the throne put the futures of all the Baratheon children in peril. Gendry held no lands and, if wealth was seized, was as poor as a beggar; no one had ever fallen as quickly or as steeply as Sansa's family, and Arya knew Sansa was not like her, was not meant for wandering the Free Cities or camping with wildlings.

If Arya was still the girl she had been at Storm's End, angry and impulsive, she would have thrown the truth at Sansa: that it was she who was always meant to be queen, that Gendry had wanted her and only married Sansa because Arya refused his proposal. If Arya was still the girl she had been after Ned's death, she would have apologized and promised to make it up to her. If Arya was still the girl she had been at Winterfell, she would have kicked Sansa in the shin and pulled her shining auburn hair.

But Arya was none of those women now, so she said the only thing which felt true in her heart.

“I did not do any of this to steal from you, Sansa. I did not make any decisions based upon you.”

“Of course you didn't because you only make decisions based upon yourself.” Sansa scoffed as she bounced in a mocking bow. “May I have your leave, Your Grace? I feel ill.”

Hurt and anger flared brightly in Arya's chest. The voice which passed through her lips was not her own; it belonged to the girl who always felt slighted, always felt less than her prettier, better loved sister. “No, you will stay. Stay and be ill. I will go.”

“No, Arya, both of you - “

Arya did not let hear the rest of her father's words, rushing from the solar and down the staircase as if she was a little girl again, trying to outrun the pain Sansa caused her. She would not let Sansa see her cry, to let her see how conflicted she was with this situation. All Arya wanted was her family back, to feel whole again.

But no man could serve two masters, and Arya was rapidly discovering that the world she left was not the world to which she was returning.
When she returned to her bedchamber, she was stunned to see Aegon and all three of their children in the large featherbed; the children were all freshly bathed in their nightclothes, Rhaenys and Aemon snuggled in tightly beside each other while Alyssanne slept in her father's arms. Arya quickly wiped away the tears on her cheeks, her heart warming at the sight of the family she created.

“All the rooms in the castle, and we're all staying in mine?” Arya quipped, drawing giggles from her children.

“We want to share a room,” Rhaenys explained, speaking for Aemon as she had since his birth. “We don't like sleeping alone.”

Aemon nodded silently in agreement, his purple eyes watching Arya unflinchingly.

“I told them we could see about sharing a chamber,” Aegon explained, “but that they are getting older and it's not appropriate for a brother and sister to share a chamber.”

“But I do not want to share with Alyssanne. She is a baby!”

“That's unkind,” Arya mildly replied.

“Well, she is! And Aemon and I have always shared a pallet. Do we not mind, do we, Aemon?”

“We can share with Alyssanne too,” Aemon offered softly, ever the conciliator.

Her eyes found Aegon's across the bed, and, though she was still uncertain about the future course of her marriage, Arya still smiled at the obvious look of pride on her husband's face. When she was heavily pregnant with Aemon, Rhaenys used to press her hands against the stretched skin of her middle, giggling madly whenever Aemon moved and proudly telling everyone about “her baby”; Aegon loved it, telling Arya he wanted their children to be the very best of friends, to know and love each other better than any other siblings ever had. Arya knew Aegon imagined he and his sister would have been great friends if the rebellion had not occurred; Rhaenys and Aemon's devotion to each other fulfilled the fondest wish in Aegon's heart.

“We shall think about it,” Aegon offered, setting Alyssanne's sleeping form beside Aemon, who easily made room for his baby sister in the crook of his arm. “Mayhaps for tonight, your mother will allow you to share her bed.”

“Of course,” Arya easily agreed, unwilling to admit she preferred for the children to be with her. She did not care what peace Aegon swore was reached; Arya knew the lords and ladies of Westeros well enough to know they did not approve of their new king and his foreign allies. Aegon may have grown up with the stories of what happened to his mother and sister, but Arya grew up under the weight of it; if someone were going to try to harm her children, they would have to fight their way past her.

“Will you stay with us too?” Rhaenys asked, her voice sounding decidedly less firm than it usually did. “Like at home,” she added when there was hesitation between her parents.

Arya resisted the urge to smile; Vaes Dothrak would always be Rhaenys's home as Winterfell would always be hers, the only place on earth where her daughter would ever feel truly comfortable.

She saw Aegon melt at Rhaenys's request, always so pliable to their daughter; Arya knew it was probably not fair to have a favorite child, but the bond between Aegon and Rhaenys was something powerful, something which reminded Arya of the relationship she once had with Ned. Rhaenys was Aegon's child as surely as Aemon was hers; Alyssanne was everyone's, too good-spirited and friendly to ever confine herself to having a preference for anyone.
“If your mother does not mind,” he murmured, eyes soft with affection.

They always used to sleep together as a family, first in Pentos and then in the Dothraki Sea; Arya remembered what it felt like to wake for the first time with Rhaenys’s small body between her and Aegon’s and to realize this was her family, that they belonged to her and no one else. After she awoke from her sleep following Aemon’s birth, Arya would wake up sometimes to find Aegon staring down at the three of them, sadness and love clouding his features as he made the same realizations she did. Arya knew she was not a good lady, obedient wife, or the type of mother who taught her children piety and deference, but she truly loved her family.

She just never realized she might have to choose which family to love.

Sleep never came easily for Arya, but it did not come at all that night. Alysanne slept curled around her mother while Aemon and Rhaenys burrowed tightly against each other, Aegon on their daughter's other side. Finally, as the moon reached its peak in the sky, Arya slipped from the bed, crossing the chamber in her nightgown to stare out at King's Landing from the high windows. She thought of Cersei Lannister held in the bowels of Casterly Rock and Rhaella Targaryen before her; queens never seemed to meet kind ends in Westeros.

She inhaled sharply at the feel of Aegon's hands resting on her hips, sliding around her waist to hold her against him; Arya could feel the heat of his body against her back, his bare skin hot to the touch, and she instinctively turned her face towards his, resting her forehead against the elegant line of his neck.

“Do you hate me for all I've done?” he whispered against her forehead, sounding far more vulnerable than any king should.

“Only sometimes,” she answered honestly. “Do you hate me for all I've done?”

“Not as often as I hate myself for driving you to it,” he replied, rewarding her honesty with his own. They were quiet for a moment, the sounds of their children's breathing a sweet lullaby before Aegon sighed, “We married for love.”

“Yes.”

“There are not many in the world who can claim that.”

Arya thought of Ned Dayne and Renly Baratheon, good men both whom her heart was never able to take to as it should have. “That is very true.”

“Is there love between us still?”

She nodded, emotion rising hard in her throat. “Love and respect and three beautiful children I never thought I would ever have.”

“But no trust?”

“Never again,” Arya swore, meaning the words as surely as if they were vowed before the heart tree. Twisting in his arms, finding his lilac eyes in the muted light, Arya knew he could see the tears in her eyes. “Every promise you made me you have broken. How could I ever trust you?”

“I did this for us.”

“You did this for you,” she corrected, forcing herself to keep her tone even and soft so as not to wake the children, “for Viserys, for Daenerys, for people who lived and died before either of us could even
know them, but you did not do it for me or our children.”

“What sort of legacy could I have left our children in the Free Cities, living off the kindnesses of others or by gold won by fighting other people's wars?”

Arya scoffed as tears rolled down her cheeks. “I did not marry you or bear your children for a legacy. They would love you if you were a sellsword, a beggar, a king, or a god. But our children will never be loved here.”

“What are you talking about? They are the prince and princesses of - “

“They are the issue of a woman who was never well-loved before she abandoned her marriage to one of the most popular lords in the Seven Kingdoms and wed the man who stripped her own blood of their legacy.” She shook her head in frustration. “You may be skilled at warfare, but the battlefield is nowhere near as bloody or vengeful as the Red Keep. You'll see.”

“See what?”

“See why I preferred exchanging my honor to a sellsword rather than remaining in its shadow.”

The first hints of anger began to flush Aegon's face. “You are the most honorable woman I have ever known, and I will take the tongue of any man who says otherwise.”

“Then you shall have quite the collection of tongues, Your Grace.” Arya rose on her toes, brushing her lips against his, tasting the salt of her own tears; Aegon clutched her too tightly, half-longing and half-desperate, and Arya knew she would bear bruises in the morning. She did not resist when he pushed her towards the bath, closing the door before lifting her to sit upon the cool stone edge of the wash basin.

Aegon buried his fingers in her tangled hair, holding her head so that she would meet his gaze. “I love you more than I could ever love a crown.”

Liar, she thought without malice even as she tipped her hips upwards in silent request to be touched.

“That one is always looking at you,” Val declared one afternoon as she and Arya sat in the gardens while the children ran and played. In the few months since first arriving in the Crowlands, Arya found Val to be the only friend she had at court and her friend would be departing with Mance and the others in three days time. All of the Seven Kingdoms was descending upon King's Landing for Aegon's coronation and the feast which would follow, but, no matter how loyal they had been, the small council made sure the wildlings would have no part in it.

Arya turned her head to try to follow Val's pointed stare. “Which one?”

“The big one who is with your sour-faced sister.”

Her eyes instantly found Sansa and Gendry as they approached the doors to the Keep, Sansa's hand resting upon Gendry's elbow, walking as regally as she practiced all those years ago in Winterfell. Not once since that first horrible day in Westeros had Sansa spoken a word to Arya; she kept to her rooms with Margaery Tyrell and Tommen's wife, the princesses usurped by the girl they used to mock when they were young. Even Sansa's children were kept away, hidden away with the other Baratheon issue; they were claiming the children were ill with fevers and terrible colds, but Arya knew it was far more than that. Thus far Aegon had not noticed the slight upon their children, too involved in trying to fix the realm he broke, but Arya knew it was only a matter of time.
Only Gendry was about, stern-faced and silent except when courtesy demanded otherwise. And Arya did not need Val to tell her how her good-brother's blue eyes followed her every move.

“Yes,” was all Arya said in reply, watching as Aemon and Rhaenys held Alysanne's hands to swing her between them.

“Why?”

Arya wasn't sure why she chose to tell the truth to Val when she denied it when confronted every other time. But still she found herself saying matter-of-factly, “Because once we loved each other, and he offered to make me his queen. But I said no and he married my sister instead.”

“Yes,” was all Arya said in reply, watching as Aemon and Rhaenys held Alysanne's hands to swing her between them.

“Why did you say no if you loved him?”

“Because I did not want to be queen and my sister did. And because I was stupid.” She took a heavy swallow from her cup of wine. “But mostly I was stupid.”

Val chuckled with a roll of her eyes. “You kneelers make everything so bloody difficult. All you worry about is what's proper and what's honorable, but where does it get you? Miserable bastards, the lot of you.”

“It isn't like with the Free Folk. We can't just steal people we like.”

“Oh really? Isn't that how you ended up the queen?”

Arya bristled at the insinuation. “I wasn't stolen.”

“You were stolen,” Val argued mildly, “and you don't even realize it.”

She turned as the children laughed and giggled, Rhaenys now chasing her brother and sister, and Arya considered Val's words. After a moment, she confessed the most treasonous belief she held in her heart, the one which felt like a betrayal to her children every time she even thought of it.

“Sometimes I wish my husband had lost the war.”

Val offered a half-smile. “Just because he sits on the throne doesn't mean he won.”

Nobody won, not in Westeros. Arya did not need Val to point that out to her.

When Arya entered the hall for dinner, she was genuinely surprised to find so many people at the table: her father and brothers, Sansa and Gendry, Margaery and Joffrey, Tommen and Elaine, Ashara, Daenerys, Rhaego, Viserys, Connington, and Lord Varys. She instantly dropped her eyes to the floor, not wanting to see the judgment in their eyes as she walked to her place beside Aegon, the skirts of her gown rustling against the floor; since her return to court, Arya had made a conscious effort to not be with Aegon in front of her family or Gendry, as if it would lessen the guilt she felt about what she did if they did not need to see her with her husband.

As the servants began to fill their plates, Arya found herself stealing glances at Gendry from the corner of her eye; he sat between Sansa and Joffrey, silent and stone faced, his black beard hiding most of his face, his blue eyes focused on Bran as he spoke. It was her subtle study of her old friend which lead Arya to miss the beginnings of the conversation between Viserys and the men around her.

“It's completely infuriating,” Viserys was saying, gesturing with the hand which held his wine cup.
“Marriage is the only claim she has to House Hornwood, and if this Bolton bastard wants to marry her for it, she should be grateful.”

“There are stories of Ramsay Snow's... preferences, Prince Viserys,” Lord Varys offered, clearly trying to be selective with his words. “And he is only the heir to Dreadfort because he is rumored to have killed his trueborn brother.”

“A woman cannot keep a holdfast, especially in the North,” Viserys insisted.

“What would you know about what a woman could do in the North?” Arya snapped, hating the heavy condescension in his tone. “Have you ever set foot above the Neck? Have you ever met Lady Hornwood?”

“No, but - “

“Then what right have you to determine what she can and cannot do? And to force the Bastard of Bolton on her besides - “

“Arya,” Aegon began, his voice clearly trying to keep the peace, but Arya would not be silenced, not with Viserys Targaryen looking and acting so irritatingly smug.

“A woman cannot fight a war.”

“Well, someone must let Maege Mormont and her daughters know, for the ladies in their family have been defending Bear Island for centuries.”

“I am certain no one is doubting a woman's capacity for defense,” Varys offered diplomatically, “but it is far preferable to have a man to rule. Ladies are more talented at keeping a home and raising children whereas men are more skilled at warfare. It is simply how the Gods designed it.”

“Oh, yes, how could one forget the magical properties of possessing a cock?”

“Arya!” Ashara gasped sharply as Rhaego laughed, quickly silencing his amusement when he saw the uncomfortable expressions on their dinner guests' faces.

“I'll not force any woman to marry someone she does not want to marry, especially a man as twisted as Ramsay Bolton,” Aegon pronounced, setting a comforting hand atop Arya's.

Viserys was furious. It was enough to make Arya's day feel less like it was wasted.

She barely heard the rest of the dinner conversation, Aegon's insistence to the Baratheon sons about how he wanted to make a stronger realm together, how he wanted the North to be a strong ally to the Iron Throne. Arya never cared for politics before Aegon's ascension to the Iron Throne, and she cared even less about it now. She picked at her food, the second-finest cuts of meat, the rich dishes which churned her stomach after so many years spent with the Free Folk and the Dothraki, and instead Arya found herself drinking too heavily of the Dornish red, her head swimming long before dinner was done.

Connington caught her elbow when she rose, unsteady on her feet, and Arya saw disapproval in the man's eyes, which she promptly ignored. Aegon was holding a meeting with the men, the ladies Baratheon retiring to Sansa's solar, but Arya did not even try to pretend she would be joining them. Instead she wandered through the hallways of the Keep, head foggy from wine, remembering when she used to run the corridors, used to be someone else entirely.

_I was fierce once_, she thought as she walked aimlessly. _I was a she-wolf, bold and brave, and now I_
She did not realize until the wind blew against her face that she was at Traitor's Walk. The bridge stretched high across the ground to reach the other side, the spikes on the wall now devoid of the heads Aegon took. Arya stepped carefully onto the walk, staring down at the drop before carefully lowering herself to sit, her feet dangling. She gasped when her slipper came loose from her foot, dropping into the darkness, and Arya heard the soft slap it made as it landed.

Everyone whispered “traitor” behind her back; it seemed only right she spend her evening here.

Arya was uncertain how long she sat upon the bridge before she heard the approaching footsteps. Between the darkness and her drunkenness, she could not make out who it was at first; only when he joined her on the bridge did Arya recognize the figure as Gendry. He sank down beside her, the wide breadth of his shoulders and the barrel of his chest so different from Aegon's lean figure, and Arya wondered what it felt like for Sansa to fall asleep in the circle of his arms.

Neither of them said anything at first, both staring into the blackness, the noises of the Keep muted. And then Arya sighed, her head listing to rest against his shoulder, and Gendry's arm came around her body, his hand resting against her hip.

“I missed you every day,” Gendry confessed in a murmur, turning his head so his lips brushed the top of her head with every word. “I went mad when I heard you wed him.”

“I never stopped thinking about you,” she offered in reply, inhaling the familiar scent of him. “I was so scared of what would happen to you.”

His fingers bit into her hip as he held her, agony twisting his features, as he implored, “Why could you be his queen but not mine?”

Too drunk to still her tongue, Arya shook her head, spilling her hair in every direction. “I didn't want to be his queen, just his wife. If you had been an armorer instead of a prince, I would have been your wife. I would have given you babies and happiness, I would have shared your bed every night, I would have loved you better than - “

His mouth was hot against hers, his beard scratching at the soft skin of her face, and Arya recognized even through her haze this was wrong. Aegon would take his head for this, and Sansa's hatred towards her would never abate; her head could end up on a spike beside Gendry's if any of this was ever discovered.

But Arya still whispered against his mouth, “Come to me tonight.”

There was fire in Gendry's blue eyes as he whispered in return, “Truly?”

“In the godswood,” she said, rapidly sobering as reality began to assert itself. “I'll be waiting.”

No one questioned when she sought out the godswood hours later, head nearly cleared of wine; men and women bowed when she passed, but Arya could not remember their faces. They bowed because she was the queen, not because they loved her; her father always said you could never trust a man who did not bear love when he bent the knee.

Arya loved her husband and she loved her sister as well; it was being forced to be something she was not which she hated.

She spread her cloak upon the ground, sitting upon it as her stomach fluttered in nervous anticipation. From the time she was thirteen, she had wanted this, had wanted it before she even truly understood
what it was; Arya was never one to deny herself what she wanted, and it was only her desire to keep her honor which made her stay far from Gendry's bed.

But her honor was gone now, given to a sellsword who was an exiled prince, a prince who broke his word to become king, and Arya was exhausted from pretending otherwise.

She thought of Jon and Val as Gendry entered the clearing, smiling hopefully as he saw her resting on her cloak; honor and vows kept Jon Snow well-and-truly miserable while they kept Val lingering in hopes he would break. Arya made vows to Aegon Targaryen because she thought love would override a man's ambition; Gendry made vows to Sansa Stark because he thought the Baratheon name was worth more than his personal happiness. They had been dutiful children to their fathers once, back when they were young and the world still seemed fair.

“I have dreamed of this a thousand times,” Gendry confessed as he knelt beside her, his hand rising tentatively to touch her cheek as if he was afraid of startling her.

Arya loosened the ties of her gown, peeling the sides apart to reveal her shift. “You talk too much,” she declared, pulling him down for a kiss.

There was nothing tender in their coupling, no sweet words or gentle kisses. Arya ripped the collar of Gendry's tunic in her haste to undress him; Gendry sank his teeth into the curve of her shoulder hard enough to bruise when he entered her. It was as much a fight as any they had before, but, unlike their other spats, Arya did not mind losing. She arched her back hard when Gendry caught her wrists, holding them above her head, effectively keeping her in place as their hips met in a fast, desperate rhythm; she did not try to reverse their positions so she might be in control. Arya learned lovemaking from Ned Dayne and learned to enjoy it from Aegon Targaryen, but the only man she ever wanted with absolute desperation had always been Gendry.

She cried out sharply as Gendry raised her hips, trying to get deeper inside of her, and Arya flung her arms out, uprooting grass as she tried to remain attached to the earth. The spring air was cool, but Arya felt as if she was aflame, Gendry's skin burning as hot as her own, and both were slick with sweat. Gendry panted her name, his lips wet and hungry against her throat, and Arya's nails bit into the flesh of his shoulders as he rose on his knees, grasping her tightly around the waist; he now sat upon her ruined cloak, Arya straddling his lap, rising and falling without faltering.

His laugh was breathless and joyful, a sound Arya had not heard since before the Ironborn Rebellion, and it made her laugh as well. “What?”

“You have leaves in your hair.” Plucking a bit of golden leaf from the tangled mess, he teased, “You shall be my forest lass.”

“Stupid,” she breathed even as she smiled and took his mouth for another kiss. Gendry laughed against her, the noise turning to a moan, and Arya shook as she peaked, Gendry following soon after.

They lay on their backs beside each other, both of their breaths heavy as their blood cooled. Arya could hear the leaves singing above her, but too many years away made her forget how to understand the trees; she closed her eyes, trying to focus, but all she could make out was fall, fall, fall.

“We should not have done that,” Arya said when she was calm.

“Regret already?” Gendry drawled, and she could hear the bitterness starting to creep into his voice.
“No, simply stating a fact.” She rolled onto her side, rising up on her elbow. “I do love my husband.”

Gendry mimicked her position. “I know that. If you didn't, you would have stayed at the Wall with your children.”

“Do you love Sansa?”

It was the only question she never asked of him before because she knew he would be honest; with his seed on her thighs, the truth of it did not seem so damning. “I respect her and appreciate her; the love I bear her is not passionate but is real. But she hates me now for giving the Iron Throne to your husband without a fight; she curses my manhood and accuses me of not loving our children well enough to give them an inheritance.”

Arya idly traced a pattern upon his bare chest. “She'll forgive you. You'll stay here or go to Storm's End, and then she'll give you more red-headed children.”

“And you'll be a miserable queen who has to pretend you are not smarter and more capable than the men who advise the king while simpering and curtsying to men who whisper about your alleged dishonors.”

“The things we do for love,” Arya drawled, and Gendry smiled mirthlessly.

They dressed in silence, Arya's fingers fumbling with her gown's ties as Gendry attempted to hide his torn tunic beneath his surcoat. She laughed softly as Gendry removed the golden leaves from her hair, and he rewarded every smile with a kiss. When he was finished, Arya gathered her filthy cloak from the ground, shaking it free of dirt before fastening it around her shoulders, the scent of Gendry surrounding her.

“This cannot happen again,” she declared, holding his face between her palms.

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

They both knew it was a lie.

Her mother was coming. Bran told her first, finding her as she was breaking fast with the children and Ashara; he scooped up Aemon, drawing a rare laugh from her serious son, and tweaked Alysanne’s nose before telling her how Catelyn left Winterfell with fifty of the Stark guard, Meera Reed, and Jeyne Westerling. Arya could scarcely believe little Rickard was old enough to act as Lord of Winterfell in their absence, but he was four-and-ten now; the years seemed to be moving faster than Arya could comprehend. Even as Bran gave her the details of their mother's arrival, Arya found her eyes drifting towards Ashara, who was pointedly avoiding her gaze, urging Rhaenys to remember her table manners.

“Do you dislike my mother?” Arya asked Ashara later in the day when Rhaenys and Aemon were taken by their septa for lessons, Alysanne napping peacefully.

Her fingers did not falter as she continued her needlework. “I barely know your lady mother. I only met her once, and she was barely more than a child then.”

“That wasn't my question.”

Ashara lifted her violet eyes, brushing a lock of dark hair off of her forehead. Since returning to court, Aegon provided her with the finest of gowns, draping her in jewels and insisting she be treated as the Queen Mother. Arya knew from her last discussion with Aegon that he entered into talks with
Lord Beric and Lady Allyria about Ashara receiving Starfall, her right as the elder sister, but Ashara did not seem in a hurry to return to Dorne.

“It was not Catelyn Tully's fault that Brandon Stark was killed by King Aerys. Nor was it Lady Catelyn's fault that her father insisted on House Stark keeping the betrothal in exchange for his bannermen. I do not dislike your mother for that which was out of her control.”

“But?” Arya prompted, knowing there was more.

“But a woman never forgets what it is like to see the man she loves marry another.” She smiled sadly. “You, of all people, understand what that is like.”

“You shouldn't listen to gossip,” Arya chastised teasingly, rising to pour herself a cup of wine.

“If I stopped listening to gossip, I would have nothing to listen to,” Ashara retorted.

Sometimes Arya found herself wondering what it would have been like to be the daughter of Ned Stark and Ashara Dayne. She knew it was disloyal to Catelyn, who always loved her as well as she could, but Arya knew from the time she was small that Sansa was the daughter she preferred. Arya was too wild and too unrefined, too willful and too quick to anger; Catelyn never quite knew what to do with Arya and, as her own children grew, Arya certainly understood the confusion. But Ashara never judged her for her less ladylike behaviors, never lectured her on propriety; beyond a few gentle reminders since returning to court, Ashara accepted Arya as she was.

Arya thought of Allyria Dayne, so beautiful and strong, quick to anger and even quicker to forgive, and she knew she would have preferred to have grown up as Allyria's little sister instead of Sansa's sister. Ashara insisted Arya never tell Ned or Allyria the truth of her parentage, and Arya made the promise easily, but she found herself wishing for a sister who did not look at her as if she was the evilest thing in the world. The closest she had now was Daenerys, but Arya never forgot for a moment that Dany was a dragon, not a direwolf.

On the morning Catelyn was to arrive, Arya found herself unable to sit still. She rose long before the sun, her stomach twisting and churning with nervous anticipation, and Arya knew she would never be able to survive until midday when the train from Winterfell was to arrive. In the very bottom of her trunks, Arya found her riding leathers and the painted Dothraki vest gifted to her when Rhaenys was still suckling; donning them was like slipping into the skin of the girl she once was, and Arya found herself inhaling deep, trying to recall the unique scents of the Dothraki Sea. As she wove her hair into a loose braid, Arya found herself remembering how happy she and Aegon were in those early days of their marriage, the way they doted upon Rhaenys and thought nothing of riding, laughing, and frolicking the days away. They were so free then, living amongst the khalasar, drinking fermented mare's milk, dancing around the fires; Aemon was even conceived beneath the stars in the Dothraki way, something Arya knew would scandalize every lord and lady in Westeros.

Now she and Aegon rarely spent any time together, let alone in each other's bed, and the only man she spent time with beneath the stars was Gendry, guilt and shame their bedmates.

Two of the Kingsguard stood outside Aegon's chamber, and Arya saw their eyes widen at the image she presented. As she slipped into the dark, cool room, Arya realized she had not been in the king's apartments since the day Robert ordered her to marry Renly; Aegon always came to her rooms. The tapestries were all Targaryen colors now, and, as Arya came to sit upon the massive bed beside her sleeping husband, she found herself thinking of King Robert and Aerys before him, all the Targaryens who slept in this room and the unsettling fact that, one day, her son would sleep in it as well.
Aegon frowned in confusion as Arya roused him, brows lifting in concern as he said, “Arya? What is it? Are the children - “

“They're fine,” she quickly assured him, letting him settle back into the pillows. “Let's go riding.”

“Riding? It's not even light yet - “

“So what? We used to ride before the sun all the time.” Taking his hands, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man she fell in love with in the Stormlands, she prodded, “Do you remember when we first got to the Dothraki Sea when Rhaenys was still swaddled? We left her with Ashara and we rode through the waist-high grass until all we could see were the different colors.”

“You put me to shame on your horse,” Aegon recalled with a small smile, “and when I laid you back in the grass - “

“It was as blue as your hair.” Lowering her face close to his, she begged, “I need you to be my husband today instead of the king. If you bear me any love, you'll get up and come riding with me.”

Aegon lifted his hand, cupping the side of her face. “Arya, you know how much I love you, but I cannot just stop being king for a day.”

“Why not? Isn't that what Connington is for? My father sat the throne for Robert a hundred times while he stopped - “

“And I am not Robert,” he cut in gently. “The realm is barely being held together as it is, the people's faith in me is fragile at best, and I cannot take a day off to play.”

“Play,” she echoed as she pulled away. “I am not a child, Aegon.”

“No, Arya, that's what not what I meant,” he objected as he sat up.

“I am so sorry to have disturbed you, Your Grace,” Arya spat before stomping from the room, slamming the door like the child she claimed not to be, furious and stung by his rejection. As she descended the stairs towards the stables, Arya thought of the guilt she kept in her heart for cuckoldng Aegon; she loved the man her husband used to be but she did not care for the King of the Seven Kingdoms. What she was doing with Gendry did not make her feel good; the moment things were over, the shame of it all returned to them. The last time they laid together was two days earlier and Arya meant it when she said they could not do it again.

She told herself she stopped the affair because it was the right thing to do, because she loved Aegon and because Sansa was her sister. But she knew the true reason was Catelyn, who always seemed to see right through Arya when she looked hard enough.

The stable boy was asleep against the wall when Arya entered, but she did not need him, had not needed help saddling a horse since she was a child. She chose one of the flat Dothraki saddles from the wall, fastening it around Aegon's destrier. She thought of Winter, who had perished on the trip from the Dothraki Sea to Volantis, and her heart ached; the only creature she missed more than Winter was Nymeria, who had broken her leash at Storm's End to never be seen again.

The stable boy awoke with a shout as Arya galloped past him, riding hard for the hills. Members of the khalasar guarded the gates, recognizing her easily and letting her pass, and Arya inhaled deeply the scent of freedom. She knew the men at the gate would not send up an alarm; she might actually get to ride without a member of the Kingsguard for once. And if enemies came, she was prepared; the arakh Rhaego gave her long ago rested against her hip.
By the time Arya returned to the Red Keep, the sun was high enough in the sky that Arya knew it was mid-morning; her braid had loosened considerably during the ride, hair sticking to her skin, and a heavy sweat covered her body. As she rode into the Keep, she saw lords and ladies alike gaping at her as if she possessed a second head, but, for the first time since returning to King's Landing, Arya did not care. She returned the well-lathered horse to the stables before entering the castle, barely managing to keep from smirking at the gasps which came from Sansa's lips.

“You look like a savage!” Sansa hissed, her hand literally fluttering against her chest. Elinor, now a tall girl of eleven, looked nearly as outraged as her mother; Rose and Alisa seemed stunned but also intrigued at the sight of their aunt clothed so strangely.

“I am what I am,” Arya replied, bending down so she was eye-level with Rose and Alisa, chucking Rose beneath her chin and earning a giggle for her action. “Would you like to play with your cousins?”

“We can't get dirty,” Alisa immediately responded. “Grandmother is coming, and it is not proper to dirty yourself when family is arriving.”

Arya gave a half-smirk as she rose, her eyes locking with Sansa's. “You've raised lovely young ladies.”

Sansa appeared thrown for a moment, unsure how to accept the compliment before grudgingly replying, “Thank you.”

“My children would appreciate their company.”

Sansa was still for a moment, glancing down at her trio of auburn-haired daughters before returning her gaze to Arya. For a beat, Arya thought she saw her sister behind those Tully blue eyes, the one who whispered secrets with her at Storm's End before she fled; and then, as quickly as it appeared, it was gone and Lady Sansa reemerged.

“I believe our children have different types of lessons during the day,” was all Sansa managed.

It shouldn't have stung; from the moment they were born, she and Sansa could not agree on anything. But Arya's children were wonderful, and it broke her heart none of the other children at court wanted to play with them. Only the children of the Dothraki socialized with Rhaenys, Aemon, and Alysanne, and already Rhaenys was slipping back into the habit of not using the Common Tongue; Arya heard the whispers about the unsuitability of the prince and princesses, and she did not want her children to grow up as outcasts the way she had.

There is no place for them here either, Arya thought as she moved towards Maegor's Holdfast, struggling to keep down the emotion rising in her throat. She wondered if mayhaps she should have insisted on Rhaenys wearing pretty gowns and having a septa, on Aemon spending more time with the little boys at court rather than permitting him to stick close to his big sister. Suddenly she was starting to understand why Catelyn always fussed over her so much, why she tried to get her to act as Sansa did.

There was no room for different in the Seven Kingdoms.

Arya was nearly to her rooms when Gendry entered the corridor, literally stopping in his tracks at the sight of her. She felt a blush rising in her cheeks, which she knew was ridiculous; Gendry had seen her as bare as the day she was born. But the way he was looking at her, as if she was something wondrous was a balm to her aching heart.
“The Kingsguard has been looking for you,” he reported softly, stepping towards her tentatively as if she was a wild animal. “The king thought you'd take protection with you.”

Arya's hand ghosted against the arakh on her hip. “I did.”

“You know how to use that?”

He was now standing so close to her, Arya could smell his skin. “Yes, and a sword, a bow, a dagger, a spear...I'm quite lethal.”

Gendry quirked an eyebrow. “No poison?”

“Poison is a woman's weapon.”

“You're not a woman?”

“Not when it comes to killing.”

He reached out, his fingers brushing the handle of the Dothraki weapon. “Have you ever used it?”

Arya could feel heat rising in her body; she needed to leave the hallway, leave Gendry before this spiraled out of control, before somebody saw. But she still found herself answering, “Once in the North.”

“A wildling?”

“Wildlings don't marry like us,” she explained. “They try to steal someone, and, if they succeed, they are wed. A man came to my tent one night and tried to steal me. I broke his nose but he didn't stop trying, so I opened his throat.”

She shivered as his fingers trailed up from her hip, across the exposed skin of her middle before reaching the ties of her painted vest. He gave one of the leather strings a gentle tug, undoing the knot; the laces loosened with each short breath Arya took, and she made a noise low in her throat when Gendry traced the curve of her cleavage.

“I want to take this off of you,” he confessed against the side of her face, his lips brushing against her skin.

“You can't,” she stated, trying to make her words as hard as iron but finding them to be irritatingly breathy. “We agreed to stop this.”

“So let's agree to start again.” He kissed her temple, her brow, the bridge of her nose before tilting her chin to look in her eyes. “I do not have to be at the council meeting for another hour. No one is expecting us. Let me love you, Arya.”

As Arya led Gendry into her chamber, she wondered when she became so weak.

“Why must I wear this? It itches,” Rhaenys complained as she tugged at the bodice of her dress. It was a very fine gown, the sort fit for a princess; it was red trimmed in black, silk and Myrish lace, and, with her dark coloring, it made her daughter appear even more beautiful than she already was.

“Because you are a princess and your lady grandmother will be quite pleased to see you look so well.”

Rhaenys wrinkled her nose, struggling a bit as Arya clumsily attempted to fasten a silver circlet atop
her head. “Grandmother Ashara does not care if I wear a gown.”

“Grandmother Catelyn is not like Grandmother Ashara.” Securing the circlet, Arya added, “And please do not call Ashara ‘grandmother’ in front of Grandmother Catelyn. It will upset her.”

“Why?”

“Because it will. Please do not fight me on this, Rhaenys.”

Her daughter was quiet for a moment as if weighing the sincerity of Arya's words. Rhaenys finally nodded reluctantly before casting a glance at Aemon and Alysanne, already dressed and playing quietly on Arya's bed. “Is Grandmother Catelyn like Grandfather Ned?”

“In some ways.” Arya pulled a dark choker from the jewel box Aegon gave her, tying the ribbon around Rhaenys's throat, liking the way her daughter smiled at the sight of the onyx resting against the hollow of her throat. “Grandmother Catelyn is a Tully of Riverrun. Do you remember their words?”

“Family, duty, honor,” she recited easily, remembering her lessons from Haldon. The septa which Aegon enlisted for the children had declared Rhaenys the most stubborn, willful child she ever met and requested to only care for Alysanne. Arya suspected Rhaenys only acted so wildly in order to have lessons with Aemon and Haldon, and, thus far, they seemed to be working well.

“Do you understand what that means?”

“Your family comes first and then your duty and finally your honor.”

“And do you know what honor means?”

Rhaenys gave her a look which clearly expressed how stupid she thought her mother to be. “It means whether or not you do the right things. Grandfather Ned has a lot of honor because he always does what is right. Jaime Lannister did not have any honor because he killed Great-Grandfather Aerys even though he swore an oath to protect him.”

“Right.” Patting at Rhaenys's curls, Arya thought of Gendry taking her hard against the wall in this very room earlier in the day. “Right.”

“Lord Mace says I look like Grandmother Elia,” Rhaenys reported, continuing to fidget with her skirts as Arya gathered the cosmetics on her vanity to begin to prepare herself. “He says I look exactly like the Martells of Dorne.”

“You do,” Arya confirmed. “The Martells are an ancient house, the lords of the only kingdom Aegon the Conqueror could not make fall.”

“Unbowed, unbent, unbroken.” Rhaenys watched Arya with keen eyes as her mother painted her mouth with lip stain. Then she said, “I do not like it here, Mother. Something is not right. I told Tormund and he said I was not meant to kneel.”

Arya smiled; she missed Tormund in all his inappropriateness. “That is because you are a princess.”

“But we all still kneel,” she rationalized, sounding so much older than her six years. Arya was startled to realize her seventh name day was fast approaching. “Everyone kneels before Father and the ladies, they all kneel to their husbands. And people say bad things about us. I hear them all the time.”
“What do you hear? When?”

Guilt flushed her face before admitting, “I skipped my dance lessons last evening to chase the black
tomcat down into the dungeons. Father says I'm not to go down there because it's dangerous but I
wanted to pet the cat. But then the men came, so I hid.”

“The men?”

“I could not see their faces, but I am certain one of them was Lord Mace. The other one was smaller
and sometimes I see him with Father.”

“Did he have a sigil on his clothing?”

Rhaenys thought for a moment before nodding. “A mockingbird.”

_Baelish._ “What did you hear?”

When she leaned close to lower her voice, Arya knew her daughter was more than serious,
especially if she was attempting to keep it a secret from Aemon. “They said you are not really the
queen because you and Father are not really married, and they called us bastards. Lord Mace, he said
the Faith will put it to a trial, and Father will have to put us aside or the realm would fall.”

Arya's blood turned to ice in her veins. “What else did he say?”

Rhaenys leaned even closer, uncharacteristic anxiety all over her face. “That Father has to marry
someone else, a...a lady of the flowers? And then the mockingbird man, he said Aunt Sansa would
have been a better queen and that...that the stag has been rutting with the wolf. What does that
mean?”

Arya hoped her humiliation did not show on her face. “I am not certain. Did they say anything else?”

She nodded. “The mockingbird said they had to be careful of making people Blackfyres because it
ended so horribly the last time. What does Father's sword have to do with anything?”

Casting a quick glance towards Aemon and Alysanne, still happily playing with the wooden toys
Bran carved for them, Arya bent down, her make-up forgotten, Taking Rhaenys by the shoulders,
Arya said, “I do not want you to speak of this to anyone else, not even your father. What you heard
must remain a secret between us. Do you understand?”

Rhaenys nodded solemnly before stating with a wisdom far older than her years, “Bad men are
trying to hurt us.”

Arya did not bother lying. “Yes, they are.”

“We won't let them,” Rhaenys declared, and there was something like Valyrian steel in her voice, a
fierceness which came from Winterfell and Sunspear, Dragonstone and Riverrun.

Never before had Arya felt such pride in her daughter. “No,” she agreed, “we won't. What are the
words of House Stark?”

“Winter is coming.”

Inclining her head until her forehead rested against Rhaenys's, Arya murmured, “We are winter, and,
when we come, men will cower.”

As Rhaenys drew her shoulders back, nodding resolutely, Arya decided Sansa could keep her little
Arya could count on one hand how many times she saw her mother cry: when Bran fell, when Grandfather Hoster passed, when Robb's first son was born. So when Catelyn Stark began to sob upon seeing Arya and her children, Arya did not know how to react. She gasped when her mother held her so tightly it hurt, but Arya returned the embrace just as fiercely, more grateful to see Catelyn than she thought she would be.

With each of her children, Arya thought of Catelyn. Once, when she was barely older than Rhaenys, Arya accused Catelyn of loving Sansa more than she loved her; Arya could still see the wrinkling of Catelyn's brow followed by the words which directed Arya's own attitudes towards mothering.

“I understand your sister more, it's true. Mayhaps I even favor her sometimes the way your father favors you more than he does Sansa. But a mother cannot love one child more than the other, for each and every child wholly holds her heart. You think I love Sansa more; Sansa thinks I love Robb more; Robb thinks I love Bran the most, and Bran thinks I love Rickon the most. I love each and every one of you in different ways, but never doubt how much I love you.”

Arya understood Rhaenys better than her other children; she felt the most connected to Aemon and preferred the company of smiley Alysanne, but she would battle to the death for each and every one of them.

“Gods be good, Arya,” Catelyn sniffled against her shoulder, “I thought I would never see you again.”

“I am sorry I upset you,” Arya lamely offered, wiping at the stray tears on her face, pulling back from the embrace when she felt Aemon clinging to her leg. Dropping a hand to his soft hair, she said, “Let me introduce my children.”

Catelyn beamed as she bent eye-level with the children. “Oh, they need no introductions. Your father writes of them often. This must be Rhaenys, Aemon, and Alysanne. I am your Grandmother Catelyn.”

Arya smiled as Rhaenys bent in a curtsy, Alysanne mimicking her on unsteady legs; Aemon bent at the waist, and Catelyn laughed before drawing them into her arms, pressing kisses to their faces. She thought of Robb's sons and Sansa's children, how Catelyn doted upon them all, and Arya hoped deep in her heart that her mother would come to love her Targaryen children just as fiercely.

“I have brought presents from Winterfell.”

They were fine gifts: a beautiful doll for Alysanne, a child-sized bow for Aemon, a dress with elaborate embroidery for Rhaenys. But Aemon cared little for bows and Rhaenys seldom wore gowns, and it made Arya ache to realize that her mother did not know her children because of the choices Arya made. She thought of Ashara, who made breeches for Rhaenys to wear, who always found books for Aemon, and a flush of guilt rose in Arya's cheeks as she realized how it was not just her children who thought of Ashara Dayne as family; somehow, between Storm's End and now, Ashara had become her surrogate mother, her children's grandmother, and an enduring member of their family.

Aegon was involved in a meeting with Lord Baelish and Viserys during dinner. Arya sat at the long table with her reunited family and felt acutely out of place. Her children patiently answered the questions posed to them, Rhaenys rambling extensively on Vaes Dothrak and describing what it was like to stand atop the Wall with Jon. As even Sansa chuckled at Rhaenys's description of Viserys
falling off a horse, Arya looked up from her wine to find Gendry smiling at her.

Even as her conscience ordered her to look away, her body reacted, recalling the pleasure he wrought from her earlier. He had been inside her half-a-hundred times since their affair began, but each time felt new, as if every time was the first time in the godswood all over again. It was only Rhaenys's knowledge of the Baelish and Tyrell's whispers about the stag rutting with the wolf which kept her from responding; if the High Septon did plan on putting her on trial and challenging her marriage to Aegon, the last thing she wanted was for her indiscretions for Gendry to be trotted out before Sansa and her children, before Aegon and their children.

Mayhaps Loras Tyrell had been right all along; she was the most selfish woman.

Gendry came to her three days before the coronation feast, finding her with Alysanne in the gardens. Immediately Arya began to shake her head, angry he would dare approach her when she was with her daughter, but there was nothing light or flirtatious in his eyes as he said, “Renly has been summoned to the small council chambers.”

Since Renly arrived at court a fortnight earlier, Arya had spent a great deal of time with her former husband, her last true friend at court. She knew no one understood how Renly could embrace her so easily, could sneak treats to her children and dance with her at dinners, but Arya did not care; she had truly cared for Renly and, since sending Loras to ferry her and the children to safety, Arya knew there was no man in the Seven Kingdoms she trusted half-so-much. He was also the only person to whom Arya shared Rhaenys's knowledge, and Renly easily confirmed what Arya assumed.

“There's no love lost between you and the realm,” Renly stated matter-of-factly one afternoon as they shared midday's meal. “Even those who hated the Lannisters and even the Baratheons loves Sansa and her children, and the rumors of you and Gendry have never gone away. You went from the prince's mistress to my runaway wife, and then you returned with your dragon husband to take the throne from your lover and sister.”

“But I did not - “

“I know that,” Renly assured her, “but people are stupid. Robert was not greatly popular by his end, but Gendry always has been; there are a great many people who would still see him on the throne. His support of Aegon is sincere, but, with you as his queen, people are worried.”

“And Mace Tyrell wants to soothe their fears?”

“Mace Tyrell wants to have a Tyrell sit the Iron Throne,” Renly explained, peeling a blood orange. “He put all his money on Margaery and, when Robert chose Sansa to wed Gendry, he took it hard and personally. I think he probably came in his pants when Gendry nearly died during the Ironborn Rebellion at the idea Joffrey might get the throne and Margaery would be queen after all. He's out of daughters now, but Garlan's daughter is five-and-ten, virginal as the Maiden, and comely enough to even draw my eye.”

Arya knew which of Garlan's daughters Renly was speaking about; Jessa Tyrell came to court with her parents and every man stopped to watch her pass. She was serving Margaery as a companion, but, with Renly's revelation, Arya began to watch the girl closer. There was something in the girl's movements, some raw cunning in her doe eyes, which reminded Arya of Margaery Tyrell at sixteen, ambition and hunger evident in every thing she did. Within days of their conversation, Arya saw how subtly Jessa Tyrell was positioned near Aegon, and, what mayhaps stung worse, how obvious Aegon was in his affection for the girl.
Arya knew she had no right to be jealous, not after having spent so many nights and days in Gendry Baratheon's arms, but she highly doubted any woman would be unmoved by being replaced with a younger, prettier girl who brought Highgarden and all its wealth into a potential marriage. All Arya brought was shame, dishonor, and no hope at uniting the Seven Kingdoms.

“Mayhaps they need to discuss an issue at Storm's End,” Arya offered as she lifted Alysanne from the grass, cradling her youngest against her, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair.

“With the High Septon?”

Arya tried not to shiver. “Our marriage was never consummated. Renly will tell him that - “

“And the Faith will not care because it was not dissolved before you wed Aegon.” Running his fingers through his black hair, Gendry shared, “They have banned me from the meetings. I am to be interrogated after Renly.”

“Interrogated? For what?”

“Ser Loras told Renly the charges against you are to adultery and bigamy. Your marriage to Aegon is proof of the bigamy, and, if your marriage to Renly is considered valid, then your children are considered the proof of the adultery.”

“Then why do they need you?” Arya pressed.

“Because they believe you slept with me while you were with Renly, and I am to be questioned about the adultery they are alleging we have committed since wedding Aegon.”

A hysterical panic flared in her chest for a moment before Arya took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm. Finally she pronounced, “I am not going to let them do this.”

“Arya - “

She moved forward, handing Alysanne to Gendry, catching him off-guard. “Take her to my mother or Ashara. I am going to deal with this.”

“Wait, Arya!” Gendry called, but Arya did not hesitate, marching into the Keep, strengthening herself as best as she could. As she stalked through the throne room, Arya tried to remember the girl she used to be, the bold, fearless girl who stalked the woods at Winterfell, who rode with the Dothraki, who lived amongst the wildlings. She was no pampered lady, no useless queen; she was a she-wolf of Winterfell and she would not let a group of men decide her fate.

Duck guarded the council room, and his face darkened as she approached. Shaking his helmed head, he began, “Queen Arya - “

“Let me pass, Rolly.”

“I have orders from the king - “

“Rolly.” Her voice nearly cracking, she implored, “For the love you bear my children, for the friendship we share, please let me pass.”

He hesitated only a moment before stepping aside. As Arya moved to open the door, Duck caught her forearm, stilling her momentarily. “I told him I do not agree with what is being done here.”

“Thank you,” Arya managed before entering the council room, startling everyone inside.
Aegon and the High Septon sat at the head of the table, Renly seated opposite of them in a chair. Lord Varys, Lord Baelish, Haldon, Daenerys, Viserys, Mace Tyrell, and Rhaego occupied the remaining seats. Immediately Viserys got to his feet, shouting for Arya's removal, but she held up her hands, trying to still him.

“You have no business here!” Viserys shouted, but Arya ignored him, focusing her attention on Aegon and the High Septon.

“You must stop this.”

Aegon said nothing, his gaze unwavering, but the High Septon scoffed. “You dare to speak to the king in such a manner?”

Arya did not spare him a glance. “I am not speaking to the king. I am speaking to the father of my children.” She felt a stab of success at the way Aegon flinched from the reminder of their children. “I do not care if you put aside our marriage if that is what you truly want. I have no interest in staying wed to a man who does not want me. I will let you declare me a whore and our children bastards if you think that will hold the realm together, because, gods know, I am tired of fighting. But you do not need interrogations and trials. I will agree to whatever you'd like.”

“You do not get to set the terms here,” Viserys snapped. “You have no power.”

Turning, burning with cold rage, Arya drawled, “No, I am but one woman. But there are twenty thousand wildlings settled on the Gift whose king was treated deplorably while here at court. They have giants, you know, thirteen feet tall. And the Westerlands, they do not care much for House Targaryen, especially after what was done to the Lannisters. That's...what, another thirty thousand swords? And, of course, should you try to hold me, my brothers would need to defend me; the North would bring twenty thousand swords and Riverrun, another twenty. And my cousin Robert, he holds the Vale and its thirty thousand swords. Now, Aegon may be the son of Elia Martell, but tell me, husband: do you think Prince Oberyn or Princess Arianne will look kindly on you tossing your wife into a black cell and naming your legitimate children as bastards?”

“Stop,” Aegon murmured, shaking his head.

Glaring at the men, enjoying the fear in his eyes, Arya declared, “I may have no power, I may be just a woman, but I could make things very difficult for everyone here. Do you really want another war when you're about to strip yourself of heirs?”

Aegon rose, his face impassive. “Leave us.”

“Your Grace,” Mace Tyrell began. “Leave us.”

When only he and Arya remained in the room, Aegon came towards her, moving as if his body was unbearably heavy. After a moment, he asked, “Would you really start a war with me?”

“I know why you're doing this, and you should have told me.” Tears filling her eyes, she asked, “How can you do this to our children? How can you claim to have done all of this for them and then take it away because Mace Tyrell says I am unpopular?”
“It is more than that,” Aegon insisted. “The Kingdoms and the Faith do not recognize our marriage as valid, and, as such, they will not recognize our children as legitimate heirs. Should something happen to me and the throne pass to Aemon, they will rebel again. I can legitimize them - “

“And what of me?” she challenged. “I get sent to the Silent Sisters while you have a dozen babes with Jessa Tyrell?”

Aegon turned crimson in embarrassment before confessing, “I love you so much. I do not think you even understand the depth of the love I have for you. But I also know I lost you the moment I stepped foot in Westeros, and you cannot pretend otherwise.”

“So the solution is to have the High Septon declare me your mistress and wed the Tyrell girl without ever speaking to me about it?”

Arya saw the first hints of anger in Aegon's purple eyes. “Do not play innocent and wounded, not when every one of Varys's little birds carries messages about what you are doing with Gendry Baratheon in the godswood.”

“And what you're doing with Jessa Tyrell is excusable because you're the king?” she retorted.

“I have not bedded that girl!”

“Only because I'm sure her grandfather has taught her that her cunt will fetch a higher station if unused!”

Aegon inhaled sharply, pride clearly stung, before gritting out, “You do not even want to be my wife. You have barely so much as spoken to me since your first night here, and you flinch from my touch at every turn.”

“I always wanted to be your wife, just not your queen. You promised - “

“I am sick and tired of hearing about the damned promise!” he shouted, startling Arya with the force of his fury. “This is where we are now, and choices must be made!”

“They have already been made!” Arya shouted right back, refusing to be cowed. “I am to be thrown away, our children are to be thrown away, and you shall end up a king so covered in flowers, they will choke you!”

He took a step backwards, his hands flexing, and Arya knew he wanted to strike her; never once had Aegon raised a hand to her with anything but tenderness, but Arya knew this king was not the man she married. Of course, she was not the woman he married either. War changed everything as it always had.

“You'll confess to the High Septon and the small council,” he stated flatly, speaking to her as the ruler of Westeros rather than the man whose children she birthed. “When our marriage is declared invalid, they will strip you and the children of the lands and titles which rightfully belong to my wife and heirs. I will provide you and the children with everything you will require.”

Her pride hurt so badly, Arya could scarcely breathe. “And how much is the king's whore and her bastards worth?”

“I will be more than generous, and I will give you Dragonstone - “

“No,” Arya immediately objected. “I do not want your family's rock. Robb will take us at Winterfell; we will go there.”
“It is a month's journey to Winterfell from here.”

“Then I suggest you invest in a comfortable saddle,” she snapped.

Aegon flinched but did not argue. “When I have...legitimate heirs with Jessa, I will legitimize our children, return their name. They will only be Blackfyres for a short while.”

“They will never be Blackfyres. If you are going to make bastards of the children I bore you, they will be Snows. They will be Snows of Winterfell, and I do not care if you ever make them Targaryens of Dragonstone ever again.” Tears slipped free of Arya's lids. “Forget them. Let them live happy lives in the North and never have to worry that the Tyrells will come for them.”

“Forget them?” he echoed incredulously. “You know how much I love them, Arya. I have already missed so much, I barely know Alysanne as it is; you cannot ask me - “

“Do you think Mace Tyrell will let you keep them close?” she countered, crying in earnest now. “Mayhaps you do not do not remember your history, but I do. Blackfyre is a cursed name in the Seven Kingdoms, and, when you have me declared nothing more than a whore, if you show any preference towards our children over Jessa's, they'll come for them.”

“I would not allow - “

“You do not know these people, Aegon! You're playing the game of thrones, and you do not even understand the players! Do you honestly believe any of the men you have surrounded yourself with would not do to our children what was done to your mother and sister if it meant securing a throne for their House?”

There were tears in his eyes now, sincerely aching from the pain of it all. “They will think I do not love them. Rhaenys...”

“When they're old enough to understand, I'll explain,” Arya swore. “Rhaenys will be safe and sound at Winterfell with her cousins and far away from the Red Keep.”

Aegon wiped at his face, nodding resolutely. “All Seven Kingdoms will call you a whore if you agree to this. They will smear your good name and treat you as if you belong in a brothel.”

Trying to push down the nausea brought on by his declaration, Arya proclaimed, “They may call me whatever they like so long as I am in the North when they do it.”

It took an exiled king, prince, princess, a stripped lord, a halfmaester, an armorer's son, a khalasar, and the Golden Company to make Arya Stark a queen.

It took a High Septon, a handful of lords, and one piece of paper to make her nothing more than a common mistress.

Arya signed away the very last shred of her honor, knowing it was the only thing which would keep her children safe.

Word always spread quickly at court, but even Arya was stunned with the speed her fall reached everyone. When she left the small council's chamber, Gendry was waiting with her father and brothers, with Catelyn and Sansa, but Arya said nothing; she did not have the words, did not know how to look into her honorable parents' eyes and declare herself to be the king's mistress and her children, bastards. She left the explanations to the men who orchestrated her fall, grabbing two skins of Dornish strongwine from the kitchens and fleeing to her solar.
Arya was well-and-truly in her cups when someone knocked upon the door. She did not bother responding, not having the energy to talk to her family, not wanting to hear them encourage her to fight; when the door opened anyway and Ashara entered, her beautiful face ashen, something broke within Arya and she began to sob hysterically, crying harder than she ever had for ten thousand reasons: for Rhaenys, for Aemon, for Alyssanne, for the Aegon she once loved so fiercely, for the stupid girl who ran away from her life and threw everything away for nothing, for long-dead Ned Dayne who loved her so foolishly, for Renly who loved her despite the pain she caused, for the dishonor she brought upon Sansa's marriage, for the love she bore for Gendry who loved her in spite of all she did. By the time Arya found her eyes dry, day had become night, and Ashara still cradled her against her breast, carding fingers through her hair and whispering nonsense the way she did with the children.

“You are a good mother,” Arya blurted out as she sniffled, keeping her face against the front of Ashara's dress as if she was still a small child, needing the comfort she offered.

“So are you.” Ashara kissed the crown of her head. “And someday they will understand what it cost you to do what you did today.”

“I do still love him,” she murmured. “If we had stayed in Essos, we would have lived our whole lives happily together.”

“Perhaps,” Ashara acknowledged, “but Aegon is too much like Rhaegar; there is too much sadness in him, too much weight of expectation for him to ever truly be free. Viserys, Jon, Illyrio, they have filled his head with memories of a prince who was careless and told him the only way he can ever avenge what was done is to hold the realm. I am sure the Tyrell girl will help him hold it, but I do not think he will be able to bear the cost.”

“I am sure Illyrio will find the coin,” she sniped unkindly.

Ashara forced Arya to lift her chin to meet her gaze. “Do you honestly believe that losing the children will not devastate him? Do you think for even a moment he will ever forgive himself for looking into Rhaenys's eyes and telling her she is not his trueborn daughter?”

“I hate the people we have become.”

“Then become someone different,” Ashara challenged, a small smile playing at her lips. “In the years I have known you, you have been Lady of Storm's End, a runaway, a mother, a member of a khalasar, a wildling, and a queen. You can be anyone, Arya. That is your gift, a gift you have given to your children.”

“I have not - “

“Your daughter speaks the Common Tongue, High Valyrian, Dothraki, and the Old Tongue,” Ashara listed, her face as fierce as a warrior's with her voice brooking no argument. “She sits her horse as well as a knight, and she is the most resourceful child I have ever seen. Your son reads twice as well as any boy thrice his age and has already begun to play the harp. Alyssanne is sweet and empathetic and smart, and she is barely two! Those children have relied on you for over half their lives, and they are glorious. A surname will never change that.”

Tears swelled in Arya's eyes again but she forced herself to keep from crying. “Thank you.”

Wiping at Arya's swollen face, Ashara ordered, “Now you are going to get up, make yourself presentable, and we are going to dine. You will march into the hall with your head high, a Stark of Winterfell, the mother of dragons, and you will remind Jessa Tyrell that she will never be half the
woman you are.”

It took a considerable amount of cosmetics to camouflage the red, swollen skin of her face, but, for once, Arya did not care. She wore her finest gown, a silk frock of sapphire blue which had been made for the coronation which would never be now; she even sat stock still as Ashara pinned up her curls, creating a tumble which highlighted the line of her neck. As Ashara tied a jeweled choker around Arya’s throat, Arya stared at her reflection in the mirror, repeating Ashara’s words to herself, an affirmation which would keep her head high.

_I am a Stark of Winterfell, the mother of dragons._

Conversation stopped temporarily as she entered the hall, but Arya did not acknowledge it; instead she strode to her seat, as proud and dignified as any lady in the Seven Kingdoms, and she saw the nervous looks Viserys exchanged with Mace Tyrell and Petyr Baelish.

_I am a Stark of Winterfell, the mother of dragons, and the direwolf does not cower before flowers and mockingbirds._

Never before had Arya acted so queenly, and, as she sipped her wine, Arya swore Jon Connington smiled at her.

“It is not right, what he has done to you,” Sansa said as she joined Arya in front of the Red Keep, her spring dress a bright yellow which stood out prettily against her hair. Stark men finished securing the trunks in the wagons, the horses saddled and ready for the long ride back to Winterfell, and Arya was surprised to find her sister seeking her out, acting as if they spoke regularly when she could not recall the last time Sansa initiated a conversation.

“It thought it would make you happy.”

“Happy?” Sansa parroted, shock on her face. “Why would this make me happy?”

“Because you did not want me to be queen. Because you hated that my children took from your children.”

“You truly think me so evil I would wish bastardization on children? What sort of monster do you take me for, Arya? Why do you hate me so much?”

Arya recoiled from the words. “I hate you? You have hated me from the moment I was born!”

“That's not true,” Sansa immediately argued. “A thousand times I tried to include you at Winterfell, and every time you spat on me while running off with Jon or Bran. When King Robert wanted to make you a marriage, I suggested Ned Dayne because he was a good, kind man who I thought would treat you well, and when he wanted to send you to some old lord in Lannisport, I pushed for Renly, who I thought would please you.”

“You pushed Renly to get me from court.”

“I wanted you away from Gendry, yes,” she agreed, “but I did not want you to suffer. And I was right! You and Renly are still friends after all which has happened. If you had not run away with Aegon, mayhaps - “

“Sansa - “

“I know Gendry fucked you,” her proper sister interrupted, and Arya was not sure if it was the
matter-of-fact statement or the phrasing which startled her more. On the list of things she expected the Lady Sansa to say, a vulgarity was as likely as Catelyn inviting Ashara to visit Winterfell.

“What?” Arya finally managed.

“Littlefinger showed me the document you signed for the High Septon. You confessed it.” Sansa brushed imaginary dirt from her bright skirts. “Was it before or after you ran from Storm's End?”

“After.”

Sansa nodded, her face revealing nothing, and Arya wished Sansa would try to tear out her hair, scratch her face, kick her; silence was so much worse.

After several excruciating minutes of silence, Arya ventured, “Sansa, I am so - “

“Don't you dare apologize to me,” she cut in, her voice shockingly even despite the steel within it. “You took my husband to bed. All I have ever asked of you is to respect my marriage, and you could not even do that. I know you do not believe it, but I love Gendry. I loved him when he was a prince and I love him still. We have our problems, yes, but that does not make what you did right.”

“Sansa...”

“We're leaving court,” Sansa continued. “We have been given Casterly Rock, and I do not want the children to hear the rumors. Gendry has been removed from the small council, and it has been made clear there is no room for Baratheons here.”

Arya said nothing, certain Sansa did not want her words.

“I know you loved him once, and I know he has always had this...fascination with you, the one who got away. And I do not think what Aegon has done to you or your children is correct, especially if he is planning on marrying a snake like Jessa Tyrell. Whatever your sins may be, he made his choices as well and should live with them. Every person should be forced to live with the choices they make.” Sansa smiled mirthlessly. “I suppose that is what has always bothered me when it comes to you.”

“What's that?”

“You make the choices, and I bear the consequences.”

Arya's chest tightened painfully as she recognized the truth in her sister's words. Finally she managed, “I hope you and Gendry are happy in the Westerlands. Aeron shall make a good Lord of Casterly Rock some day.”

Sansa nodded at the compliment before offering in reply, “I have never known anyone so singularly unhappy as you, Arya. Whether you believe it or not, I truly do pray to the Gods, old and new, you find whatever it is you have spent so much time looking for. I hope someday our daughters will be able to look upon each other as friends.”

“But?” Arya prompted, knowing there was something else coming.

“But I fear every time I look upon you for the rest of my life, all I will see is the woman my husband bedded, and I cannot forgive that.”

Arya did not even realize she wanted Sansa absolution until presented with the denial of it. “But you will forgive Gendry.”
“Gendry is not my blood.” Her voice breaking, blue eyes now wet with tears, Sansa stressed, “You are my sister, Arya. No matter how angry I have ever been, I could not imagine doing to you what you have done to me. I just... I know I am not perfect, that I have been unkind and jealous, but I deserved better than this treatment.”

Tears now rolled down Arya's face as well. “Then you must do what you need to do.”

Sansa smiled mirthlessly, carefully wiping away her tears, pulling herself together as effortlessly as putting on a new gown. “I always do what needs to be done.”

It was, in fact, the greatest difference between them.

As Arya entered the courtyard to join the train departing for Winterfell, the first thing she became aware of was her children crying. Alysanne clutched Ashara around the neck, sobbing as her septa tried to pry her off, and Aemon clung to her leg, wrapped tightly around her with all limbs. Only Rhaenys was not desperately holding her surrogate grandmother, but that was only because she was weeping in Rhaego's arms, both of them murmuring so quickly in Dothraki, Arya could not understand what they were saying. Ned and Catelyn looked both saddened and furious at their grandchildren's obvious pain, and Arya saw all of her brothers had murder in their Tully blue eyes.

Arya thought there could never possibly be something worse to witness than the goodbyes between the children and Aegon. Alysanne barely knew her father; when he kissed her cheeks and declared his love, Alysanne giggled before happily retreating into Arya's arms. Aemon, who had some understanding, asked his father if there was something they could do to stay with him; both were crying when Aemon went to his mother side, hiding his wet face in her skirts.

But when Aegon reached for Rhaenys, who understood precisely what being a bastard meant, she stepped back and slapped his hand away, her beautiful face flush with fury. Rhaenys had never so much as raised her voice to her father, the man she idolized above all others, and Arya saw the physical reaction Aegon had to her rejection. He tried to talk to her, wheedling in the soft voice he used to use when she was still suckling, the one which told of just how deeply he loved his firstborn, but Rhaenys turned her face away, a dismissive princess even when bastardized. It was only when Aegon begged a kiss from his daughter that Rhaenys responded, breaking Arya's heart soundly.

“I am not your daughter anymore. I am Rhaenys Snow, and you made me that. If I do not deserve your name, you do not deserve my kisses.”

Arya had never seen anything break Aegon Targaryen: not the murders of his family, not exile, not being a beggar, a sellsword, or a rebel. But a little girl of barely seven reduced the King of the Seven Kingdoms, the Dragon King, to a shell of a man with her rejection.

She watched as Rhaego placed Rhaenys atop her mount, her brave daughter still sniffling; Rhaego pulled the arakh from his hip, sheath and all, grasping it by its dragonbone handle. He fastened the belt around Rhaenys's waist, said something to Rhaenys, and then pressed a kiss to her brow. Arya was surprised when Daenerys's son stopped before her, his face as hard as stone.

“She should you ever want what is yours, you will have my Khalasar,” Rhaego vowed, and it was strange how deeply his offer touched her, how much he loved his cousins and hated what was being done to them for the sake of politics.

Bran lifted Aemon to the front of Rhaenys's saddle, ruffling his hair, but Arya knew Aemon's heart as well as her own; her sensitive boy always felt everyone else's pain far more acutely than his own, and there was enough sorrow around him to drown. As the septa took her place in the litter with
Alysanne, Arya stepped to Ashara, holding her as tightly as Alysanne had.

“You remember what I told you,” Ashara whispered in her ear, the heat of her falling tears scorching Arya's skin. “Do not let Rhaenys become a perfect, little lady. Make sure Aemon practices his harp. And tell Alysanne good things of her father, for you know as well as I there is a good, honest man inside the king.”

“I promise,” Arya swore, burying her face in Ashara's dark hair.

“I cannot come to Winterfell, but you can come to Starfall,” Ashara continued, and, for the first time, Arya realized she was losing her family as well. “I would so love to see you and Allyria together. And do be kind with your poor father; he worries after you so.”

“I will.” Resolutely pulling back, Arya looked into Ashara's face and nearly lost all her composure. “I love you.”

“And I, you.” Ashara kissed her forehead and the tip of her nose, the same as she had done a thousand times to the children as she put them to bed.

“Now go home.”

Like her children, Arya cried as they rode from King’s Landing, refusing to look back at the place which held such misery. She thought of Sansa and her children on their way to Casterly Rock, forcing herself not to think of Gendry, to never think of Gendry again. By the time they reached the Riverlands, Arya had nearly convinced herself Gendry Baratheon was nothing more than a memory.

And then she realized her moon blood had not come in three moons, lost and forgotten amongst the turmoil of her fall.

When their party stopped at an inn, Arya sought out the godswood, leaving her children to the company of their aunts and uncles. There were so few true godswoods south of the Neck, and the heart tree in this one looked more sad than fierce. As she knelt before it, Arya's hands found their way to her still-flat stomach, to the tiny stag swimming inside of her.

There were teas a woman could take to rid herself of an unwanted child. In Dorne, Elia Sand told Arya one of her sisters once used tansy to eliminate the seed which took root; Arya did not know the specifics, but there was surely an old woman or a maester which could be bribed with coin to brew it. The thought made Arya ill; Rhaenys, Aemon, and Alysanne were all wanted children, the bright spots in her frequently dismal world, and the idea of killing Gendry’s babe in the womb, a babe as much conceived in love as its siblings.

“All of my children are Snows,” Arya said to the tree, pondering aloud more than praying. “A bastard is a bastard, and most would believe it to be Aegon’s child as well. And if they thought differently, if it looked like a Baratheon, no one would be surprised; they all think me a whore anyway. Father would never send me away.” Touching the painted trunk, she continued, “But Sansa would truly be lost to me for good, and it is not as if Gendry could ever claim it. Mayhaps it would be a kinder life for everyone if I stopped it now.”

The wind tossed the leaves about, the whispering song too unintelligible to understand.

“I need a sign. If you truly listen, please show me what I should do.”

The crackle of branches brought Arya to her feet, expecting the intruder to be one of her siblings or even her father, who often prayed when their party stopped. For a moment, Arya thought she was hallucinating, so certain it was childish fantasies forcing their way into her mind. But then the large she-wolf licked at her hand, the rough tongue familiar after all these years, and Arya found herself
bending to squeeze her tightly.

“Nymeria,” she breathed, pushing her face into the direwolf's fur.

As she walked back to the inn, Nymeria padding along at her side, Arya decided she would wait until they reached Winterfell to share the news of her pregnancy with her family.

Maester Luwin found her in the yard with the children, the letter in his hand. Arya sat with Alysanne upon the ground, Alysanne making crowns of flowers while Rhaenys and Aemon crossed swords under Ser Rodrik's watchful eye. Robb's youngest son shouted encouragement from the fence, his older brothers waiting patiently for their next turns, and Arya's eyes quickly scanned the yard for Brandon.

At six, her youngest child was already larger than Alysanne, taller and more sturdily built. Though he wore the face of a Stark, Arya knew Brandon Snow was fully his father's son: stubborn, strong, and silent. His adventuring drove Arya to distraction, forever chasing him from Mikken's forge or finding him stranded up a tree. Often Arya found Alysanne playing maester to her baby brother, clandestinely bandaging his wounds, attempting to take the blame for his wilder exploits; when her efforts failed, Aemon or Rhaenys appeared to explain away Brandon's actions, perpetually overprotective when it came to their younger siblings. They were a fierce pack, her children, and nothing ever made her prouder than to see them all together.

Brandon balanced atop several bales of hay, a wooden sword tucked into his waistband, his dark hair unkempt, face covered in dirt despite only waking two hours earlier. When he saw her looking at him, he grinned, pushing his tongue through the opening left by the loss of his two front teeth, and Arya laughed before the old maester reached her.

“A raven from the south,” he said, his face serious.

*Dark wings, dark words,* Arya thought as she saw the three-headed dragon seal in crimson wax. Unfolding the parchment, she skimmed the words before rising, Alysanne's floral crowns forgotten, moving quickly through the castle.

She found her father and Robb breaking fast with Catelyn and Jeyne, Rickard laughing at something his father said. When they saw Arya approaching, Robb began to gesture for her to join them when she held up the parchment.

“The king and his court ride for Winterfell.”

Surprise registered on everyone's faces before Robb stated, “Aegon has not sent so much as a letter in almost seven years. He has all but forgotten the North exists. Why would he ride now?”

“I suppose we can ask him when he arrives.”

Six years of peace was more than most people ever got in their entire lives. Arya thought she should be grateful for the happy years she and her children had here at Winterfell, lives untouched by the Iron Throne; Rhaenys and Aemon never mentioned their father, Alysanne had no memories of anyone but Ashara, and Brandon knew only the North. She did not know what they talked about amongst themselves, but never once had Arya heard the name “Targaryen” slip past their lips.

But Arya also knew it was the blood of dragons in the veins of Rhaenys, Aemon, and Alysanne, a bond which Brandon could never quite replicate, a silent understanding which was nearly supernatural. Arya did not believe in magic, but she believed in Maester Aemon, remembered the words he said to her on the day she brought Alysanne to him.

Whatever was bringing Aegon to the North had nothing to do with kingly duty or a sudden burst of
fatherly concern. Arya was many things, but she was never stupid.

She knew war when it was coming.
“That is what you wear to greet the king?”

Rhaenys twisted her head, drawing her attention from the grooming of her horse to look at her mother before returning her brush to its mane. “I believe it shows him the level of respect I believe he deserves.”

Arya could not help but smile at her eldest’s words, smoothing the skirts of her fine gown. Truth be told, she wished to have the same kind of reckless courage as her daughter, wished she could thumb her nose, dress in rags, and hide away in the stables; but Arya was not a girl anymore, and, if she wanted her children to be safe, wanted Winterfell to be safe, then she needed to at least play at being a good, submissive subject. Arya could not remember the last time she wore one of her southron gowns, the last time she put jeweled pins in her hair or rouge on her cheeks; rarely in the North did she have to pretend to be anything other than the fallen daughter of Eddard Stark, the cast down queen.

Even in filthy breeches and a tunic so stained Arya could not discern what its original color was, Rhaenys was still the most beautiful young girl Arya had ever seen. Sometimes she caught herself staring at Rhaenys, unable to believe someone so breathtaking came from her womb; since reaching her fourteenth name day, Rhaenys drew the eye of every man, young or old, in the North. She possessed Aegon’s height, standing nearly a head taller than Arya, and the ebony curls which were so unruly in childhood now tumbled over her shoulders in a thick gloss. Her clothing now clung becomingly to her body, her breasts drawing the attention of any man who passed when she wore one of her gowns, and there was an innate grace in the way Rhaenys moved. But it was her eyes which Arya credited for entrancing so many because they gave away nothing; Aemon’s violet eyes and the grey of Alysanne’s and Brandon’s provided an openness which her dark-eyed daughter lacked.

Arya heard the servants refer to Rhaenys as “the Lady Stoneheart” and it never failed to amuse her; of all the characteristics Rhaenys possessed, a heart of stone was the only which she lacked. She felt things far too strongly, and Arya knew the reappearance of Aegon in her life would stir old pains.

“I know you do not want to see him - “

“And you do?” Rhaenys challenged, brushing the horse more aggressively. “He threw us away! He made you a whore and the three of us, his bastards, so excuse me if I do not want to take the knee and pretend everything is forgotten!”

“I would not want you to forget,” Arya replied reasonably, crossing the stable to lightly pet the horse’s nose. “But you are not stupid, Rhaenys. You know this visit is surprising and certainly done for a reason.”

Her daughter rolled her eyes with a snort. “He is coming because Connington is dying.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because Rhaego told me.” Returning the brush to its place on the wall, she added, “Just because you pretend the south doesn’t exist does not mean I do the same.”

“I was not aware Rhaego still wrote you.”

In the beginning, when they first returned to Winterfell, Arya lost count of how many ravens were
exchanged between her daughter and Daenerys's son. So little could make Rhaenys smile back then, but the letters from Rhaego could make her entire mood shift instantly; Arya remember how Rhaenys would peel the wax seals bearing the dragon and horse from the parchment, saving them in a small cedar box Bran carved for her. After Brandon's birth, Arya's attention was focused on the baby and then on Alysanne, who fell ill so frequently, and she was embarrassed to admit her concerns for Rhaenys lessened. Of all her children, Rhaenys was certainly the most capable and, like Aemon, she bonded quickly with Robb's sons; Arya always assumed Rhaenys's reliance on Rhaego dissipated with her growing friendships and comfort with Winterfell.

“How often does he write you?”

The smile on Rhaenys's lips made something suspicious twist in Arya's gut. “As often as I write him.” Giving Arya her back as she stripped off her filthy tunic to reveal a less soiled undershirt, Rhaenys continued, “Rhaego says Connington has greyscale and Aegon's having a crisis of conscience. And the good Queen Jessa keeps giving Aegon children but no sons.”

“You think he's coming for Aemon,” Arya interpreted.

Rhaenys turned, and Arya was stunned by the dark fury brewing in her eyes. “I think it will be a cold day in all seven hells before any of us bend the knee to the king or his false queen.”

“Any of us?” Arya echoed.

“The Iron Throne belongs to us,” Rhaenys fiercely declared. “Jessa Tyrell's daughters are not my father's trueborn children, and the entire kingdom knows it.”

“I have explained to you why your father did what he did, why - “

Rhaenys scoffed. “I am not Alysanne, so spare me the pleasant stories about why King Aegon is so right and just. I may have been a child when we left King’s Landing, but my memory is true; I recall the words Mace Tyrell and Petyr Baelish exchanged in the dungeons. They orchestrated our downfall, and I have made sure Aemon and Alysanne know that.”

Fear begin to flow in Arya's veins. “What have you done? What game are you playing?”

“I'm not playing,” Rhaenys spat. “Let the king come with all his witless followers. You and Grandfather and Uncle Robb can play at obedience, but there is nothing on earth that will make me take the knee.”

Dropping her voice, heart twisting, Arya implored, “Do not go looking for battles, Rhaenys. If we are to have any peace - “

Rhaenys spat upon the ground. “There is your peace. I curse the entire lot of them: the Tyrells, Littlefinger, Varys, Viserys, and every other craven who smiled to our faces while supporting our fall. I curse the king for filling my ears with tales about the life I would lead that he then stole away, and I curse the High Septon for serving Mace Tyrell rather than the Seven.”

“Rhaenys - “

Her daughter stepped forward, body tight with tension, as she continued, “Mayhaps your fighting days are over, but I have not yet begun. I was not born to kneel and I will not start now. You make your peace with my father, but until what was taken is returned, all he will get from me is more curses.”

There had been a time when Arya considered Rhaenys to be her father's daughter, but now Arya
knew better.

Rhaenys was her daughter through and through, and Arya sincerely hoped Rhaenys did not make the same stupid mistakes.

She found Brandon in his bedchamber with Septa Maeve, fighting desperate-ly against being dressed in the silk tunic and velvet surcoat Arya spent a ridiculous amount of coin on for the king's arrival. Despite being freshly bathed, his unruly black hair stuck up in every direction, and Septa Maeve, usually so even-tempered, looked as if she wanted to beat Arya's son.

“Mother, help!” Brandon shouted when he saw her, squirming out of Maeve's grasp and rushing to embrace his mother's legs.

“Lady Arya,” Septa Maeve began in a long-suffering voice, and Arya held up a hand, already knowing what the words would be.

“I can dress him,” she assured the harried septa. “Would you check on Alysanne and Aemon, make sure they're presentable? The king is coming up the kingsroad as we speak.”

When she was alone with Brandon, Arya squatted down, looking into his stormy grey eyes. “It is quite improper to be so unruly when she is only trying to help you.”

“I don't like those clothes.”

Arya gestured to her gown. “Do you think I like these ones?”

Brandon giggled, burying his face in Arya's shoulder. “No.”

She scooped him up, carrying him over to his bed and playfully dropping him upon the mattress, a few feathers flying loose. As he scrambled up onto his knees, obediently lifting his arms for his shirt, Arya felt her heart ache a little. Brandon was the last of her babies, and he was already halfway to manhood. Unlike Aemon, he did not care much for lessons with Maester Luwin or had much of an interest in music; Brandon was the most physical of her children, wanting to run, ride, fight, and climb. Whereas Aemon studied swordplay only because it was required, Brandon longed to be a knight of the Kingsguard, a stick sword always looped through his belt while he begged for a piece of real steel. He was not as talkative as Rhaenys or Alysanne, not as selective with his words as Aemon, but Brandon was far more honest with his mother when it came to what was in his heart.

“Alysanne said King Aegon is her father,” Brandon began as Arya pulled the tunic over his head, tucking it into his breeches.

“You already knew that,” Arya pointed out, tugging one of his arms through the sleeve of the grey surcoat.

Brandon nodded, wincing as she began to fasten the coat. “But is King Aegon my father?”

Arya paused, staring into Brandon's handsome face for a long moment. When she first told her family she was pregnant upon their arrival at Winterfell, both Catelyn and Ned assumed the baby was Aegon's. Arya knew Robb had his suspicions but never did her older brother say a word to question it, and when Brandon was born with the Stark look, no one seemed to care much who put the child in her belly.

The last letter she ever received from Aegon arrived just days after Brandon's birth, the three-headed dragon of his seal seeming to mock her. When Arya finally summoned the courage to read it, she did
not find recriminations or accusations; instead, he congratulated her on Brandon's birth, told her he would increase the amount of money he provided to run her household, and then included the line which erased the lingering hate and anger in her heart.

*I will claim Brandon Snow as my son if you wish it. My seed or not, I would be honored to call any son of yours a son of mine.*

The letter from Storm's End arrived a few days after Aegon's, Renly's crowned stag sealing it shut. He made a similar offer, volunteering to claim Brandon as his son and request Aegon to give a decree to legitimate him, making her son the rightful heir to Storm's End.

"I am a man in need of a son," Renly had written, "and your son is in need of a father."

Arya considered Renly's proposal, knowing he did not want Storm's End to pass to Joffrey, but she ultimately refused; having Brandon declared the son of Renly Baratheon would only raise more questions. No man or woman in the Seven Kingdoms would believe Renly got a child on her, and it would only drag the scandal of their marriage and her desertion back into the forefronts' of everyone's minds.

The final letter came from Casterly Rock, a crowned stag and lion protecting the words. Arya carried the letter for weeks before she summoned the courage to read Gendry's words and, when she finally broke the seal, she was legitimately stunned to find the words inside were written in Sansa's hand.

*Congratulations on the birth of your son. Mother says you named him Brandon and that he has the Stark look; I am sure he is a happy spot after the turmoil of the past year. I do not know if Mother has told you, but I am with child as well; Maester Finn says the babe shall arrive near my name day. Mayhaps when we are both recovered and able to travel, you and your children could be guests at Casterly Rock. I think it would be fitting if our sons played together.*

Sansa was always a master at speaking in riddles with the truth carefully camouflaged in pleasantries, but Arya understood her sister's meaning perfectly well: Sansa knew Brandon was Gendry's son, and she wanted to make peace for the sake of their children. Arya went through a dozen drafts of a reply before finally sending one, accepting Sansa's offer and thanking her, and, for a few brief months, Arya truly thought she and Sansa could be sisters again.

But then Sansa's infant son was stillborn and Aeron died of sweating sickness along with half of the Westerlands, and Brandon's mere existence became a reminder of the sons Sansa lost, the trueborn sons and heirs of Lord Gendry Baratheon. Arya never received another letter from her sister, though Catelyn and Jeyne Westerling received them regularly, and Arya began to suspect she might never hear from Sansa ever again.

Gendry never sent anything; Arya pretended she did not hate him for that.

It was only in the past year Brandon began to ask questions about his father. While he always understood that Ned was Arya's father and Robb was the father of his beloved cousins, Brandon never questioned who his father was because his older siblings did not have a father either. It was only when he heard one of the Karstark boys refer to him as a "bastard" that Brandon asked what the term meant, why he did not have a father.

"You have a father, my boy," Arya told him as she brushed hair as thick and dark as Gendry's back from his forehead. "Everyone does. But some people have fathers who are with them every day and others have fathers who love them from afar. Yours simply loves you from afar."
It seemed the answer which served a boy of five would not satisfy a boy of six.

Arya exhaled heavily through her nose, lifting Brandon off of his knees and setting him on his backside. As she climbed onto the bed to sit beside him, he curled against her body in a way he would never dare to do when his older siblings were around, and the ache in her chest deepened a bit; soon he would be like Aemon, too much of a little lord to rely on his mother for comfort.

“Some day,” she answered carefully, “we will have a long talk about your father, and I will answer every question you have. But for now just know this: your father loves you more than you will ever know.”

“When I become a knight, will he come and see?” Brandon asked, a hopeful smile on his face, and Arya's heart broke for all the unintentional pain she bestowed upon her boy.

“Oh, of course.” She ruffled his hair as she added, “But first you must make yourself presentable for the king so he has cause to knight you some day.”

It was amazing how compliant a boy could become when he thought knighthood was on the line.

She had forgotten how handsome he was.

It felt beyond silly to even think; Arya was four-and-thirty now, certainly not a blushing maid or the young woman who once loved a blue-haired sellsword. She was thrice a bride, four times a mother, and she gave up on romantic distractions long ago. “Celibate as a septa” was the teasing phrase Theon liked to use to describe her, and it certainly fit. Sometimes Arya even felt as if was true, as if her return to the North stripped her of every womanly desire she once possessed.

But her body responded to the sight of Aegon Targaryen as it always had, and Arya knew there must be something left of her old life inside her body.

Aegon was perched upon a great destrier, Ser Rolly and Ser Loras flanking him in their white armor; Rhaego and his bloodriders were also mounted with a handful of men Arya did not recognize. Targaryen red and Tyrell green flew above the massive train, and, as more and more wagons appeared, Arya realized she forgot how many people could accompany a king. All of court was certainly now gathering in Winterfell, and, judging by the size of the party, Arya suspected there were lords from all the kingdoms present for whatever reason. She flicked her eyes towards Ned, who clearly recognized the same thing, his face folded into a deep frown; it had been years since Winterfell hosted a king, not since the visit from King Robert where he made Ned Hand of the King, and never had so many high lords from the south sought out the North.

“I do not like this,” she whispered to Robb, who nodded minutely in agreement.

Aegon swung down from his horse easily, and, as everyone took the knee, Arya studied him beneath her lashes. He kept his silver hair short now in the southeren fashion, and there were lines around his eyes and mouth which had not been there when last they parted; his body was still lean but the swagger of his youth was now replaced with something she would have named weariness in other men. In Targaryen colors, he certainly cut an imposing figure, but, as he bid them all to rise, Arya saw the smiling kindness in his face.

“Lord Stark,” he greeted, clasping Ned's hand firmly. “Thank you for welcoming me so warmly to the North. I have heard wonderful things about Winterfell.”

“We are honored to host you.” Ned smoothly replied, and Arya swallowed back a smile; for all his hatred of courtly politics, her father had become a master at them while in service to the Iron Throne.
He greeted Robb and Jeyne next, asking for introductions to their sons, and Arya saw Jessa Tyrell climbing from a litter with her young daughters climbing out after her; they were still quite small, three and four, but they were outfitted richly in silks and laces, the sorts of dresses Rhaenys and Alysanne once owned. They both bore the look of their mother, soft brown curls and green eyes, and, like their mother, they looked at Arya with disdain.

The kingly courtesy slipped from Aegon's face as he stopped before Aemon, who was so tall he was nearly eye-to-eye with his father; the resemblance between them was so striking, even Arya was taken aback by it. She thought of Rhaenys's words in the stables, waiting for Aemon to lash out at his father, but instead her son smiled in much the same way Aegon did, his voice soft and pleased as he greeted, “Hello, Father.”

Aegon clasped Aemon tightly against him, an embrace more suited for the boy of five he had last seen rather than the young man of twelve he now was, but Aemon embraced him with the fervor, a strong showing of emotion from her stoic son. Aemon was always so close to Ned and Robb, Arya never worried about the effect of the loss of a father; now, as she saw the way Aemon responded to Aegon, Arya wondered if mayhaps she misunderstood all of her children.

Aegon knelt to be level with Alysanne, stroking her soft cheek with a gloved thumb. “Why, this cannot be Alysanne. She is only a baby.”

“I am eight, Your Grace,” Alysanne supplied helpfully, her manners far more perfect than Arya's had ever been, and Aegon's smile flickered for a second before assuring her, “I know, my love. I never forget your name day.”

Arya felt Brandon clutch her hand tightly when Aegon knelt before him, his face as gentle as it was when greeting his own children. “And you must be Brandon. We have not met, but I have been looking forward to making your acquaintance.”

Brandon eyed him for a moment with uncertainty before replying, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Arya resisted the urge to squirm as Aegon rose, stepping before her as he had with her brother and father. If she was younger, she might have blushed at the way Aegon looked at her, at all the secrets and memories hinted at in his violet eyes, but instead she offered a small smile as she murmured, “Your Grace.”

“How is it possible for you to have grown even more beautiful?” he asked in Valyrian, and Arya laughed with a shake of her head.

“My sole talent, it would seem,” she replied, the foreign words tripping off her tongue as if she used the language daily.

Aegon looked left and right before querying, “Where is Rhaenys?”

For a moment Arya considered lying but instead gave him the truth, however unwelcome it was. “She does not wish to see you, Your Grace.”

There was genuine pain in Aegon's face as he nodded curtly, and Arya almost reached to rest a comforting hand upon his shoulder before remembering her place in the Seven Kingdoms; Rhaenys may have believed there were those who still respected their claim, but Arya knew likely even more lords and ladies still thought her to be nothing more than the king's whore. As Jessa Tyrell approached, her skirts swirling around her ankles, Arya felt the unpleasant sting of long-ago slights burning in her chest.
At two-and-twenty, Jessa was even more beautiful than she had been at five-and-ten. Like her aunt Margaery, she moved as if she owned the world, and it made the part of Arya's heart which harbored bitterness as sharp as Rhaenys's to recoil when she was forced to bend and pay homage to the woman who took her place. When she saw the hint of superiority in the younger woman's eyes, Arya wanted to tear the hair from her head, to slap her face so hard that her handprint would remain upon Jessa's cheek for the rest of her life.

Instead Arya curtseyed and welcomed Queen Jessa to Winterfell, knowing the sacrifice of her pride would be worth the peace it would bring her.

The feast her parents planned for the arrival of court was the finest to be held since Robert's long-ago visit, and Arya knew it bothered her father to spend so much money on something he found to be so frivolous. Theon escorted Arya into the great hall, leading her to the table which was occupied by Robb, Jeyne, her nephews, and her children; Rhaenys's seat was conspicuously empty, and, as Arya let her eyes travel the room, she saw many familiar faces.

Daenerys and Viserys were seated at the table closest to the head table, which held Aegon, Jessa, Ned, and Catelyn; Mace Tyrell, Joffrey Baratheon, Margaery Tyrell, and Margaery's eldest son, Aegon's squire, were also seated with the elder Targaryens. Prince Oberyn, Ellaria Sand, and a collection of Dornishmen occupied one table while Uncle Edmure and his family sat at another. There were none present from the Stormlands or Casterly Rock, and Arya wondered at that; Myrcella Baratheon wed Trystane Martell ages ago, but she seldom ventured far from Sunspear, and Tommen held his wife's seat at Horn Hill since Dickon Tarly was killed during Aegon's quest. With Gendry hidden away at the Rock, only Joffrey remained a presence in King's Landing, the roles of power reversed now; the prince Arya despised now relied on the status of his wife's family, and it made Arya incredibly uncomfortable to think of Joffrey Baratheon, one of the cruelest people she ever met, having any sort of sway over the kingdom.

Arya was in the middle of a conversation with Rickard when a hush fell over the hall; she looked up, expecting to see Aegon calling for attention, but his eyes were focused on the doorway, his face a mixture of shock and awe. She turned towards the entrance and found her own breath stolen.

Arya did not know where Rhaenys got the gown she was wearing. It was brilliant Targaryen red with black embroidery, the neckline square and low enough to reveal more decolletage than Arya was comfortable with her fourteen-year-old daughter revealing; a necklace of obsidian with a massive ruby drew the eye, and Arya recognized the jewels immediately. After Rhaenys's birth, Illyrio gifted the expensive necklace to the newborn, which was to be worn on Rhaenys's wedding day; Arya knew for a fact it had been left in the Red Keep, and, when Arya saw it was Rhaego who was escorting Rhaenys into the hall, she wondered just what her daughter and the khal were trying to do.

They made a striking pair, both more beautiful than any two people had any right to be. Rhaego wore Targaryen colors as well, his purple eyes startling against his warm copper skin and thick, black hair; like all Dothraki men, Rhaego kept his hair tightly braided, the end of the braid brushing the center of his back, and Arya heard the heavy tinkling of bells as he moved. Rhaenys's black hair was piled in a complicated tumble of curls atop her head, her lips stained red, and, as they moved closer, Arya saw her lips were also swollen.

They have been kissing, Arya realized with a start, something like panic clutching her breast. Rhaenys was so like her mother, and Arya knew how stupid and reckless she had been at four-and-ten, the poor choices she made when it came to her heart. Is she in love with him? Is he in love with her?
Mace Tyrell looked to be the color of eggplant, and Arya knew why: with a khalasar and the North behind her, Rhaenys could try to take the throne which rightfully belonged to her and her siblings.

“Seven hells,” Theon breathed, and Arya slammed her heel hard into the man's shin, disgusted by the blatant admiration in his voice. He hissed sharply in pain, but Arya barely heard it as she watched Rhaego escort Rhaenys to their table, pulling out her chair and pushing her gently beneath it. Rhaenys squeezed his hand lightly in thanks before murmuring something in Dothraki; Rhaego joined his mother and uncle at their table, and Arya acutely felt the eyes of the hall upon them.

“You look like a princess,” Brandon said innocently, smiling at his big sister, and Arya's stomach dropped at Rhaenys's reply.

“I am a princess.” Gesturing for a servant to fill her wine cup, Rhaenys added, “And no one is like to forget it again.”

“What are you doing?” Arya demanded in Dothraki, hissing the words with tension in her voice. Rhaenys met her gaze evenly, completely calm. “I am the eldest trueborn daughter of Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his name, a princess of Dragonstone. If the king is going to come to my home, he will acknowledge me as such or he can be uncomfortable for the duration of his stay, but he will not know peace if he continues to deny me, deny us.”

“Rhaenys, for Gods' sake...”

“You're going to ruin the feast, Mother,” Rhaenys chided softly, nodding in thanks at the servant who filled her cup. Arya wasn't sure if she wanted to kiss her daughter or smack her.

When the music began, Rhaego returned to the table to partner Rhaenys, and Aemon, who preferred making music to dancing to it, surprised Arya by inviting one of Oberyn's granddaughters to take a turn with him. As the floor filled, Arya sighed, draining her cup of wine in a heavy swallow; the usual celebrations at Winterfell were full of boisterous, Northern men and women who cared nothing for the game of thrones, and Arya forgot how exhausting it could be to play. While the beautiful young couples swirled about the floor, Arya found Brandon snuggling against her side, burrowing his head against her side; in the privacy of his chamber, such childlike behavior was not unusual but Arya sensed there was an unease to her youngest tonight.

“What's wrong, sweetling?” she murmured, pushing his hair back from his forehead, brushing a soft kiss against his skin. Arya blinked in shock when Brandon scurried into her lap, looping his arms around her neck, drawing her ear down to his mouth. She knew she should reprimand him for acting so young at such an event, but Brandon's face was so serious, she could not bear it.

“If Rhaenys is a princess, then so is Alysanne. And Aemon is a prince. What am I?”

The Lord of Storm’s End, instantly popped into Arya’s head but she put it aside as quickly as it came. She thought for a moment, trying to figure out what the best answer was. And then she found she needed no answer at all, for Aegon was dropping into the chair beside Arya, chucking Brandon under the chin.

“What's wrong, my boy?”

Brandon squeezed her a bit tighter for a moment before lifting his head from Arya's collarbone. Arya
knew the thoughtful expression on Brandon’s face well; it was the one he wore when he was uncertain whether or not someone was japing at him. Finally Brandon repeated his question, and, for half-a-second, Arya saw something unfamiliar flash in Aegon's eyes before he leaned close, meeting Brandon’s gaze steadily.

“You're a prince of Dragonstone, the same as your brother,” Aegon stated unequivocally, “and someday you will the grandest knight to ever walk the earth. They will sing songs of Brandon the Brave.”

The tears came unbidden to Arya's eyes, and she quickly turned her face away so Aegon would not catch them glistening in the candlelight. When she swelled with Brandon, Arya did not doubt Gendry fathered her baby; she still didn't. But it was not outside the realm of possibility for Aegon to have put Brandon in her belly, and there were times when Arya even wished he was Brandon's true father, an explanation which would fix everything she broke with Sansa. Arya knew Gendry Baratheon was Brandon Snow's father as certainly as she knew Aegon Targaryen was the father of her other children, but it still made her ache to hear Aegon so freely claim her son when Gendry would never be able to do the same.

“Would you mind terribly much if I introduced you to some people?” Aegon continued, his voice so sweet and amiable, it brought back a thousand memories of Pentos and Vaes Dothrak, of Rhaenys and Aemon when they still toddled on unsteady legs. “I am certain your aunt Daenerys would like to meet you.”

It shattered Arya's reserve as Brandon went willingly into Aegon's arms, grinning broadly at the recognition, and she managed to make it outside the great hall before her tears came, hot and fierce. She stuffed her fist into her mouth to muffle any sound, whether it be sobs or the screams which were climbing in her throat, but Arya could do nothing to abate the flow of her tears. In the month since the raven arrived, she truly thought she was prepared for this, prepared for Aegon; in the years since King's Landing, she convinced herself she did not really miss him at all, the husband she chose for herself, the life she chose for herself.

And she didn't miss King Aegon or being Queen Arya, but that was not who appeared to have come to Winterfell, who smiled at her children with such love. He was Aegon again, her Aegon, and she hated how desperately she wanted to slip into his arms, to have him cup her face and kiss away her breath. She wondered if they always would have ended this way or if he only agreed to put her aside because of what she did with Gendry, a thought she has refused to allow to enter her brain for seven years. Confronted with the idea she contributed to her children's illegitimacy, the tears increase, and Arya had never felt weaker or more like a silly lady as she did spilling useless salt over long ago choices.

The hand on her elbow startled Arya, and she whirled around, wiping at her cheeks only to find Theon standing there, extending a large cup of mead. His ever-present smile was more sympathetic than usual as he quipped, “Want to get drunk with me?”

“Absolutely,” she agreed, chugging down the mead as if she was the Greatjon Umber.

Theon was the only other person in Winterfell who knew what it was like to be part of a family without being part of it all, and, as such, he was the only person Arya wanted to be around while her former husband played doting father.

Despite the amount of mead she drank with Theon, Arya could not sleep. With the moon at its peak, she found a robe, cinching it at her waist before hurrying down to the kitchen for wine. She did not bother with a candle, knowing the halls of Winterfell even in the blackest of night, and she was
surprised to find light flickering in the cavernous hall. Arya paused as the figures came into view: Aegon sat on one side of the table, Duck in his white armor on the other, both with cups of wine before them. The shuffle of her feet gave her away, and Aegon's eyes widened before he grinned pleasantly, waving her over.

“You must have heard us speaking of you,” Aegon said as she cautiously approached the table. “Duck was just reminding me of that day in Braavos when you dueled with that bravo who grabbed your arse.”

Arya smiled despite herself. “He is lucky his friend saved him.”

“You were such a fierce little thing,” Duck mused, mussing her hair as if she was a child; Arya nudged him to stop but the armor padded the blow significantly. “I told him from the moment you rode up on that house in the Stormlands, 'That one is nothing but trouble.’”

Reaching for the cup of wine before the knight, she teased, “I believe Viserys said the same and Connington too. I was quite troublesome in my youth.”

“No,” Aegon argued softly, his voice loose from wine, “you weren’t troublesome. You were...You were so bold. Fearless.”

“Stupid,” Arya corrected, “impulsive, careless, selfish - “

“That’s not you.”

“Then you're not remembering clearly.” Arya felt Duck rise from the bench, subtly removing himself from the conversation, and she wanted to grab his mailed hand, make him stay so the past could stay as buried as it ever did.

The fog of wine softened his speech, but Arya saw Aegon's eyes were clear as he stated, “I remember perfectly. I remember I made you a solemn promise and then, when enough people leaned upon me, I broke it. And then, when you were forced to be what you never wanted to be, I got angry because you would not forgive me so easily. I drove you to what you did, and then I punished you and our children for it.”

Arya scoffed, reaching to pour more wine into Duck's cup. “Do not give yourself so much credit, Your Grace. What I did, I did because I wanted to do it. You do not get to take that from me.”

“Did you always love him more than me?” Aegon asked hoarsely. “Did you marry me because you couldn't marry him?”

“I do not love him more than you,” she softly contested. “I married you because I loved you, because you were the first person who ever loved me and let me be as wild as I wished. I slept with Gendry because I was angry at you for bringing me back to court. Coming back here, I had to face what I did and the people I disappointed, and every time I heard a whisper about how I was a traitor or a whore, I thought I may as well act as one. I wanted to hurt you as you hurt me.” Staring down into her wine, she murmured, “I wanted to hurt Sansa. I wanted to hurt everyone, and the only people I truly hurt were the children.”

“You hardly did that single-handedly.” Aegon stared down into his own cup before sighing, “I threw them away. I was so angry at you, I let it blind me. Gods, Arya, I love them so much...”

“I know that. They know that,” she stressed.

“But Rhaenys - “
“You broke her heart,” Arya cut in, “but if she didn't love you as much as she does, she wouldn't care so deeply. It's different for her in comparison to Aemon or Alysanne; she had the most time with you, and she remembers what it was like...before. All she knows is one day she was the center of your universe and the next, you were having new daughters with Jessa Tyrell.”

“Connington says it was the stupidest thing I ever did.”

“Having children with Jessa?”

“Letting the High Septon declare our children bastards,” he corrected. “He never bore much love for you and he recognized what the Tyrells could bring, but the children...He said I disgraced my parents' memories by tossing them away.”

“Is that why you're here now, because you want to make Connington proud before he dies?”

“No, I'm here because I miss my family.” Aegon swirled the contents of his cup, seeming to carefully consider his words before stating, “You were right, you know. I'm surrounded by flowers, and they're choking me. Mace and Garland on the small council, Loras guarding me, Margaery whispering in Jessa's ear, I cannot catch my breath. Viserys is thick as thieves with them, so hungry still for the throne, for the power, and, when Connington dies, I won't have a friend in King's Landing.”

“That cannot be true.”

“Haldon hasn't the stamina for this, Daenerys wants to save everyone without any consideration for realities, Ashara refuses to leave Starfall, and Rolly cannot do everything. Mace is actually pushing for Joffrey to become Hand. Joffrey! I'd sooner name Moonboy.”

“Who do you want to name?”

Arya froze at the smile on Aegon's face, the quirk of his eyebrow. He said nothing, simply stared, and she instantly understood what he was saying. Arya shook her head, a disbelieving gasp leaving her lips.

“You cannot be serious!”

“Why not?” Aegon calmly asked. “You're better at reading people than most, you're observant, you understand the motivations of others, and you have never been shy about sharing your opinion with me.”

“The realm didn't want me as queen, and you think they'd accept me as the second most powerful person in the realm? How much wine have you had?”

“More than I should have,” he freely admitted, “but that does not change what I am saying. Connington says I need to appoint a Hand I trust implicitly, and you are the only person I can truly say I trust to make decisions based on the realm rather than your own ambition.”

Arya rose from the bench, pacing for a moment before snapping, “I cuckolded you! I took our children to the Wall rather than go where you sent us! I threatened to raise the realm against you! How can you possibly say you can trust me at all?! How could you ever expect me to trust you??!”

“Arya – “

“If you traveled a thousand leagues to be so fucking stupid, you can spend your time here as far from me as possible.”
As she turned to return to her rooms, Aegon called after her, “I did not give you permission to leave.”

She froze before turning, fury burning in her chest. Pinning him in place with her eyes, she growled, “You gave me permission the day you branded me a whore to all Seven Kingdoms. If you want to play king, you do it with someone else.”

It was a curious thing, Arya decided as she angrily beat her pillow, how much she could love and hate Aegon Targaryen.

For nearly a week, Aegon honored her request; he barely acknowledged her existence, spending his days meeting with the Northmen who rode to pay homage to the king, touring Winterfell with Robb and his men, and holding councils with his own men. Arya rarely saw anyone during the days; Jessa Tyrell kept court with the highborn ladies of Winterfell, and Arya was not surprised to find she was excluded from activities she did not want to take part in anyway. Even after years in the North, years away from the gossip and the whispered accusations, Arya knew every southron person in Winterfell still thought her to be the king’s mistress, and mistresses did not get invited to sit and embroider with the queen.

On the seventh day of the court’s stay at Winterfell, Arya came out of the castle to find Aegon kneeling beside Brandon, who was heavily padded and carrying a wooden sword; Ser Rodrik was strapping Robb’s youngest son into padded armor of his own, Robb smiling pleasantly as he leaned against the fence with Ned and Rolly, still clad in his gleaming white armor. As Aegon helped Brandon wrap his hand around the pommel of the sword, showing him how to hold it properly, Arya thought of her own lessons with Aegon so long ago, the silly lessons which changed her life.

The boys hacked at each other with impatience and little grace, the way Arya remembered Robb and Jon doing when they were younger. Both Rodrik and Aegon called out instructions, but neither Brandon nor Maxwell seemed to heed them, more focused on striking each other with broad, fanciful strokes than actually learning swordplay. Brandon would be seven soon, and the time for playing would start to fall by the wayside as he learned the things he would need as a man; Arya preferred to watch him play with his cousin when the time for play was nearly passed.

“It’s not a hammer, Brandon,” Aegon laughed as Brandon began to swing powerfully from the shoulder, and Arya felt nausea rise in her throat before choking it back.

Brandon hit Maxwell in the arm, tumbling his cousin onto his padded backside, and, as he advanced, Maxwell held up his hands and cried, “Yield!” while Rodrik bent to help him back to his feet. Arya laughed at the pure joy on Brandon’s face as he turned his bright grey eyes on his mother and Aegon.

“I won! Did you see, Mother? Did you?”

“I did! You were wonderful!”

Brandon’s grin only widened as Aegon knelt down, removing the helm atop his head and ruffling his dark hair. “If you practice enough, mayhaps we can see about you getting a real sword for your name day.”

“Aegon,” Arya began, shaking her head, knowing her son would manage to skewer himself and likely one of his cousins if given actual steel, but Brandon was already whooping in excitement, throwing his arms around Aegon’s neck and squeezing him tightly. Arya saw a shadow of sadness pass over Aegon’s face for a moment even as he returned the embrace, pressing a kiss to Brandon’s hair, and, when Brandon pulled away to spar with Maxwell again, Arya dropped her eyes to avoid
Aegon's gaze.

“He is wonderful,” Aegon murmured as the boys began again, the clicking of their wooden swords meeting in an uneven rhythm.

“Thank you.”

“I broke my fast this morning with him and Alysanne. They remind me of Rhaenys and Aemon when they were small.” Aegon smiled sadly before adding, “Except they far more formal. Rhaenys would have stolen my bacon and Aemon would have climbed into my lap.”

“They don't know you,” Arya pointed out, surprised by the coolness in her own voice, in the heavy echo of resentment she would have sworn did not exist in her heart any longer. “What did you expect?”

“I did not expect anything - “

“Liar.”

Aegon exhaled sharply through his nose, irritation plain on his face. “What do you want me to say, Arya?”

Ignoring the speculative looks of her father and brother, Arya turned to face Aegon, keeping her voice deliberately low so Brandon would not overhear. “I don't want you to say anything. You come here with your new wife and your new children, and it is as if you expect all of us to be so happy to see you, like the past seven years did not happen.”

“I did what we agreed - “

“Agreed?” Arya scoffed. “What choice did I have, Aegon? Should I have gone to Dragonstone, let you come visit as you liked, be the whore the court still whispers I am? I brought them here so they could be away from the people who would call them the king's bastards, to give them a chance at the happiness Rhaenys and Aemon knew when they were small.” She was startled by the feel of tears on her cheeks and quickly wiped them away as she gritted out, “We're not the people you left.”

“Then come back to court so I might have a chance to know you, know all of you,” Aegon entreated softly, stepping closer but not touching her, something for which Arya was grateful. “You do not have to be Hand, but just come back. Let me be their father again.”

“If you think Mace Tyrell will ever allow that - “

“I am the king,” he declared, his voice hoarse yet fierce, “and, contrary to what you seem to think, Mace Tyrell does not make my decisions for me. I told you once I did everything I did so our children would have a legacy, and I mean for them to have it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our children deserve more than to be hidden away in the North with nothing to call their own. They were born to be kings and queens. I saw that years ago, and I still believe it. And I know you believe it as well or else you wouldn't be so scared.”

“I'm not scared,” she lied, folding her arms over her chest, her eyes instinctively finding Brandon still hacking away at Maxwell.

“You're terrified,” he argued, and Arya shivered as he gently clasped her elbow, keeping her in place
so she could not flee from his words. “Do you remember what I said to you the first night we kissed, what I said about you?”

“You said there was a queen inside of me.”

“For as long as I have known you, all you have ever been able to believe is the terrible things people say about you; you let them twist you up inside your head so badly, you cannot even see the truth anymore. Whispers can't hurt our children.”

“But ambitious men with daggers and poisons can.”

Aegon smiled wryly. “The Arya Stark I knew did not tremble at shadows.”

“The Arya Stark you knew did not have four children to protect.”

“Arya - “

“If we come with you to court, people are going to ask questions and I do not...” Arya's eyes drifted to Brandon, dancing away from Maxwell's blows, and she felt tears rising in her throat again. “I do not want him to know where he comes from, what I did.”

Aegon caught her beneath the chin with two fingers, forcing her eyes to lock with his; immediately she felt it, the siren song of his body, the love which they were both far too careless with when they were younger. “Brandon Snow is my son, and I will take the head of any man who says otherwise.”

“Why?” was all she could manage.

Genuine anguish filled Aegon's handsome features as he murmured, “Because he's yours.”

Before Arya could reply, Brandon flung himself at her legs, squeezing tightly while bouncing with excitement. “I won again! Did you see me?”

Arya bent, scooping him off of his feet, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek. “You will be a wonderful knight.”

Her heart broke as Brandon's arms reached for Aegon, who took him easily, a grin stretching across his face. As Aegon began to praise Brandon for his fighting prowess, Arya looked away only to find Jessa Tyrell watching her from a window.

There was something in Jessa's expression which reminded Arya of Cersei Lannister, and Arya knew better than anyone the lengths the former queen had gone to in order to get her own way.

Arya never much cared for music; Sansa was always the one who pleaded for Ned to bring singers to Winterfell, who could enrapture men with the sweet soprano of her voice. Septa Mordane gave them music lessons, but only Sansa took to them, Arya always finding her fingers too clumsy, the pitch of her voice too sharp or too flat.

Now, as she followed the sounds of Aemon's harp, finding him seated before a fire in one of the smaller parlors, Arya wished she had been more appreciative of Septa Mordane's lessons. Aemon smiled at her as she entered the room, taking a seat opposite of him as his fingers continued to pluck out a melody Arya vaguely recognized from her time on the Gift. Mance used to play it, called it “her song,” but Arya did not know the words or what it was called.

Of all of her children, Arya always felt closest to Aemon. Rhaenys was first Aegon's daughter and
then wholly her own person; Alysanne and Brandon belonged to everyone, both having grown up at Winterfell, but Aemon was always hers, her sweet, quiet boy whose heart was too big for his own good, who preferred his harp to his sword. At two-and-ten, he was all long limbs, more gangly than graceful, and, though his features were fully Targaryen, Arya saw so much of her father and Jon Snow in her son, the seriousness of the North having filled his soul where the fire of the dragon filled Rhaenys's.

When they first arrived at Winterfell, Aemon barely spoke except to ask when Aegon was going to visit; Arya lost count of how many nights Aemon climbed into her bed, huddling beneath the furs and pressing his face against her neck, his face hot with tears. It was not until Brandon was born that Aemon began to return to the boy he used to be when they lived amongst the wildlings. Aemon had always been sweet to Alysanne, but having a little brother seemed to give him a purpose, and Arya suspected Aemon wanted to be as much of a father to Brandon as he could be. Alysanne was Brandon's best friend, Rhaenys was his idol, but Aemon was the one Brandon did not want to disappoint.

He was not meant to be a warrior, her eldest son; unlike Rhaenys, who took to every weapon as if it was an extension of her body, or Brandon, who was always so physical, Aemon preferred books. Robb called him “the little maester” and Arya always thought of Maester Aemon, gone so long now. Like Ned and Jon, Aemon never acted impulsively; he was the sole person Rhaenys listened to when she was in her rages and the person who could soothe Alysanne's tears the quickest.

*He would make a wonderful king,* Arya thought, surprised by the sudden thought. Even when she was still a queen and he was still a prince, Arya never thought of Aemon as the future king, and Arya highly doubted Aemon ever thought of himself that way.

“Did you ever want to be king?” she asked with a candidness she never would have used with Rhaenys and her mercurial temper.

Aemon's fingers paused over the strings, and Arya could see the careful consideration he was giving the question. Finally he settled on, “I don't care much for power.”

A small smile tugged at Arya's lips. “Unlike your sister?”

Aemon smiled as well. “In Dorne, women can inherit before men. Rhaenys thinks it is unfair she would be passed over for me, and she would make a better ruler if we were ever to rule.”

“Why would she be better?”

“Because she was born to fight.”

“And what were you born to do?”

“Listen.” Aemon's smile became smaller, sadder as he countered, “What were you born to do?”

Arya shrugged. “I do not know. What do you think I was born to do?”

Long fingers plucked out a melody Arya recognized instantly; it was the tale of Daena the Defiant, and it had been one of the few songs Arya enjoyed as a child. “Whatever you wish to do. You’re not like other ladies, other mothers.”

“No?”

Aemon shook his head, scattering his fine silver hair in all directions. “I remember what you used to be like. You were different then.”
Genuine curiosity bloomed in her chest. “What do you remember?”

“You used to wear pants and keep your hair braided like a Dothraki. I remember when we lived in the tent with Grandmother Ashara, when Uncle Jon used to visit, you smiled more.” A shadow fell over his face as he murmured, “We all used to smile more.”

Studying his face, so much like his father's, Arya queried, “Would you want to go south, to return to court with your father?”

“Alone?”

“No, all of us would come as well. Is that something you would want?”

Aemon set the harp upon the seat beside him, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly. After an indeterminable amount of time, his cheeks flush with embarrassment, he confessed, “I missed him.”

“You do not have to be ashamed of that, Aemon.”

“But I am.” In that moment, the boy poised on the cusp of manhood looked even younger than Brandon as he stated, “He sent us away, Mother. He took your crown and the crown which was supposed to be mine, and he gave them to Jessa and her daughters. How can I miss someone who took everything away?”

“Because he's your father.”

There was a tremble to his chin when Aemon declared, “He loved us once. I know he did. I remember it.”

“He loves you still,” Arya assured him, reaching across the gap to squeeze his hand. “You will never understand how deeply he loves you all. What happened...There was so much which went into that, but love for you and your siblings was never a reason for it.”

“We aren't supposed to be here. At Winterfell,” Aemon clarified, answering the question painted on her face. “I do not know why, but I have always felt that way.”

“Where are we supposed to be?”

For the first time in his life, Arya saw a flash of fire and blood in Aemon's violet eyes. “We're dragons, Mother. Do you truly believe anyone in the North ever forgets that?”

No, Arya knew no one ever forgot who fathered her children, forgot what she had done by running off with the exiled Targaryen prince. Time healed wounds but it never erased them; the scars of her actions were still visible in every part of her life: the shuttered disappointment in Catelyn's eyes, the sadness in Ned's smile, the echo of reproach in Robb's voice, the unbearable silence from Sansa, the distrustful glances the people of the North exchanged when they saw her or the children. Arya wanted so badly for her children to have a place at Winterfell, to be wolves, but if there was one thing Arya was learning, her children were well-aware of what they were.

“Do you want to go to court?” Arya repeated softly.

Aemon squeezed her hand tightly. “I want to go where we belong.”

*Where do dragons belong?* Arya nearly asked, certain he was offering her some sort of riddle. It was only as she posed the question to herself she recognized the answer, knew it as if it was imprinted on her heart.
Arya rose, brushing Aemon's hair from his eyes and pressing a kiss to his brow. “I love you.”

Her son offered her a smile so much like Ned Stark's, it made her heart ache. “I know. I've never doubted that.”

Arya never cared much for the gods, the old or the new. She prayed because she hoped someone was listening, but Arya did not put much stock in the existence of more powerful, benevolent beings. Catelyn and Jeyne Westerling still lit candles in the small sept; Ned and Robb sought help before the heart tree, but Arya had not implored the gods for anything since that day years earlier in the Riverlands when she asked for a sign and received Nymeria.

The godswood was silent, one of the few places untouched by the visitors from court, and Arya smiled when she found her father sitting near the small pool, his cane resting beside him as he polished Ice with great care. She remembered when she was very small how massive the greatsword seemed and how jealous she was that one day it would belong to Robb instead of her. Sometimes, when she slipped away from Septa Mordane, Ned would set her in his lap and let her help him polish it, the ripples of the Valyrian steel dancing before her eyes.

“You're quiet as a shadow when you want to be,” Ned remarked as she sat down beside him, uncaring about messing her gown in the dirt. “When you were little, I could hear you coming a league away.”

“Tormund Giantsbane taught me to be silent or else I'd never catch anything when I hunted.”

“And a fierce hunter you were, I'm sure.”

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes, Ned's hands working over Ice as Arya stared at the ripples dancing across the pool. Finally Arya blurted out, “Did you ever love Jon less because he is my son?"

“No,” Ned answered immediately, “because he is my son. He may not have come from my seed, but I taught him to walk, to talk, to swing a sword, to shave, to be a man; is that not what makes a father?”

Arya thought of Jon Connington, wasting away from greyscale a thousand leagues away, and softly sighed. “Do you ever regret it, not telling Jon that Aunt Lyanna was his mother and Rhaegar Targaryen was his father?”

“I regret hurting your mother with the lie,” he replied diplomatically, “but it would only have caused more pain for Jon to have known.” Ned turned his grey eyes upon her, a knowing light shining in them. “Is this about Brandon?”

It never failed to amaze Arya how quickly she seemed to turn from fully grown woman and mother to an embarrassed child under her father's gaze. “Do you think a man can love a child which came from betrayal?”

“I think a man can learn to do anything if he loves the woman enough.” Ned's face was troubled but his voice certain as he declared, “And he loves you more than enough.”

Arya shifted uncomfortably, crossing her arms over her chest as she pulled the corner of her lip between her teeth. She did not want to think about how much Aegon loved her or how much she loved him in return. When it came to love, Arya wished she could be more like Sansa, who always knew her heart; Arya knew how to take down a deer with one shot from her bow, how to disarm a man with a sword, how to wield an arakh with the deadly talent of a Dothraki screamer, but Arya
never understood her own heart.

“You must be so disappointed in me and the choices I've made.”

“Sometimes I am,” Ned admitted, and Arya loved him for such blatant honesty, “but mostly I envy you for your courage.”

Arya snorted. “My courage? What have I done - “

“When you first returned, I confess I had no idea what to say to you, how to treat you. It was as if I was being asked to choose which of my daughters I loved more, which I was choosing to support. And then Ashara came to me.”

“I did not think you two spoke.”

There was a surprising amount of affection in Ned's voice as he said, “Oh, I did not so much speak as listen. She told me all which you had gone through since leaving the Stormlands, and then she said, 'If she was a son, you would ask to hear of her adventures and forgive her indiscretions. You forgave Lyanna easily enough.'” Ned exhaled deeply with a small shake of his head. “She loves you as fiercely as your own mother does.”

“Ashara loves everyone fiercely.”

“She always did.”

Intrigued, Arya blurted out, “Do you still love her?”

Ned returned his attention to Ice, and Arya saw there was more force in his hands now. “Your uncle Brandon, he was so much more than me in every way which mattered to our father, but Ashara Dayne, the most beautiful woman in the Seven Kingdoms, wanted me. I was young and it was a heady feeling. I loved her more than I thought possible, and I was certain I was going to marry her.”

Arya knew what came next. “But then Aerys killed Brandon and Grandfather Rickard, and you had to marry Mother.”

“War changes everything; it always has. I wrote Ashara, told her how sorry I was but how I had to marry Catelyn. Even though I knew it would make the child she carried a bastard, I still wed your mother, and I swear to the gods, I have loved your mother as best as I am able ever since.”

“But?”

“But I mourned her for twenty-five years, and I have never forgotten the daughter we lost. I try to live as honorable a life as possible, but it was considerably easier to do when the only woman who would have tested my honor was thought dead.” His hands stopped moving, the Valyrian steel gleaming in the spring sun, and Ned Stark suddenly looked far older than he had only a few moments earlier. “If the king loves Brandon and Brandon loves the king, the truth can become what you wish it to be.”

“You're telling me to lie?” she asked in shock.

“A lie can be kinder than the truth, especially for children.” Grey met grey as Ned looked her square in the eye. “To protect your children, lies are worth the smudges on your honor.”

“What honor?” she drawled bitterly. “Seven kingdoms believe I am a whore and a traitor besides.”
“And four children think you hang the moon while the king grants you more respect than he does the woman he calls his queen.”

“You used to say a man was only as good as his name.”

“I used to say many things.” Ned wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in to kiss her temple the way he had so many times when she was young. “Of all my children, you are the one I worry about the most and the least.”

Despite the gloom hanging over her, Arya laughed; she felt the same way about Rhaenys. “I wish to warn you: I am going to do something very stupid which will rile Mother to no end and may likely put me in a position to be killed by Mace Tyrell.”

Ned’s deep laughter surprised her. As he struggled to his feet, bracing his weight on his cane, he chuckled, “Seven years of peace was more than I ever hoped to get from you, my girl. Are you certain you know what you are doing?”

Falling into step beside him, Arya admitted, “Seldom, if ever.”

He did not ask her what she was going to do; he did not try to stop her.

Arya never loved Ned Stark so much as she did that day in the godswood.

A week before all of court was to return to King's Landing, Arya went to Aegon, trying to remember the brash young woman she once was, the woman who hunted down a blue-haired sellsword and demanded sword lessons, the woman who fled everything she knew for a man she had known for only a few moons' turn. She found him seated in one of the solars with Viserys, Daenerys, Joffrey, and the Tyrells, and, with the exceptions of Daenerys and Aegon, everyone looked at her as if her presence was an affront.

“I need to speak with you,” was all Arya said, her eyes locking with Aegon's, mimicking the composure Catelyn Stark always seemed to possess.

“That is not how one addresses the king,” Viserys snapped, his face pinched in disgust. Age had not been kind to the eldest Targaryen; where once Arya thought he might be considered handsome, now he resembled a weathered bird. “Do they not teach manners in the North?”

“No, we are taught useful things here.” Returning her attention to Aegon, she repeated, “I need to speak with you.”

“You cannot - “

Arya whirled on Prince Viserys, her intense disdain for Aegon's uncle rushing to the forefront, breaking her fragile calm. “You do not tell me what I can and cannot do, especially not in my home.”

Viserys opened his mouth to retort, but Aegon held up his hand, silencing the words. Arya saw Jessa frown deeply as Aegon rose, her bow mouth twisting unattractively, and, when she said Aegon's name in an attempt to still him, Arya recognized the blatant irritation there. For the first time, she wondered what Aegon's marriage to Jessa Tyrell was like.

Arya lead him to a small alcove near Maester Luwin's office, her skirts swirling around her ankles, and she could acutely feel his eyes upon the line of her neck, left bare by the net which kept all her hair gathered. She dressed with particular care today, eschewing the plain dresses she usually wore for one of the elaborate gowns she had not worn since being at court; today Arya Stark looked like
the queen she once refused to be, and there was something in Aegon's gaze which made her shift uneasily, as if she was young again and being judged by Septa Mordane.

“What?” Arya eventually said, smoothing her skirt, suddenly longing for the breeches and tunics she stopped wearing after Brandon was born in order to play at being a proper mother. Never had she felt unsure in her body when hidden beneath layers of men's clothing, and Arya thought she left such uncertainty behind long ago.

“You were my wife for seven years, and I believe I have seen you wear more gowns in the past month than I did our entire marriage.” Arya tried not to shiver as he traced her exposed collarbone with the tips of two fingers, his touch making her body come alive. Of all the problems which existed in their marriage, physical attraction had never been one of them. “It makes you look like someone else.”

“You preferred me in dirty breeches and painted vests?”

“I preferred you in nothing at all,” he countered with a sly smile, and Arya shook her head with a soft chuckle, the tension in her limbs dissipating beneath the warmth of his laugh.

Playfully pushing him backwards with her hand, she said, “I did not pull you away so we could reminisce.”

“Why did you pull me away?”

“The offer you made me.”

Aegon's eyebrows rose in surprise, hope filling his features. “You're accepting?”

“I cannot be Hand,” she declared, keeping her tone low so they would not be overheard. “I would not be respected and, what's worse, neither would you. If Seven Kingdoms would not support me as queen, they would surely not support me as the second most powerful person in the realm. They would say you gave away the realm to your whore.”

“You are not - “

“I know I am not a whore,” she interrupted, “and I do not need you to tell me so. However, after speaking to the children, I think you are right: our children should know you and you should know our children. If you wish us to come south with you, we will, but we will not stay at court.”

“Then where will you stay?”

“Dragonstone, as you once promised. It will be close enough for visits but still private enough that it will not make a spectacle of our return.”

He grinned, nodding immediately. “I can make the arrangements. You'll return with us.”

“There is more,” Arya added, watching as his happiness began to falter. “I have conditions.”

Aegon waited, his face expectant.

“You'll make them Targaryens again,” she began, trying not to sound as nervous as she was. “Rhaenys, Aemon, Alysanne, they deserve to have their name back. I won't ask you to legitimize Brandon - “

“I will,” he cut in, face softening. “He deserves a name as well.”
Choking back the emotion which threatened to overwhelm her, Arya rushed on, “Aemon will receive lands and a title, and you'll provide Rhaenys and Alysanne with dowries when they marry. And they will choose who they marry; there will be no betrothals made without their consent.” Voice breaking, she managed, “I want them to marry for love.”

He stepped into her, carefully brushing away the single tear which escaped her eyes. “I want that as well.”

“And returning to court does not mean I am returning to your bed.” Squaring her shoulders, inhaling deeply, she reminded him with a hint of reproach in her voice, “We cannot go back.”

“I know.” And yet his fingers still traced the neckline of her gown, still tripped over her shoulder before following the delicate line of her neck. When he cupped her face, his thumb softly stroking the arch of her cheekbone, Aegon sighed, “But wouldn't the world be sweeter if we could?”

The kiss he bestowed upon her was chaste but it shook her more deeply than any passionate kiss she had ever been given.

Regret hurt so much less when there was someone to share it.

"Are you certain you know what you are doing?"

Ned's words echoed in Arya's mind as she sat down to dine the first evening in the Red Keep. Arya never thought she would look upon the castle ever again, certain she would live the rest of her life at Winterfell, and, as Brandon gasped, she wondered if this was the wrong choice, if bringing her children back to King's Landing was going to be the end of the peaceful lives she strove so hard to give them.

“That is Rhaenys's Hill,” her eldest daughter told her youngest brother who sat beside her at the table, answering a question Arya did not catch, “named after the first Aegon's sister and wife. That is where they kept their dragons.”

“Dragons?” Brandon echoed, his eyes wide.

“Aegon rode Balerion the Black Dread,” Rhaenys recited, Arya assailed with the memory of Jon Connington telling the same story to her when she was small, “and they say his scales were black as midnight. Queen Rhaenys, she rode Meraxes, who could swallow horses whole. And do you know who Queen Visenya rode?” When Brandon shook his head, she continued, “She rode Vhagar, and its breath was so hot, it could melt a man's armor.”

“Truly?”

“Truly,” Aemon chimed in, and Arya could not help but smile at the picture he and Alysanne presented seated side-by-side, their silver hair gleaming in the candlelight. “Aegon and his sisters conquered Westeros with their dragons, but the dragons which followed were never as large or as powerful until they died away completely.”

“And the only time all the dragons took to the sky together was during the Field of Fire, when they killed 4,000 men and destroyed House Gardener,” Alysanne piped up, startling Arya with history she knew Septa Maeve never taught her. “That is how the Tyrells came to control Highgarden, because they bent the knee to Aegon the Conqueror.”

Mace Tyrell, who sat near the head of the table alongside Margaery, laughed. “Only a stupid man does not bow before a dragon.”
“Yes, House Tyrell seems to do quite well when one of its members goes to their knees before the king,” Rhaenys quipped, and, while Jessa and Mace obviously bristled at the insinuation, Arya knew her daughter phrased the insult just deftly enough to claim ignorance if confronted for its impropriety.

“Why did the dragons die?” Brandon queried, oblivious to the tensions in the room, his eyes still wide as if listening to one of Old Nan's stories.

“The maesters and maegis say that magic left the world,” Daenerys offered, smiling fondly as she picked at her food, “and, since magic gives birth to dragons, they had to die away.”

Brandon sighed, slumping in his chair. “I want to see a dragon.”

Viserys laughed, but there was nothing kind or joyous about it. “You are sitting at a table with them, boy.”

Arya bit her lip to keep from laughing at Brandon's thoroughly unimpressed expression. “I meant real dragons.” As everyone present at the table, even Jessa, gave small chuckles at Brandon's words, her son turned to Rhaenys and asked, “But can't you hatch dragons from your eggs?”

The silence which fell over the hall seemed to echo, and, while Viserys began to puff up with indignation, Arya looked to Rhaenys, who seemed utterly unaffected as she replied, “Mayhaps someday.”

“You gave your eggs to them?!” Viserys exploded at his sister, and Arya felt her entire body stiffen at the scared expression on Alysanne's face, at the way she grabbed Aemon's arms tightly for protection.

Daenerys was unruffled, used to her brother's tantrums. Both Rhaego and Ser Jorah, who stood at Daenerys's back, looked positively ready to kill the eldest Targaryen, but, much like Rhaenys, Daenerys simply said, “They were mine. What does it matter whether I kept them or gave them to our nieces and nephew?”

“Because those eggs were our inheritance!”

“Those eggs were wedding presents from Illyrio to me when I wed Drogo. They were mine to do with as I pleased, and it was my will to give them to the children when they set sail from Volantis. If they were of such great importance to you, you would have asked after them long before now.”

“Wait,” Aegon spoke up, turning his gaze on Arya. “You have Daenerys's eggs?”

“She put them in our things when we left the Dothraki Sea,” she explained, reaching for her wine cup. “I did not even know we had them until we were in Braavos. I assumed they were meant for the children, so I gave them each an egg.”

“Those eggs were to go to the heirs of House Targaryen,” Viserys rushed on, “and the heirs are the children born to Queen Jessa. They cannot keep them. They must go to the true dragons of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Viserys,” Aegon began, his voice weary over what Arya assumed was an argument he and his uncle had been having for the past month, but it was Rhaenys who cut in, Rhaenys who pinned the man in place with eyes which burned black.

“You think a marriage blessed by the High Septon makes a dragon, Prince Viserys? You believe because a fat man in a silly hat declared us to be bastards, that somehow makes the blood in our veins different from the blood in yours?” Viserys opened his mouth but Rhaenys rushed on, her
voice gathering strength. “We are the blood of the Kings of Winter and Old Valyria, ice and fire made flesh, and it is our song which people will remember when your bones are naught but dust.”

Rhaenys lifted her cup of wine, swirling the liquid as she drawled with deliberate mocking, “And you would not wish to wake the dragons, would you, Uncle?”

Viserys pushed to his feet, bracing his hands on the table as his face twisted in anger, furious words about to pour from his mouth. Every maternal instinct in Arya told her to rise as well, an action Aegon was echoing, but what happened next startled Arya to her very core.

As Viserys leaned forward to shout in Rhaenys's face, Aemon reared up suddenly, grabbing the knife beside his plate and embedding it deeply within the wood of the table between Viserys's splayed hands. Jessa gave a shout, but no one else moved, waiting to see what was about to happen.

“You will stay down, ser, or I will put you down,” Aemon growled, and, while Arya did not recognize the fierce young man staring down his great-uncle, she certainly recognized his tone: it was the voice of Ned Stark, of Winterfell, of the North.

Arya finally found her voice, getting to her feet and resting a hand upon Aemon's shoulder; she could feel the heavy tension throughout his limbs, and she instantly regretted bringing her sweet, peace-loving son to court, to men like Viserys.

Aegon had given them rooms in the Tower of the Hand when they arrived, but it was her own chamber Arya lead her children to as Aegon dressed down Viserys. Aemon was vibrating with anger, and it was not until they were locked away in the privacy of her rooms Arya saw Rhaenys was squeezing his hand tightly as if to tether him to the earth. Alysanne and Brandon both curled up on the large bed, their bodies fitting together as they had when they shared a nursery, and Arya ran her hands over their heads as if they were still babes, sensing just how upset they were.

“How dare he?” Aemon finally spat, and there was fire in his voice, a rage Arya was only familiar with when it came from Rhaenys. “How dare he say we are not true dragons?”

“Aemon –”

“I am a prince of Dragonstone!” he cried, and, if his fury startled Arya, the tears which now coursed down his cheeks knocked her even further back. “I have just as much right to the throne as any whelp of Jessa Tyrell’s! More even! The dragon has three heads, and we are those heads!”

Rhaenys grabbed her brother's face, forcing him to look at her, and, as always, Aemon began to calm beneath his sister's gaze. “And they will see that. Remember what I told you.”

The words chilled Arya to the bone, and, when she asked what Rhaenys meant, none of her children would answer. Even Alysanne, usually so open and honest, lowered her eyes, and Arya understood that, in this, her children were a united force. She could not get a single syllable from her children with Aegon and later, as she put Brandon to bed, when she asked him if he knew what Rhaenys was speaking of, Brandon shook his head.

“Am I a dragon?” he murmured as sleep began to take him, snuggling into the mattress as Arya tightly tucked the blankets around him as he preferred.

_No, thank the Gods._ “You are whatever you wish to be.”

When she returned to her chamber, she found Aegon seated on the bed, his head in his hands. As he lifted his face as she entered, Arya saw how genuinely exhausted he appeared, and she was certain she knew the feeling. Reaching up to remove the pins from her hair, Arya stilled when Aegon asked,
“May I?”

The correct answer was “no.” It was too intimate, too much like the past; she used to tease him over his appreciation of her hair, the way he used to gently untangle it after a hard day of riding, the way he’d arrange it to cover her breasts while she rode him. And yet Arya turned, silently giving him permission, wanting to be taken care of even if it was only for a moment.

Seven years was a long time to be lonely.

“I spoke to the children,” he said after a moment, his fingers carefully separating the hairpins from her thick hair, setting them neatly on the edge of the table. “I apologized for Viserys, assured them they are as trueborn as my daughters with Jessa, but I do not think Rhaenys trusts me still.”

“It will take time. The legitimization will help. She loved you more than anything on earth once; she'll love you again.” Arya exhaled in pleasure as his fingertips gently massaged her scalp, sifting through her locks with calloused fingers. “Gods, that feels nice.”

Aegon chuckled softly at her back, carding his fingers through her hair before beginning again. “You are always so easy to please.”

Arya laughed. “We both know that isn't true.”

Gathering her hair in one hand before releasing it, letting it scatter around her shoulders before repeating the motion, he murmured, “I think it would be best if you and the children leave for Dragonstone sooner rather than later. I did not think...I did not think your presence would cause such discord amongst everyone.”

Of course you didn't. King or not, you've always been painfully naïve. “I would prefer it.”

“Rhaego and the khalasar will join you,” he said, and Arya wondered how much of a role Rhaenys had in arranging that. “I assumed you'd prefer them to a knight of the Kingsguard.”

“Rhaenys certainly will,” she drawled, and Aegon's hand tugged a bit painfully at her hair as he gritted out, “She's a child.”

Arya turned, smiling at the look of consternation on his handsome face. “She's older than Daenerys was when she wed Drogo, the same age I was when I wed Ned Dayne. And trust me when I say, the way she and Rhaego look at each other - “

He pressed his fingers against her lips, glaring in a mixture of affection and genuine irritation. “Stop it.”

Stepping backwards, Arya pointed out with a giggle, “You were her age the first time you shared a bed with a woman.”

Aegon made a grab for her, and Arya darted away with a laugh, feeling younger than she was, safer than she was as she twisted past him, putting the bed between them and throwing a pillow at him for good measure. As he frowned, she teased, “You have become slow in your old age. If I had been a traitor with a dagger, little Olenna would be taking the throne in the morn.”

“Mayhaps you are right where I want you,” Aegon retorted, his face more alive than she had seen it since Vaes Dothrak. “You cannot leave the room without passing me, and I guarantee you will not pass. I shall seal you up in here like Baelor did his sisters, make this your very own maidenvault.”

“I am no maiden.”
Aegon's eyes darkened with lust as he deliberately looked her over from head to foot and back again. “I remember.”

Good humor leaving her, Arya shook her head minutely. “Stop.”

“Why?” he challenged, taking a seat upon the bed. “You do not love me? You do not miss me or want me?”

“I do not wish to be anyone's mistress ever again,” she corrected, sitting on the opposite edge of the featherbed. “I told you before we ever left Winterfell that we could not go backwards - “

“And I am not proposing that.”

“Then what are you proposing?”

He looked decidedly un-king-like as he lay back, staring up at the canopy over the bed the way they once stared at the stars above the Dothraki Sea. For a moment Aegon said nothing and finally he murmured, “I want to make love to you. I want to fall asleep with you on my chest and wake up with you in my arms. I want to feel for just a moment how I used to feel when we were together, when the children were small and we were just beggars. I want to be with our children every moment and forget all that happened after the war: Gendry, Jessa, everything.”

“But we can't,” Arya said thickly, “because you have two daughters with Jessa, and I have a son whose blood is not that of the dragon's. And we are both far too old to play at pretending.”

A tear shimmered in the candlelight as it rolled across Aegon's temple to disappear in his hair. “And to all seven hells with what we want?”

She lay back, her head resting alongside Aegon's, her vision swimming with tears as well. “Jon told me once life isn't always about what you want.” Twisting her head so she could look at him, she offered, “Mayhaps we used up all our wanting when we were too young to realize what it was worth.”

Arya did not move when Aegon sat up, pulling her along with him. She shivered as he cupped her face, kissing away her tears, his breath hot against her skin. “One last night of wanting and in the morning, we will be the king and lady we are supposed to be.”

A smart woman would have said no. No one ever accused Arya Stark of being smart when it came to love.

Arya did not particularly love Dragonstone, but her children adored the island fortress of House Targaryen. She remembered sailing past it when fleeing Essos, catching sight of the fearsome dragon towers, and, while she could only find peace in the garden where the trees reminded her of the North, her children loved everything about it. The few houses who called Dragonstone home were unsure about the Dothraki now settling there, but Rhaego and Arya both gave them assurances they would not be bothered. The servants were cool the first few weeks before her children's kindness won them over, and somehow the presence of Septa Maeve soothed their fears; there was no godswood upon Dragonstone but the sept was often used by the residents of the island. Even Rhaenys, who worshiped the old gods more than the new, began to visit the sept and soon Arya found Rhaenys, Aemon, and Alyssanne gathering there daily for prayer. Only Brandon remained her stubborn Northern boy, wanting no part of the elaborately carved relics in the sept, joining her in the garden at the tree she painted a face upon to say his prayers.
“Do you know what they pray for?” she asked Brandon one afternoon as they watched the trio disappear into the sept.

Brandon remained quiet, staring up at her with large grey eyes, and Arya knew she would get no answer from Gendry's son; he may not have been included in whatever was happening amongst his older siblings but even the Others would not be able to wrench from him their secret.

The decree of legitimization arrived by raven six months after they settled upon Dragonstone, and, as Arya read the parchment at dinner, declaring Rhaenys Snow, Aemon Snow, Alyssanne Snow, and Brandon Snow to all be the legitimate children of Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his name, she saw Rhaenys's shoulders droop. For a moment she thought her eldest was disappointed, but Arya quickly realized her daughter was crying from relief, the burden of being a bastard finally lifted from her back.

“May I see it?” she requested, wiping at her cheeks, holding out her hand, and Arya complied, giving her the parchment. Rhaenys read Aegon's bold hand, nodding silently to herself, and, when she finished, she set the parchment upon the dining table and drew a deep breath.

“I am Princess Rhaenys Targaryen,” she declared, and her voice sounded so certain, so queenly, Arya found herself studying her daughter as if she was a stranger instead of the babe she suckled. “I am the dragon's daughter. He recognizes that, and now everyone will have to as well.”

“Yes,” was all Arya could reply.

“They will have to recognize us all.” Rhaenys's grin was blinding as she turned it upon her siblings, who returned it with as much vigor. “Let the Tyrells pretend we don't exist now.”

“Rhaenys,” Arya began, shaking her head at the troubling tone of her daughter's voice, “the Tyrells are not our enemies.”

“Anyone who is not us is an enemy.” Rhaenys looked at her meaningfully. “Protect the pack, remember?”

Arya wondered if she had taught her ambitious daughter all the wrong lessons.

Brandon was sick with fever, miserable and complaining of a sore throat; Maester Marwyn gave him a tea to drink, but Arya remained in his chamber, singing him to sleep before eventually succumbing to sleep herself. It was the strange flickering of green light which woke her from repose, Brandon still snoring beside her; Arya rose from the bed to look outside and found her heart immediately in her throat.

She knew what wildfire looked like; Thoros of Myr used a flaming sword in tournament when she was young and, even then, it terrified of her. Wildfire was unpredictable and always fatal, burning until it was gone, unable to be quenched; Rickard Stark was cooked alive in his own armor and Jon Snow bore scars on his arm from saving Lord Commander Mormont, and that was the result of regular flame. As Arya ordered Septa Maeve to remain with Brandon, she raced down the stairs, shouting for assistance, taking off across the grounds as if she was a child again.

When she was the wildfire inside a contained circle of sand, the Dothraki, Maester Marwyn, and even the lords of Dragonstone surrounding it, Arya knew something was happening she did not understand. She rushed to Rhaego, opening her mouth to demand to know what was going on, when she saw movement inside the flames, movement which looked remarkably like Aemon.

“My gods,” Arya breathed, her legs giving out, Rhaego catching her easily.
“You must trust it, Arya,” Rhaego said above the loud crackling of the flames. “This is what is meant to be.”

She screamed, loud and piercing, screamed until her voice gave way, screamed as the flames consumed her children. Rhaego’s grip upon her did not budge, and, as the sun began to rise over the water, the wildfire began to die. It was not until she heard the gasps and prayers, saw men and women taking the knee, that Arya turned her attention to what she assumed would be the charred and ruined remains of her family.

They stood in the center of the blackened circle, their naked bodies covered in soot, untouched by the flames; that in itself would have been breathtaking, but Arya knew it was not their unburnt flesh which earned the devotion of those surrounding them.

A black creature was perched upon Rhaenys's shoulder, its red eyes taking everything in; a cream-colored monster wrapped itself around Aemon's bicep while Alysanne cradled a thing with emerald scales. As the Dothraki began to murmur, Arya finally shook free of Rhaego, not knowing the word the Dothraki used but certain of its meaning.

”Dragons,” the khalasar chanted while the lords remained silent in fealty, and Arya could scarcely catch her breath at what she was saying, what her children had done. The words of Maester Aemon pushed their way to the front of her brain - wake dragons from stone - but never had Arya expected this.

“What have you done?” Arya murmured as the children approached her, dread and awe twisting into a knot around her heart.

“It is all right, Mother,” Alysanne offered, cuddling the green dragon against her heart the way Arya once held Nymeria as a pup. “Fire cannot kill dragons.”

As the black dragon on Rhaenys's shoulder opened its mouth and screamed, Arya knew with certainty her children were now the most dangerous and the most endangered people in all of Westeros.
Aegon arrived a moon's turn after the dragons hatched, and Arya met him on the dock, entering his embrace easily, clasping him as tightly as a child with a favorite toy. For the first time since ascending the throne, Aegon traveled only with a small retinue of people, bringing with him only the people he trusted the most: Rolly, Daenerys, Haldon, Ashara newly arrived from Starfall, Bran who had come at Arya's behest, and Rhaego, who had delivered Arya's message. All wore the soberest of expressions, and Arya shivered at the blatant fear she glimpsed in Ashara's lovely violet eyes.

They rode to the castle in silence, Nymeria and Summer loping before the horses, and she thought of her children as she last left them: Brandon wielding his blunted tourney sword as he fought invisible opponents, Alysanne roasting bits of meat over the fire to feed to the growing dragons, Aemon pouring over an ancient text Maester Marwyn procured for him, and Rhaenys cradling her black monster in her arms as she spoke to it as if it understood every word.

“What are you doing?” Arya asked as she fastened her cloak around her shoulders, genuinely confused by the amount of affection her children were showing the beasts.

“We have to train them,” Rhaenys replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Otherwise they could be dangerous.”

“No living man knows how to train a dragon.”

“As no living man knew how to train a direwolf,” Aemon softly countered, turning a page, “and yet you managed.”

Arya did not think she would ever be able to look at the three creatures her children now cherished as suitable companions; she remembered how much Catelyn disliked their wolves in the beginning, how she waited for them to turn, and even then Arya thought it was ridiculous. With the exception of Shaggydog, none of their wolves ever so much as nipped at someone without provocation.

But dragons were not direwolves, and a displeased dragon could set entire villages on fire. Flames may not be able to claim her trio, but they could certainly burn Brandon, Dragonstone, and Arya herself.

Alysanne called the dragon with green and bronze scales Vhagar; already when the creature exhaled, steam escaped the slits of its nose, and Arya was certain it would breathe fire before the others. Aemon's cream-colored pet was Meraxes, and Brandon teased his big brother that the dragon's golden horns were a crown; unlike its siblings, Meraxes would allow Brandon to pet him without snapping, though Aemon made Brandon swear he would not dare try to touch Meraxes without Aemon being present. Brandon agreed, of course; though fascinated, Arya knew her youngest was as frightened by the dragons as she was.

But it was Rhaenys's dragon which truly concerned Arya. With black scales and hints of red upon its wings, it did not surprise her that Rhaenys called the monster Balerion. Already Balerion was twice the size of its siblings, quick to snap at anyone who came too close; even Aemon and Alysanne did not try to handle Balerion, whose aggression was only increasing with every passing day. Though not able to yet take flight, Arya witnessed Balerion flapping its wings, managing a few inches off the ground before crashing down, shrieking in frustration before trying again.

If Vhagar and Meraxes made her uncomfortable, Balerion terrified her, and Arya did not know what she was going to do.
As they entered the castle, Arya heard rushing footsteps, turning her head just in time to see Brandon charging the group, shouting in excitement, “Father!” Arya watched as Aegon immediately bent, sweeping Brandon into his arms, and the familiar throb began in her heart at how happy Aegon made her son, how wonderful Aegon was with him.

“And have you come to see the dragons?” Brandon asked. Not waiting for an answer from anyone, he continued, “You can look but you can’t touch because they could hurt you. But if you ask Aemon, he might let you pet Meraxes.”

The children and their dragons were in one of the great rooms; Arya heard Ashara's sharp intake of breath at the sight as Duck murmured, “Seven save us.” Alysanne looked up first, grinning broadly as she set Vhagar on the floor to run to Aegon. Aemon and Rhaenys were slower moving; when Aemon went to embrace Ashara, she instinctively stepped back, fear in her eyes at the sight of Meraxes perched upon Aemon's shoulder, and Arya's son removed the dragon before hugging his adopted grandmother.

Rhaenys did not put down to Balerion to embrace Rhaego, the dragon puffing smoke from the slits of its nostrils in displeasure, but Rhaego did not pull back as everyone else did. Arya saw how wide Daenerys's and Aegon's eyes became at the sight of Balerion, and then Aegon's eyes met Arya's; no matter how much time had passed since they were man and wife, Arya could read the king like a book and knew he was concerned.

Bran was the only one who did not appear terrified, bending down to look at Vhagar and Meraxes, now snapping at each other with powerful jaws. When a laugh slipped past his lips, Arya felt irritation towards her younger brother.

“Is something funny?”

Bran grinned up at her, unrepentant. “Do you remember the story Old Nan used to tell us about what kept Winterfell warm?” Not waiting for a reply, he ghosted his hand over the dragons, feeling the heat they gave off at all times. “We'd have burned alive.”

Arya thought of Rickard Stark cooked in his armor before 500 men and wondered just how true those words were.

It was after midnight when Aegon came to her rooms. Arya had not pretended to herself he would not come; she did pretend the reasons she brushed her hair until it shone and donned a silk shift with delicate embroidery were something other than wanting to see arousal in Aegon's violet eyes. He did not knock when he entered, strolling into her chamber as easily as he once did when they shared rooms in Pentos, and, not for the first time, Arya missed having a husband, missed the easy companionship which came with it.

In a rare moment of softness, Rhaenys once asked Arya about her husbands. She knew her daughter's head was full of fantasies about wedding Rhaego, fanciful ideas of what it meant, and it amused Arya to think of her hard-headed, desperately realistic daughter indulging in girlish play. So, when Rhaenys asked Arya what she liked most about each one of her husbands, Arya replied honestly.

“Ned was sweet, mayhaps the sweetest man I have ever known. Renly could make me laugh quicker than anyone and was the first person to ever truly recognize I was capable of being more than just a lady. And your father...”

“What about my father?” Rhaenys prompted, and Arya could see the hints of childish adoration in
her daughter's beautiful face.

“Your father set me free. All the parts of me that everyone else thought were shameful or unladylike or improper, Aegon loved.”

As Aegon smiled tiredly at her as she rose from her dressing table, Arya knew it was still true; she would love Aegon Targaryen until the day she died.

“I had to tell Brandon and Alysanne a half-dozen stories before they'd go to sleep,” Aegon informed her, and Arya wondered if she should protest as he toed off his boots and tugged his tunic over his head.

She laughed. “They manipulated you. They both know they cannot have more than one story, two if it is their name day.”

Aegon frowned for a moment before shaking his head with a sad chuckle. “I do not know your rules.”

“You'll learn,” she replied, unconcerned.

“I would learn quicker if I did not have to wait months between visits. If you were at court...”

“If I was at court, none of us would ever know peace.” Thinking of the three dragons residing in the castle, she added, “Especially now.”

Aegon's face darkened as he nodded, stripping down to his smallclothes. “Dragons...” An incredulous laugh burst from his chest, irritating Arya for a moment before he quickly explained, “When we married, Connington told me I was mad, that I threw away the Seven Kingdoms for...Well, for a not entirely flattering term. And I said to him, ‘You don't understand, Jon. Our children are going to be dragons.’ But I never expected this.”

“It was terrifying,” Arya confessed in a whisper, voicing the shameful feelings which burned in her chest over the past month. “When I saw the wildfire, when I saw the children in the fire...I've never been scared of our children before but I was. I am.”

“Arya - “

“I'm not a dragon, Aegon,” she continued. “And when I see the children with their dragons, with things which aren't even supposed to exist anymore, all I can think about are the dangers here: to me, to Brandon, to the smallfolk, to the children once the realm discovers what they have - “

Aegon pressed a finger to her lips, stilling her voice. “Which is why you must come back to court. If I have men start construction immediately, the dragon pits can be repaired before they become too large to manage.”

“If the Tyrells find out our children woke dragons, especially now that you have legitimized them, I do not wish to think what they will do - “

“They would not - “

“They are as ruthless as the Lannisters, Aegon. They are just better at choosing the winning side.” Shivering despite the heat, Arya murmured, “Legitimized or not, they will always be seen in the eyes of those who support Jessa as bastards. And if I returned to court, you'd constantly hear about how unseemly it is to bring your whore to court.”
“What if I didn't bring my whore?” he challenged. “What if I brought my wife?”

Arya was shocked into silence for several moments before finally choking out, “What?”

“The Targaryen kings of old had multiple wives,” he reminded her, gently pushing a lock of her hair behind her ear. “Your marriage to Renly was dissolved years ago; you are free to wed again. You are the mother of my children, children whose blood is so Valyrian they woke dragons from stone. You belong at my side.” Voice softening, Aegon rested his forehead against her own as he breathed, “Our children belong on the Iron Throne.”

“Your daughters with Jessa come before ours in the line of succession.”

“Not if you are my wife again.”

The weight of Aegon's words began to truly sink in, and Arya understood exactly what was being offered to her, to her children. Jessa would technically be his first wife, the High Queen of Westeros, but this proposal would make Arya a queen as well; children from a legitimate marriage, *sons* from a legitimate marriage would come before any daughters of any marriage.

Aemon could be king. Brandon could be a knight of his Kingsguard. Rhaenys would have the status and position to wed Rhaego as she wished. Alysanne could make a good marriage with someone kind and gentle. It was everything a woman could want for her children.

And Arya was genuinely stunned to realize she *did* want it for her children. After seeing the toll the past seven years had on Rhaenys and Aemon especially, Arya wanted them to be recognized for the wonderful, intelligent people they were, wanted Alysanne and Brandon to know what it was like to have two parents. Yes, Jessa Tyrell and her daughters would still exist, and Arya truly did not wish them ill; as much as she personally disliked Jessa, Arya learned long ago how to recognize when a girl was raised to be nothing more than an extension of her family’s ambition. As for the little princesses Olenna and Elia, Arya would never wish Aegon's other daughters to be set aside, wanting to spare them the indignity her own children suffered.

“The gods gave our children dragons, Arya,” Aegon continued, his fingers tugging at the ties of her shift. “And dragons belong in King's Landing.”

“You would truly marry me again?”

Arya inhaled sharply as Aegon's hands slipped to the backs of her thighs, lifting her easily as he walked them to the bed. He set her on the center of the mattress, carefully peeling the shift from her body, his fingers ghosting down the front of her body. “I would marry you every day for the rest of my life.”

Robb once playfully accused her of being more of a man than he was, and sometimes Arya liked to believe it so; as much as she loved her big brother, Robb could be foolishly honorable, too blinded by abstractions to understand absolutes. But any ice in her veins always seemed to melt beneath Aegon's familiar touch, and she cursed her inability to be stronger.

She once heard Theon refer to love as “a woman's weakness,” but Arya suspected the weakness of love was not wholly a woman's problem.

“We're not too old, you know,” Aegon said afterward as they lied, sweaty and sated, amongst the tangled sheets.

“Too old for what?”
“More children.” Aegon's hand settled low on her belly, on the softness which would stretch to accommodate a baby. “We could have another, mayhaps even two if we are quick about it.”

“Easy for you to say when it is not your body which will be put through its paces.” Drawing patterns on his broad chest, she reminded him, “I nearly died with Aemon, and Alyssanne's birth was no easier. And Brandon was so large, he got stuck.”

“Did he?” Aegon was quiet for a moment, idly carding his fingers through her hair, before venturing, “You know I love him. I love him as surely as I love Aemon or the girls.”

“But?”

“But I don't want the last child you bear to be Gendry's,” he whispered, and Arya could hear the shame in his voice at the confession. If she was the woman she had been years earlier, she would have raged at his jealousy, but the anger of her youth had been replaced with far more rationality. She understood what Aegon was saying; that did not mean she necessarily liked it.

“That is a poor reason to have a child.”

“You don't want more?”

Sometimes she did. When Brandon was pushing her hands away, insisting he was grown and not a baby any longer, she felt an ache in her breast for how quickly all four of the children grew. But Arya had no want to wed again and her poor parents could not bear the weight of another shameful bastard birth, so Arya thought her childbearing days were over. Other days, however, she wanted to murder the children she did have, all so headstrong and certain they did not need their mother's counsel.

“I think it could be problematic,” she tactfully replied, turning her face up to look at him, hoping he could see the sincerity in her eyes.

There was something youthful and vulnerable to Aegon as he asked, “Do you love him still?”

With a sigh, Arya sat up, unashamed of her nudity. For a moment she struggled to find the words she needed before finally settling on, “There will always be a part of me who loves him. He was the first man I ever loved, the first man to ever...to ever want me.” Seeing the way Aegon flinched, she challenged, “Do you want to hear this or not?”

“Yes,” he begrudgingly replied.

“Sansa was always the perfect daughter: Mother's favorite, the beautiful one, the charming one. All she ever wanted was a handsome prince to marry and to be his princess. Sansa and I have always had a complicated relationship and we may not always like each other, but I did not want to take anything from her.” Arya laughed sardonically. “Of course I failed spectacularly at that.”

“Arya...”

“He hated it, being the prince, being the heir; he hated it as much as I hated being sent away to Dorne, sent away to Storm's End. For the longest time, he was my best friend. Sometimes he was my only friend. And when we came back from the Wall, it was just...”

“Just what?”

“Comforting. Familiar. And it seemed as if being honorable never got me anywhere anyway, so why not just give in? And I loved him, yes, but it was a love which made me feel guilty and ashamed
and...I've lost count of how many people have called me 'the king's whore' since you landed here, but I've never felt as if I was a whore until I slept with my sister's husband.”

“And yet you still love him,” Aegon interpreted.

“How can I not when he gave me Brandon? Would you prefer I hate him, that I vilify everything he is? He isn't a bad man; he is weak and human like the rest of us. We all made choices, good or bad, but I cannot look at Brandon and ever curse what brought him to me, to us.”

Silence stretched between them for an indeterminable period before Aegon declared, “Brandon is our son. I never want him told of Gendry Baratheon's role in our lives.”

“Gendry is nothing to him. Brandon firmly believes you are his father, that he is as Targaryen as his siblings.”

“Good.” Drawing Arya back down against him, he murmured against the crown of her head, “But I still think we are not too old for one more child.”

She chuckled softly, settling into the curve of his arm. “Let us handle the three dragons, four children, and this marriage proposal of yours, and then we will discuss it.”

In the end, there was no discussion. When Aegon, Duck, Haldon, and Daenerys returned to King's Landing, leaving Bran and Ashara on Dragonstone, Arya had already missed her moon blood. By the time the dragon pits were repaired and Aegon sent for them to come to court, Arya's stomach was straining against the fronts of her gowns.

“Are you certain this is what you want to do?” Bran queried the evening before they were to return to King’s Landing, his face folded in concentration.

“Which part?” she countered with a smile.

“Any of it.” Bran's Tully blue eyes were clouded with worry as he looked at her, and Arya remembered when he was still slipping through her windows, clambering up the walls of Winterfell with more grace than Arya possessed when she walked. There had been a time when she and Bran were as close as Rhaenys and Aemon; Arya missed that closeness.

“Bran…”

“You don't want to be queen,” he reasonably pointed out. “You want Aegon, but you've never wanted a crown. And I know for damned sure you don't want your children growing up in the Keep. I don't understand why you're doing this.”

“Of course you don't.” Arya sighed as the child inside her tumbled restlessly. “I love him. I know everyone has always doubted that, but I do love Aegon. He was the only man I ever chose for myself, and we were so happy once. The children are happier with him around, and they deserve to have a father. Jon told me once that life isn't always about what you want, and, yes, being queen isn't what I want, but if it's what is best for the children…”

“And Jessa Tyrell? How will you handle her?”

“As quietly as I can.” Trying to keep her voice as calm as possible, she lied, “Jessa Tyrell is not my enemy, and her daughters are my children's half-sisters. There is no need for us to be combative.”

Bran smirked. “You honestly believe that?”
“No,” Arya admitted with a frown, “but I need to keep saying it so Rhaenys believes it.”

“Meera has a theory our wolves are a reflection of our personalities.” Bran's small smile became a grin as he quipped, “Mayhaps it's true of your children and their dragons.”

“If that is true, Rhaenys and Balerion may level entire kingdoms.”

“No,” Bran argued gently. “There's rage in her, yes, but all Rhaenys wants is to get back what she lost: her name, her father, her inheritance, her title. And she's not stupid; she knows the Tyrells conspired to remove you as his wife, that they schemed very hard to make sure a Tyrell would inherit the throne. She knows what returning is going to bring.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“Aemon did.” Bran sighed. “He does not want to be king. You know that?”

The baby inside of her kicked hard, making Arya wince. “Yes, he mentioned it, but he did not say whether he plans to abdicate some day.”

“The throne would pass to Brandon then.”

“Yes.”

Bran's gaze and words became pointed as he drawled, “And wouldn't that be ironic?”

She ignored the implication of his words; instead she retorted, “Neither of my sons wish to be king. Unless this one is a son, Rhaenys will likely inherit just as she wishes, and she and Rhaego can rule the Seven Kingdoms.”

“I always thought the kingdoms would be better off if we returned to how things were of old, with each realm ruling itself.”

Arya smiled mirthlessly, her hands absentely stroking her belly. “As do I.”

It seemed as if all of Westeros was gathered on the streets of King's Landing to see her children and their dragons arrive at court. People gasped and shouted, cried for the Seven and took the knee; Rhaenys and Aemon both rode with Balerion and Meraxes flying alongside them, but Alysanne seemed unsure with the attention, Vhagar remaining perched upon her saddle. Brandon, who shared a mount with Bran, stared at the crowds with wide eyes, and Arya could feel hundreds of eyes falling upon her swollen middle, now much larger than it had ever been with the other children when she was only five moons gone.

“They will never love me,” Arya murmured to Ashara, who rode beside her.

“No,” Ashara easily agreed, “but they will love your children.”

“They will fear my children.”

“Sometimes that is better.”

“You think so?”

Ashara nodded gravely. “I have seen queens and princesses, kings and princes who were loved, and they died easily. Mayhaps a little fear would do the realm good.”
Arya was not sure if she preferred fear to love, but if fear would keep her children alive, she hoped the men and women of the Seven Kingdoms were terrified by them.

Rolly and Haldon met them at the entrance to the Red Keep, both men smiling pleasantly at the children and pressing kisses to Ashara's cheeks. As Bran helped Arya down from her horse, she caught sight of Loras Tyrell standing silently against the wall, his white armor gleaming, and there was something in his eyes which made Arya feel like a child again, like the girl he chastised on the banks of the Vale.

Sometimes Arya feared she would always be the awkward girl who knew she was not as pretty as Sansa, as charming as Robb, as intelligent as Bran, as fearless as Rickon, as honorable as Jon; even with a crown, Arya knew no one would ever respect her. There would be no songs written about good Queen Arya or tales told to maidens about her piety; she would always be the woman who broke her marriage vows, who played mistress to a king, who manipulated a king into naming her bastard as one of his trueborn sons. Stories would be told of Arya Stark, but none of them would be flattering.

This is not your place, Loras Tyrell's eyes seemed to accuse, and Arya wanted to say, I know, but she didn't. Instead she offered him a polite greeting which would have made Catelyn proud.

She repeated the vows the scowling High Septon said in the nearly empty Great Sept, resisting the urge to tug at the clasp of the Targaryen cloak hung upon her shoulders.

She forced kind words to slip past her lips when Jessa Tyrell made biting comments full of innuendo.

She said nothing at all when Viserys baited her.

For the first time in her life, Arya Stark was the very definition of a perfect lady, and she would remain that way until her official coronation, until her children's futures were sealed and no one could deny them what was theirs ever again.

A mother must be willing to do anything for her children.

It was the only lesson Arya ever learned from Cersei Lannister.

“I missed you at supper.”

Arya lolled her head towards the door to her chambers before shifting her cumbersome body to face Aegon. She tried to struggle to a sitting position, bracing herself against the headboard, but Arya sighed in frustration, remaining in repose. “I cannot walk down the stairs.”

Amusement twinkled in Aegon's violet eyes as he perched on the edge of her mattress. He pressed his hand against the huge swell of her belly, the child inside immediately kicking his palm. “Haldon said you were having some discomfort.”

“Discomfort? I am the size of a mammoth, my ankles have swollen to twice their usual size, my back aches constantly, walking to privy exhausts me, and the damned babe isn't set to arrive for another month!”

Aegon traced the arch of her stomach before venturing, “Haldon says there is a tea he can give you which will bring the baby sooner.”

“I do not want to risk the child. I just...” She pressed her cheek into Aegon's gentle hand. “I have never enjoyed being pregnant. Does that make me a terrible woman?”
“Yes, an absolutely horrible one,” he teased, caressing her cheek, her jaw, the line of her neck. “I cannot believe you do not enjoy sharing your body with a tiny creature who makes you grow fat and achy with every passing moon.”

“How are the children today?”

Aegon urged her onto her side, his hands beginning to firmly knead her back. “Well, Brandon got into a bit of trouble; one of Joffrey's sons said something rude to him, and Brandon split his lip. Alyssanne spent the day with Olenna and Elia, and, though I doubt she'll ever admit it, I think Jessa has a soft spot for her. Aemon trained in the yard before studying with Haldon. As for Rhaenys...”

“What?”

“She spent much of the day in the pits,” Aegon reluctantly provided. “The guards there say she is training Balerion.”

“What sort of training?”

Apparently she can now get Balerion to breathe fire upon command and...” Aegon sighed, and Arya prepared for whatever was going to come next. “She is teaching him to accept a rider.”

Arya whipped her head around, eyes bulging. “She plans to ride him?”

“I do not know what she plans,” he admitted, the regret and sadness heavy in his voice. “No matter how hard I try, I cannot regain her trust. She speaks to me only when she must. I invited her to have midday meal with me, just the two of us, and she answered questions but nothing more.”

“I think she's just waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“Waiting to see if she gets to keep this.” Arya inhaled sharply as the baby powerfully kicked her ribs. “Rhaenys never gets to keep anything: her life in Vaes Dothrak, her life with the wildlings, Winterfell, Dragonstone, you. She's careful.”

“She's you.”

Arya was not sure why she bristled at the assessment, but she did. “She is not.”

He kissed the nape of her neck, featherlight and moist. “Rhaenys may look like my mother, but whenever I look at her, I see you as you were at Storm's End: angry, guarded, unrepentant, hungry.”

“Hungry for what?”

“For everything.” His lips found the curve of her shoulder, and Arya sighed in pleasure despite herself. “It's what I love the most about you, you know. Other women, they settle, they come to terms with things, they let their fathers and their husbands choose for them, but you... You do not rest until you get what you want.”

“That sounds like a horrible way to be.”

Aegon chuckled, one hand carefully cupping her tender breast, his thumb gently tripping over her hardening nipple. “No, it's wonderful. You're the strongest person I've ever known, and, if our daughters have to be like anyone, I am glad it is you.”

She smiled as she twisted her head to look at him. “You know I am far too big to fuck you, yes?”
“Yes, my love.” He kissed her for a long moment before whispering, “I just want to sleep here with you. Is that alright?”

Arya never slept easily, but sleep came even harder for this pregnancy. There was no position she could find comfort in, no way to ease the constant ache of her body; as Aegon slumbered peacefully beside her, Arya twisted and turned, trying to find even passing relief but nothing came. Finally, she lurched her way to her feet, her lower back screaming from the added weight of her belly, and stumbled to the window seat, staring out at King's Landing.

There were few men out at so late an hour and those who were looked to be drunk, returning from gambling and whoring. In the distance, she could make out the ships bobbing in port, and the sounds of dragons were audible even from across the hills. The child inside of her turned and flipped, and, as Arya grasped her stomach, she felt wetness between her thighs.

Reaching beneath her shift, her fingers came away with blood and fluid, and Arya felt a fission of panic start in her chest.

“It's too soon. “Aegon! Aegon, wake up!”

Everything began to happen so fast, Arya was scarcely prepared. Aegon immediately sent for Haldon and Maester Marwyn, helping Arya into bed as labor pains began to rip through her middle. Soon both maesters, Daenerys, Ashara, and Rhaenys were in her chamber, Ashara and Daenerys helping Arya out of her shift, Rhaenys grasping her mother's hand even as the blood seemed to drain from her daughter's face. Under different circumstances Arya would have laughed; she had seen Rhaenys draw blood on any number of boys in the training yards, but something like birth was obviously scaring her.

“When you were born,” Arya panted, squeezing Rhaenys's hand, “I labored for two days. I was certain I was going to die. This is how it goes.”

Rhaenys swallowed before murmuring, “You almost died birthing Aemon. You slept for so long.”

Arya shouted as a strong pain tore through her, and Ashara began to mop at Arya's brow with a cool cloth. When the pain passed, she gasped, “If something happens to me, you will look after your siblings. Promise me.”

“I promise,” Rhaenys breathed, looking so much younger than her fourteen years. “I promise, Mother. I will care for them.”

She did not know how long she labored before the baby finally slipped from her body, shrieking with the indignation of being ripped from the womb. Arya lifted her head, trying to see the baby, when another powerful contraction struck. As she cried out, Maester Marwyn returned his attention to her, leaving Haldon to tend the baby. Rhaenys and Ashara both were demanding answers when Marwyn declared, “There's another baby!”

This one came easier, entering the world with a few mewling cries rather than screams. Arya could barely focus her eyes, so bleary from pain and exhaustion; Rhaenys's grip on her hand did not budge, and, for a moment, Arya closed her eyes, trying to relax as Marwyn handed the bloody baby to Daenerys.

“They are small but healthy,” Haldon reported as Marwyn disposed of the afterbirth, one of the newborns cradled in his arms while Daenerys cradled the other.

“What are they?” Arya rasped, wincing as Ashara and Rhaenys helped her to rest against the headboard.
“A boy and a girl, Your Grace,” Daenerys answered with a kind smile. “The boy was hiding the girl. She's a bit smaller than he is.”

Her arms trembled as Daenerys and Haldon gave her the babies, but Arya resolutely held them, staring down into their little faces. The boy looked as Aemon had, silver-haired and violet-eyed, a Targaryen prince through and through; he was the one with the powerful lungs, the one who continued to fuss. It was the girl who surprised her, the silent bundle who weighed next to nothing; her newborn daughter stared up at her with Tully blue eyes, a light dusting of auburn hair upon her head, her bow mouth pursed as if in contemplation.

“She looks like Grandmother Catelyn.”

“She looks like Sansa,” Arya corrected in a choked whisper, pressing kisses to the tops of both babies’ heads.

When Aegon entered the chamber a few hours later, when Arya and the babies were rested, the bedding cleaned, Arya took one look at his wide grin and teasingly chastised, “Do not look so satisfied with yourself.”

“Twins,” was all he said, his grin stretching even further across his cheeks as Aemon, Alysanne, and Brandon filed in behind him.

“What are we going to name them?” Alysanne queried as she carefully cradled the girl baby, Rhaenys keeping a careful hand beneath the baby’s back for added support.

Arya and Aegon smiled at each other at Alysanne's proprietary tone; these babies belonged to all of them.

“What do you think we should name them?” Aegon countered, carding his fingers through Arya's hair as she leaned against him.

Aemon, who held the boy, said, “I think he should be Daeron.”

“Then she should be Daena,” Rhaenys chimed in, smiling down at her baby sister with an expression of tenderness Arya had not seen on her face for years.

In that moment, with her husband cradling her in his arms, their children all around them, Arya felt a more complete happiness than she ever had in her life.

The letter came a month after the twins were born, a month during which Arya remained abed while she healed. She was half out of her mind when Ashara came to share midday meal, the parchment in one hand. Arya instantly smiled upon seeing her, grateful for the company, but her smile faltered upon seeing the expression on Ashara's face.

“What is it? Are the babies - “

“The babies are fine,” Ashara rushed to assure her, taking a seat in the chair beside her bed. Looking down at the parchment, she said, “A letter has arrived for you from Casterly Rock.”

Arya's heart stopped for a moment before managing, “From my sister?”

“I do not know, Your Grace. I have not broken the seal.” Her face darkened before entreating, “Do not read it, Arya. Whether it is from Sansa or her husband, do not read it. It will only bring you trouble.”
She took the letter, studying the handwriting on the front; it was not Sansa's flowery script but a bold hand, a man's hand. For a moment Arya considered doing exactly what Ashara asked, casting the letter into the fire and being done with it. But if the letter was from Sansa, transcribed to a maester, Arya wanted to hear what her sister wanted; if the letter was from Gendry, Arya did not know what she wanted.

Bracing herself, Arya broke the seal and immediately found her heart in her throat.

Your Grace,

I write to you now, not only as a loyal subject of King Aegon VI, but as your good-brother. Though it has been many years since we have spoken, I hope you will hear this request and understand it is meant with kindness for my lady wife, your dear sister.

Since the death of our son Aeron and the loss of our boy in the womb, my wife has been stricken with sadness. She has never taken to the Westerlands, and I fear Casterly Rock, the scene of our greatest losses, only saddens her further. The last time I saw Sansa truly at peace, she was at court in King's Landing. It is also the place where my daughters, now women-grown, were happy as well.

I most desperately request that Your Grace, in her infinite kindness, will take on your sister as a companion at court and my daughters as your ladies. I understand your kingly husband holds no love for me, and I would not ask his forgiveness by being allowed to return to court. If you will grant my wife and daughters to come, I will remain in Casterly Rock, continuing to serve as the Warden of the West, a faithful servant to the Iron Throne.

I thank you for considering my request. Congratulations on the birth of Prince Daeron and Princess Daena. As always, I pray to the gods, old and new, for the continued health and well-being of you and your children.

With gracious thanks,

Lord Gendry Baratheon
Lord of Casterlyn Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Warden of the West

“It is not from your sister, is it?” Ashara asked, her face thick with knowing.

“Gendry asks that I take my nieces on as ladies in my service and have Sansa as a companion. He will remain in the West if Aegon agrees as he...is not welcome here.” Arya set the letter down, hating how her hand trembled, hating even more how formal the letter read, as if she was not his oldest friend, as if she had not bore his son.

“Should I summon Haldon to send a reply?”

Arya shook her head. “No, I need to speak to Aegon first.” She laughed mirthlessly, and Arya was embarrassed to find her eyes wet with an emotion she could not identify. “She hates me, you know.”

“I am sure that is not true.”

“No, it is.” She wiped at the tears on her cheeks but, to her frustration, they continued to come. “Even before...She said she did not think she could ever forgive me for what I did. And then...And then the gods took both of her sons. Sansa did everything she was ever supposed to do, and she lost her sons while I got to have three. How is that fair?”

“You lost three babes of your own,” Ashara reminded her, brushing her hair back from her face as if she was still a child, “and you, of all people, know how unfair life can be. Good people suffer and
bad people prosper, and there is no rhyme or reason. I do not know your sister well, but I cannot imagine, from all I have heard, that Lady Sansa would wish ill upon your children.”

And then something broke inside of Arya, and she was sobbing, her entire body shaking with the force of her emotions. “I loved him so much,” she wept, wrapping her arms around Ashara as the older woman held her. “He was meant to be mine, and I ruined everything!”

Ashara shushed her, rocking her back and forth, and Arya clung to her, the same desperate, clawing pain of her youth clutching at her heart. She did not know why she was reacting this way; she did not for a second doubt the depth of her love for Aegon and the children they made together. But Gendry was always in her heart, her head, her dreams and nightmares, and, what was more, with every passing day, he was present in Brandon. Stark look or not, Targaryen name or not, her son was a Baratheon through-and-through; it vexed her to no end how a boy who had never met the man who fathered him could be so much like him.

“Breathe, child,” Ashara urged, kissing her brow. “It will be alright.”

“I just want it to stop hurting.”

“It never will,” she stated with authority. “For the rest of your life, when you see him, think of him, or hear from him, you will ache with all the things which could have been. And it does not mean you love your husband less or favor his child over the others. It is a woman's burden, and we all bear it in some way.”

Fighting to compose herself, Arya managed, “Do you feel this way towards my father?”

“Every day, my queen.” She kissed Arya's brow again. “I think of how much we loved each other once. I think of Allyria and how I longed to raise her alongside your lord father, who wished to wed me. Sometimes I even imagine you are the other child I should have had with Ned Stark. Imaginings can be a comfort when you need them to be so long as they remain imaginings.”

“I love Aegon with all of my heart, I swear I do. He makes me happy, and he loves our children better than most fathers do. But knowing all of that, how can I still, after all this time, mourn Gendry?”

“Because love does not make sense. Even the maesters of the Citadel know that.”

At supper, when Aegon came to her chambers to dine, Arya said nothing, handing him the letter and patiently waiting for a reaction. She had no doubt that the moment the raven from Casterly Rock arrived in the rookery, Varys knew of its presence, a presence he likely made known to Jessa and her men. There were never any secrets in the Keep, even less amongst kings and queens, but, with the arrival of Daeron and no child swelling in Jessa's belly, the Tyrells were seeing the Iron Throne slip further and further away from Highgarden. They needed a scandal, and Arya was determined to deprive them of one this time.

“Do you wish for Sansa to come to court?”

“If that is what she wants.”

“Your nieces, they might have a positive influence on the girls? They were quite polite if I remember correctly.”

“Yes, Sansa made sure they were the epitomes of ladylike behavior.”

Aegon sighed, setting down the parchment and studying her face. Finally he asked the question Arya
knew he wanted to ask in the first place. “Do you want him to come?”

“I want peace. His presence would not bring that.”

He snickered with an arch of his eyebrow. “Careful, Arya. You are starting to speak in the non-answers of a queen.”

Huffing at his words, Arya snapped, “Then here is an answer which will be suitably clear for you: I think it is hypocritical to ban a man from court when you also keep him as your Warden in the West. You do not trust him in your castle but you entrust the Westerlands to him, lands which provide you with healthy incomes and would be integral in defenses. If you were smart, you would never have dismissed him from the small council and replaced him with Garlan Tyrell, and furthermore, if you were truly smart, you would know he is the best friend you've ever had in the Seven Kingdoms.”

She saw fire start to blaze in her husband's eyes. “My best friend? That is what you call a man who bedded my wife?”

“He helped you hold the realm even after you stripped him of his crown, put his grandfather and uncle to death, and imprisoned his mother. In case you've forgotten, you were not quite so beloved when you first landed, and you would not have had such an easy transition if not for him.”

“Then I am to forget what happened between you two?”

“No, you are to remember what it was like then, how desperately unhappy we all were. All of us erred then, and if I can face Jessa Tyrell every day and call her my sister-wife, surely you can grant a bit of kindness to a man so he does not have to send his wife and children away while he rots in the Rock.”

He sighed, rubbing his face tiredly. “I fear if I see Gendry Baratheon again, I will punch him squarely in the face.”

“You think I do not wish to do the same to Jessa every time I see her? The only satisfaction I get is knowing I have sons and she does not.” She managed a smile, trying to jape. “You've turned me into a silly woman.”

Aegon scoffed. “You? If I had a hundred men like you, I could conquer any land I chose.”

She reached out, gently cupping his cheek. “I have given you five beautiful children and married you twice. You love Brandon as surely as you love Aemon or Daeron. There are no more reasons to hate.”

“I shall have Haldon send word to Casterly Rock inviting the Lord and Lady Baratheon as well as their daughters to court.” For a moment Arya thought the subject was done, reaching for her wine, when Aegon gently caught her wrist, drawing her attention. “Brandon is my son.”

“Yes.”

“I do not want him to ever know otherwise.”

*You do not want him to love Gendry as he loves you.*

Arya agreed, knowing it was what needed to be said if she wanted to see Sansa and her girls, if she wanted to begin to undo the damage she caused eight years earlier.

Enough years as a lord's wife had taught Arya how to lie very well.
Alysanne doted upon her baby brother and sister, constantly underfoot in the nursery, slipping away from Septa Maeve in order to tend to them. Always the sweetest of Arya's children, she could not fault Alysanne for bringing cheer to the nursery, showering Daeron and Daena with kisses and songs; Aegon teasingly referred to her as “the little mother,” a nickname which began to stick throughout the castle.

It was by accident Arya found Alysanne, Olenna, and Elia in the nursery, staring down into the cradles at the sleeping babes. She froze as she saw Jessa waiting patiently in a bright, yellow gown, looking far more beautiful than Arya ever had; of all the accusations Arya wished to level at Jessa Tyrell, to call her ugly would never be one of them.

“They are beautiful babies,” Jessa offered, her voice devoid of inflection.

“Thank you.”

“I know what joy his children bring to our king.” Finally her voice broke as she said, “And a son is a great blessing on our house.”

For the first time Arya truly looked at Jessa Tyrell. Instead of the scheming, ambitious girl she usually saw, Arya glimpsed what she suspected was the true Jessa: still young, undoubtedly pressured by her father and grandfather to produce a male heir, High Queen in name but well-known to not be the preferred wife of the king. Arya now realized just how much younger Jessa was in comparison to herself and Aegon and how untried she likely was in matters of the heart.

She was barely older than Rhaenys when Mace brought her to court to put in Aegon's path. What sort of a man trades his blood away like a bloody horse?

“You will have sons,” Arya found herself saying.

“Mayhaps,” Jessa allowed, and there was something hard in her eyes then as she turned them upon Arya, looking her square in the face for the first time since they first met. “But even if I bear him a dozen healthy boys, he will still love yours more.” Bitterness and disgust twisted her pretty features then, her next words killing Arya's goodwill towards the younger woman. “Even your bastard will have a place before my sons.”

“All of my sons belong to the king;” Arya gritted out, trying to maintain a calm demeanor as Alysanne and her half-sisters continued to cluck over the babies.

“As bedding kings is your specialty, I am certain that is true. Rightful kings, usurpers who call themselves kings, you have a talent for ensnaring both alike. Had I your talent, I would not be sharing my husband and my title, and my House would not curse me for being unable to hold attention.” Casting an eye towards the children, Jessa turned to face Arya fully, her face as fierce as her uncle Loras's when he jousted. “I underestimated you.”

“Most do.”

“They say you are more man than woman, more warrior than lady. Everyone speaks of how well-behaved you are now, but the memory of your past deeds lingers still.”

“No doubt encouraged by House Tyrell.”

“I thought you were a stupid, savage slut,” Jessa murmured plainly, smiling pleasantly so as not to disturb the children, “the sort of woman who pays no mind to honor and beds her sister's husband wantonly. But, as I said, I underestimated you. You kept your belly full of dragon, used your pretty
daughter to seal the Dothraki to your cause, had your little stag worship the king right into legitimization, and then, as if that was not enough, brought dragons back to court. Why, Tywin Lannister himself could not have hatched a better scheme.”

“How dare you - “

“I dare because I am still High Queen,” Jessa rushed on, “and my daughters have just as much right to this world as yours. I am not your sister; I do not hand over what is mine and bite my tongue. My daughters are legitimate princesses of the Iron Throne, and no one will ever be able to dispute that. Mayhaps I have not supped with wildlings and ridden with a khalasar, but make no mistake: I will fight as fiercely for my children's rights as you have done for yours.”

“I do not wish to deprive Aegon's daughters of anything.”

“Your very presence does that.” She shook her head, wrinkling her face distastefully. “You think me a fool, a pretty but useless flower, but I am not. I know he prefers you, in his bed and in his life; he respects you and your opinions on the realm. I am younger and prettier, but it is you he gets more children on, you he positions at his right hand. All I am is the wife he cannot be rid of, as it would cost him my family's wealth and strength. I am the pity of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Arya looked at her for a moment before coldly retorting, “What would you have me say?”

“I have no want or need for your words, Lady Stark, but you will have mine.” Jessa leaned forward, her face mere inches from Arya's as she hissed, “My children have as much dragon's blood in their veins as yours do, and succession can be a tricky business.”

Rage boiling deep in Arya's chest, she retorted, “Then I suppose the dragons will have to dance some day.”

Across the room, Jessa's daughters played with Arya's daughters, as happy and peaceful as any sisters could be.

“Why are you so nervous?”

Arya lifted her eyes to look at Brandon's face, her hands still working on tucking his undershirt into his breeches. She knew he was too old for this and could certainly do it himself, but, as usual, Brandon would not listen to Septa Maeve, requiring Arya's intervention.

“What makes you think I am nervous?”

Brandon lifted his hand, pressing his index finger to the furrow between her brow, stroking gently as if to soothe it. The gesture made Arya melt, catching Brandon's wrist and pressing a kiss to his palm. He stooped slightly, resting his forehead against hers, and he whispered, “I'll protect you, Mother.”

Tears sprung to her eyes as she pulled Brandon tightly against her, cradling him as if he was as small as Daeron. She loved all of her children, but, even now, Arya still viewed Brandon as wholly hers. Since arriving in King's Landing, Brandon was never far from Aegon, always wanting to run and spar with the other boys before chasing after his “father,” but at night, he still wanted Arya to tuck him in, still required Arya's touch to gentle him.

“My love for you is deeper than the sea. Did you know that?”

Brandon nodded solemnly before burying his warm face into her neck. She inhaled the scent of him – soap from his bath, sweat from the rising heat, the lingering whisper of the North – and held him a
bit tighter as a tear slipped loose from the corner of her eye. Somewhere in the Keep, Sansa, Gendry, and their daughters roamed, having arrived around midday. Arya wanted to go to Sansa, to speak to her in private, but Ashara urged her to wait until everyone was rested, until they would all sup together.

In less than an hour's time, Gendry would look upon his son for the first time, and Arya was absolutely terrified.

“Mother?” Brandon ventured as she helped him into his newest surcoat, a bright red velvet lined in black.

“Yes, my love?”

“You look very pretty today.”

Arya smiled, glancing down at the purple silk of her gown, carefully tailored to emphasize the roundness of her breasts and camouflage the weight she had yet to shed from her hips and stomach following the birth of the twins. With her hair pinned and curled, tumbling over her shoulders in a dark waterfall, Arya felt beautiful, and she tried to convince herself it had nothing to do with Gendry.

“And you are a handsome, little prince.”

Brandon's face clouded for a moment, mouth twisting as if unsure whether or not to speak. Finally he said, “Tywin says I am not a true prince.”

Arya did not particularly care for any of Joffrey's sons, but Tywin, who was only a few years older than Brandon, was known through King's Landing for being a brutish, spoiled boy. “Tywin is an idiot.”

His serious expression did not falter as he continued, “Tywin says Father isn't really my father, and everybody knows it. He says you lied.”

“Is that why you split his lip two moons ago?”

Brandon nodded. “He called you a bad name.”

“People do that sometimes.”

His small fingers tangling in the long, gold chain she wore, he whispered, “I am not a dragon.”

She could not bring herself to lie, not then. Cupping his face, staring into the eyes so much like her own, she whispered in reply, “You are my brave, strong wolf.”

Brandon was quiet for a moment, fingering the heavy amethyst which hung from the chain, before asking, “Can I still call Father 'father'?”

“Of course.” Pressing a final kiss to his forehead, Arya rose, taking Brandon's hand. “Will you escort me to supper?”

Brandon grinned, wide and happy, and Arya tried not to flinch at how much he looked like his true father. “Yes, Mother.”

He was never a chatterer, her Brandon; though not as taciturn as Aemon, Brandon never felt the need to fill the silences. It was one of the many traits Arya shared with him, an appreciation for quiet. As they approached the dining hall, Brandon seemed to sense her increasing anxiety, squeezing her
hand in a playful, syncopated rhythm, and his giggle when she responded in kind lessened some of the weight on her shoulders.

“Aunt Arya!”

Whipping her head around, Arya’s heart stopped as she found her sister's family approaching the hall.

Elinor, Rose, and Alisa all had Sansa’s auburn hair, though Alisa’s was darker; all were tall and porcelain skinned, and Arya found it hard to believe none were betrothed yet. Whereas Elinor and Alisa sank into polite curtsies, Rose stepped forward and embraced Arya, making her smile; Arya did not like the constant reminders of her new station in life, and curtsies still only served to embarrass her.

Sansa was as beautiful as Arya remembered her to be, though there was sadness in her blue eyes now, small lines bracketing her mouth and eyes; they were all getting older now, no longer children, and Sansa was as dignified as their lady mother in that moment. Her smile, soft and small as it was, made Arya's chest puff with hope, and she grinned in reply, unable to school her face.

It was a struggle not to stare at Gendry, who held Sansa's elbow with a blank expression. He was still as tall and barrel-chested as he had been years earlier, still impossibly handsome even with half of his face obscured by a dark, well-kept beard. His eyes shone brightly as he took in the sight of Arya and Brandon, and it was only when Brandon smiled at his aunt and uncle that Arya saw something subtly break in Gendry's expression, his eyes closing briefly before slipping back into a stony mask.

“Look how big you have all gotten,” Arya forced herself to chirp pleasantly. “I hardly recognized the lot of you!”

“You look different as well,” Elinor offered, her voice prim but a hint of acid beneath the words.

“She is the queen now,” Brandon volunteered helpfully, drawing the eye of all in the corridor, “so she has to wear fancy gowns, not like at Winterfell.” Smiling up at Elinor, he asked, “Have you ever been to Winterfell?”

Despite herself, Elinor returned the smile. “Not since I was your age. Is Old Nan still there?”

Brandon nodded immediately, his smile becoming a full-blown grin. “She tells me stories about the other Brandons and Mother when she was young. My father promised we could go visit when Rickard gets married. Mayhaps you can come with us!”

Arya laughed, ruffling his hair as she suggested, “You may want to introduce yourself to everyone first, my love.”

Remembering his manners, he recited just as Septa Maeve taught him, “I am Brandon of House Targaryen, Prince of Summer...Summer...”

“A polite boy indeed,” Sansa softly said with a slightly pained smile. “I am your aunt Sansa, this is your uncle Gendry, and your cousins Elinor, Rose, and Alisa. We are of Casterly Rock.”
Brandon turned his eyes upon Gendry, studying him, and Arya felt her stomach twist in panic before Brandon finally said, “You used to be the king.”

“In another life, yes.”

“What are you now?”

Before Gendry could reply, Bran entered the corridor, greeting everyone heartily, and the awkwardness of the initial meeting was over as they filed into the dining hall. As her children and Sansa's laughed and told stories of the Westerlands and Winterfell, traded descriptions of lions and dragons, Arya almost convinced herself everything could be as it once was.

Then she caught Gendry stealing glances at Brandon, and Arya remembered just how uncertain this situation was.

It was an old habit, sneaking down to the kitchens for wine and sweets in the dead of night. Except, of course, now that she was queen, it was significantly harder to sneak, especially with a member of the Kingsguard at her door. Tonight it was Ser Daemon Sand, Arya's favorite guard after Rolly, the only one who would laugh and jape with her, the one who permitted her a bit more freedom than the rest. He took one look at her in a pair of Aegon's breeches and a soft tunic, her hair unbound, and quipped, “There is the Lady of Starfall I remember so well.”

“Shut up,” she replied good-naturedly, leading him through the darkened corridors.

She piled Daemon's arms high with a loaf of bread, blackberry preserves, and a jar of candied nuts before grabbing two skins of Dornish strongwine. The great hall was cavernous with only two people in it, making Arya shiver as she and Daemon sat at one of the long tables.

“I am not to drink while I am guarding you,” Daemon reminded her as she poured two cups. Sliding one of the cups to him, she countered, “I shall not tell the Lord Commander if you do not.”

They drank and nibbled upon the sweets, Arya asking questions about Godsgrace and his last visit to Dorne, when they heard voices approaching. Daemon got to his feet, his hand falling to the hilt of his sword, but Arya did not move, draining her cup and pouring another. Her limbs were starting to loosen from the strength of the wine, an indulgence she had not partaken in since her last reign as queen, and, in the three days since Sansa and Gendry arrived at court, all Arya wanted and needed was to relax.

Despite her best efforts, she had not been able to secure any length of time with Sansa in private. Almost immediately Jessa and Margaery claimed her for their little court, and, whenever Arya approached her big sister, she made some excuse as to why she could not talk. Not wanting to push the issue, Arya resigned herself to seeing Sansa only at meals.

She made certain her path never crossed with Gendry's.

The doors to the hall opened, and Arya was genuinely surprised to see Aegon, Gendry, and Rolly entering. Even through the fog of wine, Arya could see Aegon's bottom lip was split and there was a purple bruise forming around Gendry's left eye, and it made her scoff in disbelief.

“Did you two fight?”

Both of the men started at the shrill sound of her voice, clearly not expecting to find her getting drunk in the great hall, but Aegon recovered first, smoothly correcting, “We had a discussion.”
“With your fists?”

Gendry ducked his head as if embarrassed but Aegon only laughed, taking a seat at the table and grabbing one of the skins. Ser Daemon remained standing, at attention alongside Rolly, both of the armored men silent against the wall, and Gendry took his seat, carefully filling Daemon’s abandoned cup with the strongwine.

“I do not know why you prefer this to wine from the Arbor,” Aegon remarked.

“I suppose I have never learned to appreciate what the Reach offers as much as you, Your Grace,” Arya drawled, eliciting a small smile from Rolly. “Besides, I like all things Dornish. A holdover from my time there, I’m sure.”

“You never much speak of your time there.”

Arya shrugged. “I haven’t much to tell. I rode horses, danced, lost three babes, and utterly puzzled my poor husband, Gods rest his soul.” She drained her cup again, taking the skin from Gendry to refill it. “You’d have liked Ned.”

“He was a good man,” Gendry softly agreed, and, for a moment, Arya was little more than a child again, stripped nearly nude by court with Gendry saving her from grasping hands, presenting to her to sweet Ned Dayne. “He deserved better than the end he received.”

“He deserved better in many respects.” Swirling the wine about her cup, she leveled her gaze upon Gendry. “How is your mother?”

Confusion and surprise shone in his eyes, but Gendry answered, “She is as well as she ever is. Sansa keeps her contact with the girls limited, and she fights with Tyrion as often as possible, but I am certain Cersei Lannister will live to be 200-years-old if bitterness and anger can sustain a person.” His voice faltered as he added, “She was never the same after Jaime was beheaded.”

“I liked Ser Jaime,” Arya pronounced, using the title Aegon stripped from the Kingslayer before putting him to death for the murder of his grandfather. “When the court came to Winterfell, he found me stick fighting with Bran and told me I was a natural with a sword.”

“He liked you as well. He told me once, if Robb had half the balls you did, your brother could declare himself King in the North and rule half the realm.”

“A treasonous thing to suggest,” Aegon pointed out mildly.

“Considering you executed my uncle for treason, you can hardly be surprised.”

“It was different in Robert’s court,” Arya said, the edges of her words starting to slur from the wine. “You do not know, for you were not here, but Robert was not concerned with treason, so he was kinder about things.”

“My court is not kind?”

“Your uncle is a mad man,” she proclaimed with a wave of her hand, “who likes to terrorize people for his own pleasure. Mace Tyrell and his passel of sons put themselves before the realm, and the people bear no love for rich men concerned with making themselves richer. Baelish is a lech who plays upon men’s insecurities like Aemon plays his harp, and Varys...Well, the gods only know where his loyalties lie. Any man in the realm I would trust stays far from your court, which is what makes it unkind.”
Aegon exhaled sharply with a mirthless chuckle. “And I thought you were honest when you were sober.”

“If you want pretty words, go find Jessa. I'm sure she'll stroke your...ego as much as you'd like.”

A bark of laughter escaped Gendry before he could catch it, and then they were all laughing, the strangest mixture of light and sadness. Gendry's broad shoulders bounced as Aegon's eyes closed with the force of his laughter, and, for a few moments, Arya felt like the girl she used to be, the one who laughed more than she cried, who talked more than she plotted. It was an odd feeling, the sense of comfort which came with being in the presence of the two men who knew her best.

When the laughter tapered off, Aegon declared, “We are behaving as fools.”

“When haven't we?” Arya countered, pouring another cup of wine.

A week into their stay at court, Arya entered the twins' nursery to find Sansa standing near one of the windows with Daeron in her arms, smiling down into his small face with such tenderness it brought tears to Arya's eyes. She was unsure how long she stood in the doorway watching her sister and her son, but, when Sansa noticed her, she turned as red as her hair.

“Theyir nurse required the privy -“

“You needn't explain.”

Sansa's gaze dropped back to Daeron, who was slumbering soundly. “They are beautiful babies. The girl is so small, she seems a doll, but this little prince will rule everyone.” Her chin began to tremble as she murmured, “When Aeron was born, I made him a beautiful blanket for his blessing ceremony. Mayhaps I could make one for Daeron as well?”

“I would like that,” Arya managed, her voice breaking as she recalled her poor nephew. “I was always hopeless with embroidery.”

Sansa looked up from Daeron, tears now coursing down her cheeks. “You always seem to best me. Queen, a half-dozen children, a husband who adores you...I have been measured and found wanting, it would seem.”

“Sansa...”

“I would have been a good queen, fair and just. I would not have been like Cersei; I'd have helped Gendry make a kinder realm.” Her tears fell harder now. “My son would have been an excellent king.”

“I know.”

Sansa crossed the room, placing Daeron back in his cradle, wiping resolutely at her cheeks. Composing herself, she rasped, “I see so much of both of you in him.”

“He is purely Aegon -“

“I did not mean the baby.” Tucking an errant lock of auburn hair behind her ear, Sansa confessed, “When my son was born without breath in his lungs, I hated you so fiercely. I hated your son so fiercely. Why should you get to have a healthy boy when I did not? And then, when the sickness took Aeron, I was certain I was being punished.”
“For what?”

“For wishing ill on Brandon. For wishing ill on you. For...for going to Queen Cersei all those years ago and begging her to help me make sure Gendry would not put me aside for you.” Sansa’s tears returned as she declared, “I did not consider either of you when I went to the queen. All I could think about was being given to Joffrey, and he is...You do not know, Arya. You do not know what sort of cruelties he’s capable of, even back then. There was a serving girl...I would have sold you to the Stranger if it meant I did not have to be Joffrey's bride.”

Arya said nothing, recognizing that Sansa was purging herself of years’ worth of regret and pain.

“I tried so hard to be a good wife to Gendry and love him as Mother said I would grow to do, but there has never been passion between us. Even at our best, we were only friends who shared a bed when duty required it. I always knew he longed for you, and he always knew I longed for another as well.”

“Who?” Arya blurted out, so genuinely startled by the revelation, she could not contain herself.

Sansa smiled wanly in amusement, a flush of pride in her cheeks. “You always thought me so dull, you could not imagine me having secrets of my own, could you?” Using the back of her hand to brush away tears, she evaded, “He was a man in service to House Lannister, far too low-born to ever become anything more than a trusted friend, but I loved him dearly. Mayhaps if I had your courage...”

Trying to think of the Lannister men at court when they were younger, Arya nearly missed her sister's next words.

“He wrote you letters after Brandon was born, and I stole them from the rookery like a common thief. I was so angry and jealous...” Meeting Arya’s gaze, desperation shining in her wet eyes, Sansa admitted, “He wanted to claim Brandon as his son and have him fostered at Storm's End with Renly. I could hardly get him to speak to me, and there he was, writing pages upon pages to you, begging for the chance to be a father to your son, calling you his 'dearest love,' and I - “ Springing forward, clasping Arya's hands in hers, she pleaded, “Do not hate me. I was not well then, I was half-mad from grief and still furious over the affair, and I did not want to hurt your boy. I swear it the gods, old and new, Arya, I did not mean to hurt your son.”

It was the largest role reversal of Arya's life, listening to Sansa beg her for forgiveness. And finally, when Arya found her voice, she was surprised to find she was not angry or bitter, not longing for the past or aching for missed opportunities; she was simply tired of fighting.

“The past is the past. I would rather just move forward.”

As she embraced Sansa beside her slumbering babes, Arya prayed for peace.

The problem was, Arya did not think it existed anymore.

Gendry found her a few days after her conversation with Sansa in the nursery, a hint of wildness in his eyes which Arya had not seen since before she wed Renly. She was playing cyvasse with Rhaenys, who was increasingly becoming more irritated at losing, Aemon plucking out a song upon his harp when Gendry entered her solar without knocking; startling both of her children with his brazeness.

“I need to speak with you.”
“Can it wait?”

“No.”

Arya was acutely aware of Rhaenys's and Aemon's eyes upon her, and she forced herself to remain calm as she asked them to please give her and Gendry privacy. Aemon rose easily, smiling at his uncle, but Rhaenys eyed them both suspiciously as she left, her dark gaze pressing down upon Arya like a weight. When the door closed, leaving them alone, Arya stood, walking away from the cyvasse board and crossing to the window, needing to focus her attention anywhere but on Gendry.

“Sansa told you about the letters,” Arya guessed, watching as Brandon and Alysanne frolicked in the gardens with Olenna and Elia under Septa Maeve's watchful eye.

“Yes.”

The amount of tension in one word made Arya's spine stiffen at what was to come next. “Gendry...”

“Did you know you were pregnant before you left court?”

“No, we were halfway to Winterfell before I realized what was happening.” Smiling as she watched Brandon shimmy up an apple tree out of the septa's grasp, she added, “He's my Northern boy.”

For several minutes Gendry was quiet, and Arya almost thought he was going to leave; she was not sure if she wanted him to do so or not. Eventually he managed, “Why did you let Aegon claim him when you know he is mine?”

Bristling, Arya turned, glaring at him. “Because he isn't yours! Because he can never be yours! Did you think letters would change that? Did you think you could send a raven and it would make everything better?”

“Of course not! What we did wasn't right, I know that, but that does not change - “

“What did they say?” she challenged. “You tell me what was in those letters which would have made any difference at all!”

There was true anger in his face now, the infamous Baratheon temper making its appearance, and Arya gasped when he crossed the room, seizing her by the shoulders. “No, nothing ever makes a difference with you, does it? You make all the choices, to all seven hells with the rest of us!”

“Let go of me,” she spat, trying to push him away only to gasp as she found herself pressed against the wall, her arms pinned against her side, Gendry's chest flush against hers. Arya could feel every inch of his body against hers, but there was nothing sexual about it; for the first time in her life, she was genuinely afraid of Gendry.

Breathing hard, jaw tightly clenched, Gendry glared at her for a moment before the anger seemed to drain from his body. Arya inhaled sharply as he rested his forehead against the wall beside her head, her body instinctively forming to his. “We made him,” Gendry sighed against her ear, his warm breath making her shiver. “You and I, we created Brandon out of nothing, and that...”

She ducked beneath his arm, slipping away, needing the space before she did something stupid and reckless. Fidgeting with her gown, Arya mumbled, “He needed a father. Aegon loves him, and I thought...” Voicing cracking with long-buried hurt, she sputtered, “I did what I had to do!”

“He's my son,” Gendry said, his voice so broken, Arya could not bring herself to look at him. “I wanted to be his father. I wanted you.”
“You can’t have me,” she softly argued. “And would you rather have Brandon know the truth, that his parents are selfish, adulterous oathbreakers, that his birth was a shame upon both of our houses?”

Gendry pinned her with his watery blue gaze, stealing her breath. “I suppose that has always been the difference between us, Arya. I have never been ashamed of loving you.”

For hours after he left her solar, Arya sat and pondered the true reasons for her shame.

The last person Arya expected to find tending to the twins was Rhaenys. Dressed in a pair of soft leather pants and a painted vest, her eldest child could easily have passed for Dothraki, especially with the lingering scent of horse upon her clothing. Arya knew Rhaenys spent the morning riding with Rhaego and Daenerys, a bit of information relayed to her by Jessa, whose judgmental tone made it perfectly obvious what she thought about a princess behaving so wildly. She was fairly certain a responsible mother would have told her daughter she needed to begin to conduct herself as a princess should, but riding horses was certainly preferable to riding dragons, so Arya did not voice her concerns.

Daena was cradled in Rhaenys's arms, and Arya paused in the doorway, smiling at the sound of Rhaenys softly singing in the Old Tongue; Arya recognized it as the lullaby Dalla and Val used to sing to Alysanne when she was an infant, and, as it always was when Arya thought of their time at the Wall, she found herself missing the wildlings and especially Jon Snow.

“You have a beautiful voice.”

Rhaenys jerked in surprise, jostling Daena and causing her to fuss for a moment, before regaining her composure. “You shouldn’t sneak. It's unseemly in a queen.”

Arya smirked as she crossed to the cradles, lifting a smiling Daeron into her arms. “Hardly the most unseemly thing I have ever done. And it does not change what I said: you have a beautiful voice.”

“Aemon is not the only one of us with talent, you know,” Rhaenys playfully teased, but Arya could hear the undercurrent of stung pride within the words.

“Do you think I believe Aemon is the only one with talent?”

“He is your favorite,” Rhaenys answered matter-of-factly, transferring Daena to her other arm, “and always has been. Aemon is talented, Alysanne is friendly, Brandon is spirited, and I am the troublemaker.”

“That's not what I think.”

“Liar.”

“It isn’t,” Arya calmly insisted. “You and Aemon have different talents. Aemon's talents run towards music and histories, but you are more skilled at languages and weapons. And Aemon is not my favorite.” She grinned mischievously. “Obviously I prefer Alysanne.”

Rhaenys laughed in surprise, her voice high and light, and it made Arya laugh as well; she could not remember the last time she and Rhaenys had just sat and laughed together. When the laughter tapered off, Rhaenys turned her dark eyes upon Arya and said, “Before the war, I remember how much you used to laugh. Even at the Wall, you laughed. You don’t laugh so much anymore.”

“Neither do you,” Arya countered.
Rhaenys was quiet for a long beat, staring down into Daena's face, before confessing, “I thought everything would be better when we came back here. From the time we were declared bastards, all I could think about was getting back here, getting back what was ours. I thought legitimization...waking the dragons...I thought it would matter.”

“And now you think it doesn't?”

“I do not know.” Rhaenys clenched her jaw, frustration evident in her features, before managing, “I will never be queen; three brothers saw to that. I cannot be a maester or a septon; I cannot be a knight or take the black. All I can be is a lord's wife, popping out children as my husband wishes and pretending as if I have the slightest interest in managing a household. There is no place for a woman like me in the world.”

Arya felt a peculiar tightness in her throat as she recalled having once had a similar conversation with her father. “You are Aemon's dearest friend. He would find a place for you on the small council - “

“I do not want a place found for me. I want a place of my own, something no man can ever taken away from me.” There was something achingly vulnerable in her face as she implored, “Surely you, of all people, understand that.”

“I do,” Arya confirmed, gently untangling Daeron's fist from her hair.

“Viserys wants to marry me off to some Greyjoy of Pyke to find the Iron Islands to the throne,” Rhaenys revealed. “The only reason the council is not pushing the issue is because of Balerion. They fear what would happen if I was not here to tend him or if I set him loose.”

“Your father will never force a marriage upon you.”

Tears now glistened in Rhaenys's eyes. “But he will not grant me the marriage I want either. Haven't you heard?” When Arya shook her head, Rhaenys managed, “Rhaego is to wed Elinor Baratheon and become the Lord of Casterly Rock.”

“What?!”

“Nothing is to be gained from a marriage between Rhaego and myself,” she recited, and Arya knew she was repeating the words of whoever told her of the betrothal. “The Iron Throne requires a better hold in the Westerlands, and the Lannisters are the richest family in the Kingdoms. Rhaego will become Warden of the West when Elinor inherits.” Usually so unflappable, Rhaenys broke completely as she sobbed, “Father promised to make me a fine marriage with a gentle, honorable man.”

Arya rose immediately, setting Daeron in his cradle, lifting Daena from Rhaenys's arms to set her alongside her twin, and then enfolded Rhaenys in her arms. She could not recall ever seeing her daughter so forlorn, her heartbreak so evident it made Arya cry along with her. Rhaenys's hands clutched at Arya's gown, burying her face in her mother's lap, and Arya rocked her as if she was as small as her infant siblings.

“Why can I never have anything I want?” Rhaenys whimpered, sounding impossibly young.

It took hours before Rhaenys significantly calmed, Arya tucking her away in her chambers, whispering promises to her. By the time Rhaenys fell asleep, exhausted from her sorrow, Arya was nearly blind with rage towards Aegon and his council, and she refused to play the polite queen any longer.

She found Aegon in the small council meeting room, Gendry, Viserys, Mace Tyrell, Garlan Tyrell,
Varys, Petyr Baelish, Haldon, Daenerys, and Rhaego seated around the table, and Arya hated each and every one of them in that moment.

Pinning Aegon with her glare, she demanded, “How could you do this to Rhaenys?”

“Arya,” Aegon began, a hint of nervousness in his eyes.

“You have utterly destroyed her, and for what, gold?”

“This is not your concern,” Viserys began, and Arya whirled so quickly, she saw both the prince and Lord Baelish recoil in surprise.

“If you ever presume to tell me what is and is not my concern in regards to my children, I will make good on the promise I made you in Pentos, do you understand?” Turning her attention to Rhaego, she asked, “How could you agree to this? After all the promises you made her, after all you have been through with her, how could you agree to this betrothal?”

Rhaego said nothing, a look of shame so fierce upon his features, he was nearly crimson.

“No one is seeking to hurt Rhaenys,” Gendry offered softly. “That is not why the contract was made.”

“What a comfort that will be to her,” she spat sarcastically, returning her gaze to Aegon. Softening her tone, she pronounced, “You have broken your daughter’s heart. I hope all the gold in Casterly Rock was worth it.”

“Arya!” Aegon called after her, but Arya did not stop, heading immediately to the rookery, finding Maester Marwyn tending to the ravens. She grabbed a few pieces of parchment, scribbling out quick notes, sealing them with a direwolf rather than a dragon.

“I need you to send this one to Maester Samwell Tarly at the Citadel, this one to Mance Rayder on the Gift, this one to Allyria Dayne of Starfall, and this one to Lord Renly at Storm's End. You are not to tell anyone of these letters, and, when replies come, they are to be brought directly to me. Can I trust you with this, Maester Marwyn?”

The maester nodded immediately. “My first loyalties are always to you and your children, Your Grace. You can trust me.”

Arya was not sure if that was true.

She was about to find out.

It took nearly a fortnight for the responses to arrive at the Red Keep, a fortnight of Rhaenys's shadowed eyes, Aemon's seething anger at Rhaego, and confusion from Alyssane and Brandon. Arya found herself unable to even look at Aegon, so sickened by his betrayal, and even Sansa seemed disgusted by the way her daughter had been turned into the source of Rhaenys's sorrow. If anyone knew what it was like to be stripped of your autonomy and used a piece in the game of thrones, it was Sansa and Arya Stark.

She gave the letters from her friends to the flames, transforming the words into smoke.

Another fortnight was required to make the necessary arrangements, to use gold to buy passage, to use the threat of dragons to ensure silence. Only when everything was in place did Arya gather her four eldest children in the godswood, away from prying eyes and Varys's little birds; Nymeria
prowled between the trees, better than any posted guard. She would go to Bran and Ashara later, tell them what she had done and what she would ask of them, but that was not for now.

When she was ten, Arya learned to play cyvasse from one of her father's bannermen. She watched the men play before one of the Glovers finally taught her, teaching her so well she won an entire purse from one of the Karstark boys before they left Winterfell. Even now, Arya remembered well what the most important lessons of the game were.

“You never try to strike until all your pieces are in place,” Whoresbane Umber told her, drinking heavily from a mug of beer, “and, no matter what, you always protect your dragons.”

Arya was not well-skilled at the game of thrones, but she was unbeatable at cyvasse.

“Something is wrong,” Alysanne predicted as she and Brandon sat upon a large exposed root, her nose wrinkling in anticipated distaste.

“Not precisely,” Arya corrected, aware of how closely she was being watched by Rhaenys and Aemon. “I wanted us to have a family meeting.”

“Then where's Father?”

“Father isn't coming.”

Alysanne's face fell. “Is he sending us away again?”

“No, your father is not sending you away,” Arya sighed, sinking to the ground, unconcerned with dirtying her gown. Rhaenys smiled as she did the same, but Aemon remained standing, leaning with a casual grace against the trunk of a tree. “Our lives have changed a great deal in the past two years, for better and for worse. Your whole lives, everything has been in a constant state of change, and that is my fault, your father's fault. I had hoped we could have peace here.”

“We were not built for peace,” Rhaenys stated.

“You were not built for war either.” Tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, Arya admitted, “I never wanted this life for any of you. Princes and princesses, their lives are not songs; I thought I could spare you from unhappy truths, but none of you are children, not anymore.” Looking them all in the eye, Arya proclaimed, “You all deserve lives you wish to lead, not lives which are chosen for you.”

“What's going on, Mother?” Aemon asked.

“You all are leaving King's Landing tonight.”

Immediately they began to protest, but Arya held up her hands, silencing them. Taking a deep breath, she explained, “You have done nothing wrong, and your father wishes to keep you all at court. This is not being done because of anything other than my choices.”

“Have we been bad?” Brandon queried, his lower lip quivering.

“No, my love, you have been wonderful, but...You wish to be a knight, yes? You want to be Ser Brandon the Brave?” Brandon nodded immediately. “Well, before you can a knight, first you must be a page and then a squire. Lord Renly of Storm's End is going to take you into his service.”

“We aren't going to the same place?” Alysanne asked, a frantic edge to her usually calm voice. It was only then Arya realized her children had never been separated, not once in all their lives.
“You are going to go to Starfall with Grandmother Ashara,” Arya assured her, quick to let Alysanne know she would not be alone. “Lady Allyria and her daughters are very excited to host you, and you will love Dorne.”

“What about Vhagar?”

“He'll stay here for now, but, when you are a bit older, we can see.”

“And where will we go?”

“You will go to the Citadel to earn your chain; Maester Sam of the Night's Watch is forging more links there, and you will serve as his apprentice. Afterward, if you wish to take the black, your uncle Jon will be happy to have you.”

Aemon's quiet smile said more than any words ever could.

“What becomes of me then?” Rhaenys inquired.

Arya reached over, taking her hand and squeezing it tightly. “I am sending you somewhere a woman can be equal to a man and make her own way. Does that sound like something you would be interested in?”

Rhaenys grinned. “I suppose I can stomach it.”

“You are going North.”

“Back to Winterfell?” she asked, confused.

“To the Gift.” As realization dawned in Rhaenys's eyes, Arya confirmed, “Mance would never turn away a good spearwife.”

“I will not go without Balerion.”

She was silent for a moment before neutrally reporting, “The pit guards say Balerion fights against his chains harder than Meraxes and Vhagar. Chains...They can become so fragile. And I have even heard whispers that Balerion is large and strong enough that he could carry a rider...if someone was skilled enough to ride, of course.”

“Of course,” Rhaenys echoed with a slight nod of her head.

“What about you and the babies?” Alysanne murmured. “Where will you be?”

“We'll stay here.” Motioning both Alysanne and Brandon forward, embracing them tightly against her chest, she pressed kisses to the crowns of their heads, tears starting to swell. “And we will come to visit, and you will visit us as well. We'll write letters, and think of how many adventures you will have.”

“But why can we not tell Father we're going?” Brandon murmured.

“Because sometimes we have to do things for ourselves, like when we were at Winterfell.”

“You remember, Brandon,” Rhaenys chimed in. “We protect the pack.”

“Isn't Father our pack?”

“No,” Aemon answered, surprising Arya with the steadiness of his voice, how much like a man-
grown he appeared to be. “Your pack are the ones who are always there for you, who protect you. Father is the king, and he owes his loyalty to everyone; our loyalties are only to each other.”

“Only each other?” Brandon echoed.

Aemon clasped Brandon's shoulder firmly, and Arya was startled to see how old they both looked in that moment. “Only each other.”

Arya explained the rest quickly: they could not pack much, must now say goodbyes to anyone, should carry on as if it was a regular day. Only Alysanne looked wholly unsure, and Arya remained with her in the godswood while the others went to pack their things.

“You do not want to go?”

Alysanne's grey eyes were wide and wet with tears as she whimpered, “I do not want to go without you.”

Bending down so she was eye-level with Alysanne, she whispered, “If I tell you one of my most deepest secrets, will you keep it?” Alysanne nodded, sniffing. “Allyria Dayne is more than just my friend; she is my half-sister. Grandfather Ned is her father as well.”

“Truly?”

“Really and truly,” she swore, wiping at Alysanne's cheek. “So whenever you miss me so much you cannot bear it, all you have to do is give Allyria the strongest hug you can, and it will be like you are hugging me.”

“But what will you do when you miss me?”

“I will visit Vhagar and make certain he is doing well in your absence.”

“You're scared of Vhagar.”

Cupping her face, Arya vowed, “For you, my girl, I can face any fear.”

Alysanne slipped her arms around Arya before breathing softly in her ear, “Bad things are coming.”

“I know,” she whispered in reply, squeezing her tightly.

Aemon left first, hiding his silver hair beneath a hood. He said his goodbyes to Alysanne and Brandon in their chambers, but Rhaenys saw him to the stables, where Marwyn was waiting. Arya watched as Rhaenys and Aemon clung to each other, both of them crying unashamedly, and, when they pulled apart just far enough to brush their mouths together, Arya though of Aemon, sick at the Wall, and how Rhaenys kissed him in defiance of Sam's warnings of disease, wanting to make sure her beloved brother knew he was still loved.

Their voices were so hushed, Arya could not make out their words, but both were crying in earnest, clasping each other with the sort of desperation Arya recalled from her own pained parting from Jon all those years ago.

Finally, resolutely, Aemon stepped back towards his horse, smiling weakly at both Rhaenys and Arya. “I will write often. And I will visit when I can.”

Both Rhaenys and Arya watched as Aemon disappeared down the road, and Arya irrationally worried he may not have packed his harp, the only thing which seemed to give him pleasure lately.
Alysanne left next, lower lip quivering as she clung to Rhaenys and Brandon, Ashara gently unwinding her hands from Arya’s cloak. It was only after Brandon gave her his wooden sword and Rhaenys tucked one of her jeweled hairpins into Alysanne’s locks that Alysanne finally boarded the ship which would take her to Dorne.

“Allyria and I will take wonderful care of her,” Ashara vowed, and Arya nodded, embracing her surrogate mother with a desperation nearly as strong as Alysanne’s.

“I have no doubt.”

When Alysanne’s ship was out of sight, it was time for Brandon and Bran to board the black sailed ship which would carry them to Storm’s End. Unlike his older sister, Brandon did not cry, but Arya could easily read the anxiety all over his face. As Brandon assured both Arya and Rhaenys he would be brave and mind Lord Renly, Rhaenys knelt before him, unfolding his small hand and placing the silver direwolf pin gifted to her by Robb in his palm.

“What are our words?” she murmured.

“Winter is coming.”

“House Stark and House Baratheon have always been the closest of friends.” Arya’s throat tightened as the full weight of Rhaenys’s words hit her squarely in the chest. “You shall be the pride of both.”

Brandon beamed beneath his sister’s words, but he positively exploded in excitement when Arya removed the small sword from beneath her cloak, carefully wrapped in fur, tucked away for nearly ten years but carefully preserved for this day.

“When I was nine, your uncle Jon went to the Wall, and he gave me this before he left. He had Mikken make it for me, and I had to keep it secret since ladies are not supposed to fight with swords. It’s called Needle.” Carefully placing the pommel in Brandon’s hand, she said, “This is a bravo’s blade, not a greatsword. It’s designed for speed, not strength.”

“I’m fast and strong,” Brandon reminded her, eying Needle with absolute awe.

“But that means nothing without control.” Turning Needle so it was tucked into his belt, she ordered, “Take your lessons in the Stormlands very seriously, and you will be the grandest knight the Seven Kingdoms has ever known.”

As Brandon promised to do so, bravely walking alongside Bran onto the ship which once carried his mother and siblings from the Vale to the Wall, Arya softly asked Rhaenys, “How long have you known?”

“The stag is rutting with the wolf.” She shrugged. “I didn’t understand it then, but...I’ve heard things over the years, and I put it together.” Arya was caught off-guard when Rhaenys leaned forward, hugging her tightly. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For letting me choose.” Rhaenys pulled back, and, for the first time, Arya saw herself in Rhaenys’s black curls and brown eyes. “You were right, you know.”

“About what?”

“When Maester Aemon died, I told you everything would be alright when we saw Father again. And you said to me, ‘Your father is no more magical than I am, Rhaenys. No one can fix what the gods
broke.” The confusion must have shown on Arya's face for Rhaenys explained, “The gods made us women, and no one can fix that. Princess or not, dragon or not, at the end of the day, all I will ever be is a useless daughter.”

“Aegon does not think you useless. Before you were ever born, he said you would be a warrior greater than Queen Nymeria.”

“And I will,” Rhaenys stated, “but not here, not for the Iron Throne.” The resolution on her face faltered as Rhaenys's hand rose to play with the dragon pendant she never took off, the one her father slipped over her head when she was still little more than a babe. “He loves the realm more than he loves us.”

“No,” Arya began to argue, but Rhaenys rushed on, not waiting for confirmation or denial.

“He will never find the balance. He - “ Her voice broke but she quickly recomposed herself, gritting out, “Mayhaps it will be different for Daeron and Daena. They will not know anything but this; they will be prepared. I thought this was all I ever wanted.”

“And now it isn't?”

“Ser Jorah once told me wanting can be a dangerous thing. And I think he is right.”

“Why is that?”

“When has wanting ever brought us anything good?” Holding her head high, her eyes focused on the Red Keep rising before them, Rhaenys announced, “Wanting is for men, for weak and greedy lords and princes. They can have their wanting. The wildlings have the right of it anyway.”

“The right of it?”

“They take: land, riches, husbands. When they desire something, they try to make it theirs, and, if they fail, they failed fighting and, if they succeed, it is truly theirs. So I can walk through fire and ride a dragon, so my father is the king; what good is it? The man I love will still wed my cousin, the throne which should be mine will pass to one of my brothers, and I will always be what the smallfolk whisper about: too bold, too crass, too foreign. This is not the life I was promised, but this is also not the realm I was promised.”

Voice hoarse with emotion, Arya choked out, “You should ride to the pits alone.”

Rhaenys nodded in understanding, a smirk upon her lips. “The next time you see me, I shall be Queen of the Wildlings.”

“And a wonderful queen you will be.”

Arya managed to make it into the Holdfast before completely breaking down, sobbing so hard she sank to the floor, unable to catch her breath. By the time the shouts began to rise in the air, the screams of “dragon” echoing from every direction, Arya was not sure she had the strength to stand, to face what she had done.

But she was a Stark of Winterfell, so she simply carried on.

Aegon came to her a few hours after Rhaenys escaped on Balerion's back, sending the entire countryside into a panic. Arya sat primply on her windowsill, staring out into the dark at the
Blackwater, and did not turn when he entered, did not turn when he asked in a pained voice, “Where are our children?”

“Daeron and Daena are in the nursery.”

“Our other children.”

She finally turned, her face deliberately flat. “I sent them away.”


“Because I do not want them to be like us. I want them to be happy and have a chance at living ordinary lives away from this snake pit.” Rising, forcing herself not to flinch from the violet eyes blazing with suppressed rage, she explained, “I only agreed to go to Dragonstone because I thought it was what was best for the children; they all missed you so fiercely. And when the dragons hatched, I agreed to wed you so it would protect them. When the twins were born, I was absolutely certain everything would be wonderful now, but it wasn't.”

“Because Rhaego is going to marry Elinor?” he scoffed. “He is far too old for Rhaenys anyway - “

“It isn't solely about the betrothal, though it is certainly plays a part.” Arya threw up her hands. “She loves him, Aegon. They have been planning their wedding for the gods know how long; I am certain she gave her maidenhead to him, and you conspired to marry him off to her cousin. Princess or not, what man is going to want another man's leavings? Better yet: why should our daughter have to settle for a man she does not passionately want? Why can she not have chosen her husband the way we chose each other?”

“We need a firm alliance with Casterly Rock - “

“You traded your daughter's happiness for the realm,” she cut in, “and you opened my eyes to what I was doing to the children.” Rushing on as Aegon opened his mouth to protest, Arya stated, “Rhaenys was born to lead men in battle and in peace, but you wanted to put her in a gown and let her rot. Aemon does not want to be a king; he wants to be a maester. Alysanne has such a gentle heart, she was constantly being weighted down by the treacheries here. And Brandon...Well, you know what is said about Brandon just as I know that no highborn lord was going to take him on as a page or a squire, not when he is not a true prince.” Grasping Aegon's hands, she entreated, “Don't you see? We were wrong. They were wrong. Their blood may be that of kings and queens, but that is not what they want. Daeron and Daena, we can raise them here, raise them to be a lord and lady, but - “

“How could you do this without consulting me? To do it in secret, to smuggle our children from King's Landing...How can I forgive you?”

“I did not do it to hurt you. I did it for our children, to give them happier lives than we have lead.” Reaching up, cupping his cheek, she stated, “You know things are not how we planned them to be. Sacrifices have to be made, and I will not let our children be those sacrifices any longer.”

“I have never - “

“Rhaego's betrothal was the first; you sacrificed Rhaenys for Casterly Rock. What would come next? Every day we get further and further from the people we wanted to be, and I will not let the children suffer for it. They've known other, happier lives; I just wish to give them that again.”

“They would never agree to that. The legitimization, the line of succession, Rhaenys and Aemon fought for it - “
“And they learned the price is too high!” Arya sagged in exhaustion, murmuring, “The price is always too high.”

Aegon said nothing, staring at her for an indeterminable time, before pronouncing, “Until I receive word of our children’s safe arrivals to wherever you have sent them, you are confined to your rooms. Someone must be present when you visit the twins.”

As he turned to leave, Arya said his name, stilling him for a moment. She recoiled at the anger and disgust on his face, the overwhelming sense of betrayal radiating from his every pore.

“I have nothing else to say to you, Arya.”

Aegon would never come to her room again.
The Broken Pack

So much could change in six years. Wars could rage, dynasties could tumble, people could turn to
dust; a half-dozen years wasn't so many over the course of a lifetime, but it could be enough to alter
that which a person knew, that which was familiar. It was enough time for the past to find a person,
to bring forth the unpleasant truths a person worked so hard to hide.

It was all Arya could think of when she laid eyes upon Brandon for the first time since leaving for
Storm's End.

He was four-and-ten now, impossibly broad and taller even than Renly; his brown hair had darkened
even further while in the Stormlands, the strands nearly black now, a messy fringe falling into his
Stark grey eyes. There's a thin layer of stubble on his cheeks, but it does not hide the cut of his jaw,
the sharpness of his cheekbones, and Arya's breath caught as she saw the way the eyes of the young
women of court followed Brandon and Renly as they entered her solar.

*He's a man grown now,* Arya realized with a start, sadness settling in her body. *The little boy I sent
to Renly is gone.*

She held him too tightly when she embraced him, squeezing as if he was going to turn to smoke in
her hands; her hands could not even meet as she stretched her arms around him, and she gasped
when Brandon lifted her straight off of her feet with a booming laugh which immediately brought to
mind Robert Baratheon.

“I'm going to be here for, at least, a moon's turn, Mother. We don't have to do all of our hugging
now.”

Arya pulled back, clasping his face between her palms as she playfully scowled. “Just because you're
bigger than me now doesn't mean I can't still take you over my knee.”

“You never took me over your knee.”

“Mayhaps I should start.” She stretched up on her toes, brushing her lips against his cheek. “I've
missed you so much.”

The bold, cocky man before her seemed to melt away as his handsome face softened, and Arya
could see her boy again, the one who dreamed of knighthood and would hide from his siblings how
much he liked to be cosseted. “I missed you too.”

“Did no one miss me?” Renly quipped.

Arya was startled at the white in Renly's beard now, but his embrace was as solid as ever. She had
exchanged innumerable letters with her former husband since he began fostering Brandon; he
detailed her son's progress and told humorous stories. The only thing Renly had not done was bring
Brandon to court; the invitation for her to come to Storm's End was always open, but each time she
spent letters to request Brandon come to visit, Renly would make excuses of how it was not a good
time. She understood why now; it was painfully obvious her son had not a drop of Targaryen blood
in him and was, in fact, clearly of the Baratheon line. But Renly could not refuse an order from
Aegon to bring his son to court to celebrate Olenna's betrothal, and Arya knew the next few weeks
were going to be uncomfortable for them all.

“Oh, I missed you every day, my love,” Arya teased. “Tell me: did you long for me as well?”
“I could hardly sleep these past six years,” Renly played along. With a grin, he clapped Brandon on the shoulder and declared, “I haven’t done too poor of a job raising him up, have I? A true Stormlord, he is.”

Brandon beamed under the attention. “Has he told you the news yet?”

Arya looked to Renly, who shifted uncomfortably. “The news?”

“I’m going to be his heir and take over Storm's End.” As Arya's face fell, Brandon quickly explained, “I’m not going to be king anyway; the throne was always supposed to be Aemon’s, and, if not, there’s still Daeron. I like the Stormlands, and I’ll be a good lord.”

Head spinning, she shook her head. “No, your father - “

“Which father?” Brandon interrupted before catching himself, his face instantly folding into remorse. Arya fumbled for a moment, trying to formulate a response, when Brandon asked in a gentler tone, “Is Alysanne here yet?”

“Her party isn't arriving until later in the evening.”

The silence stretched between the three of them, no one knowing how to bridge the outright challenge of the long-accepted lie of Brandon’s parentage; after several long minutes, Arya suggested Brandon bathe and shave before the evening’s feast. He nodded, brushing a parting kiss to her cheek before disappearing out the door to his old room. It wasn't until he was far from earshot that Arya managed, “Seven hells.”

“I know,” was all Renly replied.

No one was ever going to believe her son was a dragon, not when he was so obviously a stag.

When Aegon declared that a betrothal had been arranged between little Olenna and Edmure Tully's oldest son, Arya knew most mothers would have been enraged; both Rhaenys and Alysanne were older than Olenna, and custom would dictate they be betrothed first.

But Rhaenys had not so much as sent a single letter since leaving King's Landing upon Balerion's back, and Alysanne politely turned away every suitor Aegon put forth, always claiming she was not ready for a marriage. Though Arya and Aegon could scarcely agree on anything any more, the one promise he had never wavered from was the one he made concerning their daughters; he would never force them to wed, never send them away the way Arya had been sent away.

Her relationship with Aegon had never recovered from sending the children away, though, if she was honest, Arya had not tried to right it. She knew he still thought it was due to Rhaego's marriage to Elinor, but it was so much more than that; it was a smart decision to wed Rhaego to the heiress of Casterly Rock, a way to end the enmity between Houses Lannister and Targaryen. And Arya also knew that, even if Rhaenys had married Rhaego, she never would have been fully satisfied as a wife and mother; mayhaps it was a terrible thing to confess, but Arya knew it never brought her true satisfaction. She loved her children, loved them fiercely and loved them well, but there was also resentment buried in her chest: towards Aegon and his long-ago desperation to get a child on her, towards herself for allowing herself to fall into the roles she raged against when she was younger, towards the children who kept her rooted in place.

No, Arya never tried to mend her broken marriage because what she had always suspected turned out to be true: she did not have the stomach for ruling. She and Aegon had lied to themselves long enough; he could never make her a queen, and she could never make him into someone who did not
want a throne.

The past six years had certainly not be easy. With her separation from Aegon and only the twins to tend to, Arya often found herself painfully lonely and often unbearably bored. Though she never thought she would say it, Sansa had become a gift from the gods. Sansa was so skilled at the politics of court, at understanding what people wanted and how to give it to them, Arya could only marvel at it; she had always thought Sansa to be so useless, pretty and pleasing without a thought of her own in her head. It wasn't until seeing Sansa performing as the perfect lady that Arya realized Sansa often felt the same way she did; she simply didn't verbalize her distaste.

“You have no idea what it was like at court towards the end of Robert's reign,” Sansa said one afternoon when Arya mentioned her poise. “Robert preferred women to be seen and not heard, and Cersei always thought I was slow-witted. The only tolerable one here was Lord Tyrion, and he was just as looked down upon as I was. I learned fairly quickly to keep my mouth shut and a smile on my face.”

“How could you stomach it?”

Sansa looked at her in a combination of confusion and amusement. “You really don't see it at all.”

“See what?”

“Just how indulged you've been.”

“Indulged?” she repeated, bristling.

“You wanted to ride horses and play at swords, so Father turned a blind eye. You didn't want to wed Edric Dayne, and Father was prepared to break the contract. You marry Renly, and he left you to run Storm's End and toil as you wished. You run off with Aegon, and you get to spend years playing in the Free Cities and the Dothraki Sea. You go to Jon, and he shields you from the war you played a part in starting. Your children are declared bastards, and, rather than be shamed, Father takes you all back to Winterfell. You bear Gendry's child, and Aegon legitimizes him to spare you the shame of it. You send away the heirs to the Iron Throne without consulting the king, and rather than punish you, he keeps you on as his queen and insists you still be treated with respect.”

Arya shifted, strangely embarrassed to hear her life laid out so plainly.

“You know nothing of what it means to be a lady in our world because no one has ever treated you as one.” Returning her attention to her needlework, Sansa declared, “I kept my mouth shut or else Robert would have bloodied it. You'll never know what that's like.”

“You make it sound as if nothing bad has ever happened to me.”

“Most of what has is the result of poor choices you made.” Sansa lifted her blue eyes, and Arya was suddenly struck by how much she looked like their mother in that moment. “You are my sister and my queen, and the love I bear you is true. But you have had an easy and better life than most women in the realm, and your continued insistence that somehow you have been victimized by it all is ridiculous.”

There was far more to Sansa than Arya ever believed, and Arya found herself following Sansa's lead at court, trying to imitate her older sister's behaviors. She would never be beloved at court, especially with Jessa serving as the ideal queen, but Arya adapted; after all, it was what she did best.

The only true hurt which plagued her was Gendry.
It was easier to forget what she felt for her old friend when he was tucked away in the Westerlands and she, in the North. But with Sansa and their daughters taking up residency at court, Gendry was often at court for, at least, half a year's time before returning to the Rock. Before the affair, before Brandon, no one ever thought it suspicious to see the two of them engaged in conversation, to share a laugh over some jape; but their return to court also brought back the rumors, the whispers, the men and women who theorized about the timing of her fourth pregnancy. And, though she never said a word, Arya knew Sansa's eyes followed the two of them just as closely, determined not to miss what she was blind to the first time. As a result, Arya often found herself opening her mouth to say something to Gendry only to catch herself; she could count on her hands the number of conversations she and Gendry had in the past six years, and it made her ache with sadness to know the impulsive decisions they made years earlier had essentially killed their friendship.

Arya did not know why she started to give Gendry Renly's letters concerning Brandon. The first had arrived two moons after Brandon arrived at Storm's End, and, as she read about Brandon's lessons with the maester and how diligently he practiced his swordsmanship, Arya thought of how distraught Gendry was in her rooms months earlier; Aegon may have claimed Brandon as his own, but the knowledge that Gendry had wanted their son, had been denied the opportunity to be his father haunted Arya. Every time Renly's letters arrived, Arya would read them before handing them over to Gendry without a word, a silent acknowledgment of the son which would forever bind them.

She did not want to imagine how Sansa would react when she saw Brandon alongside her husband. The forgiveness Sansa was capable was impressive, but even Arya did not think she would be able to look at Brandon Targaryen and see past his origins. Not even Sansa could be that good and kind.

Being a mother was a curious thing.

When Rhaenys was born, Arya loved her daughter far more than she ever thought possible, but she did not fully understand her. Rhaenys had been Aegon's daughter, his little shadow, and later, when they were at the Wall or at Winterfell, Rhaenys had become the child Arya came to rely on, the one who could manage her siblings with more grace and ease than Arya could ever manage. Often she wondered if Rhaenys resented her for that, if the reasons her eldest child never sent letters from the Gift because she was finally free of responsibilities which were never meant to be hers. With Aemon, Arya awoke from the birthing bed to find a little boy who always wanted Rhaenys far more than he ever wanted his mother. Aemon was kind and thoughtful, the child Arya always felt particularly tenderhearted towards, but Aemon had always belonged to Rhaenys; even in the letters he sent from the Citadel, Aemon kept himself at a distance.

Alysanne was easily the sweetest of her children, the one whose manners never faltered, the one whose temper never got the best of her. Arya loved her middle daughter but worried for her more than the others. A heart as gentle as Alysanne's could be bruised so easily, and, unlike her siblings, Alysanne heard and cared deeply about what the smallfolk said. Of all the children, Alysanne was the one who came to court often, who enjoyed her time at Starfall but longed to return to her family. Though she could never admit it aloud, Brandon was the child who never left her thoughts. Arya wished it was because he had been so young when leaving for Storm's End or because she didn't want her dishonor to color him, but it wasn't. She knew Brandon never left her thoughts because he was Gendry's, and it both horrified and fascinated her how much he could be like a man who played no role in his life.

But it was the twins who most confounded Arya.
It was not that Arya did not love her youngest children because she did; Arya wasn't sure if any mother could control loving her children. But Daeron and Daena had never felt like hers the way her older children had. Daena was pleasant and well-mannered; she positively worshiped Olenna and Elia, and even Jessa managed to put aside her longstanding dislike of Arya in order to dote upon Daena. Arya tried to relate to her youngest daughter, but there was some sort of disconnect between them; even at six, Daena was more a lady than Arya had ever managed to be.

Daeron was the one who worried her, whose behaviors kept her awake at night. He was nothing like his brothers; there was no peace to Daeron. As he grew, Arya found herself more and more bothered by the disregard her youngest son had for those around him, for the way he treated servants and even his sisters. Combined with a temper more volatile than wildfire, Daeron was no one's favorite, and, though Aegon often tried to teach him a better way, Arya often saw it failing. Brilliance or madness, someone once said of the Targaryens, and Arya could not help but believe that the Targaryen madness already had Daeron in its grips.

The one and only time she ever tried to broach the topic with Aegon, he shouted her down so quickly, Arya knew they would never be able to discuss her concerns about Daeron.

Arya did not know if it was possible for a child be born ruined, but she wondered if Daeron was the price which had to be paid to the Gods for bringing dragons back to the world.

“The Citadel hates magic,” Lord Varys told her a fortnight earlier when Vhagar had broken his chains and killed two guards before being subdued. “They celebrated the death of the dragons. I cannot imagine they are happy for their return.”

“Because they're destructive?”

Varys smiled indulgently, as if she was a child and not a grown woman, before explaining, “The wolf kills the rabbit. The lion kills the wolf. Man kills the lion. Dragon kills man. What kills the dragon?”

Arya shrugged. “Nothing.”

“That's a bit of a scary thought, isn't it? Men can kill dragons, but the dragon will kill scores in the process. By the time they're finished, the dragon has killed those they love and laid waste to entire towns. Men fear dragons, especially powerful men who are used to controlling the world.”

“Are you saying maesters want my children's dragons dead?”

“Oh, not just the maesters.” Varys gestured broadly with his arms. “All of Westeros is acutely aware that all which stands between them and fiery death are a few chains and the princess's good temper. I have served the Iron Throne and House Targaryen loyally - “ Arya scoffed. “Mostly loyal,” he amended, “for many years. Fear of the Targaryens and their dragons held the realm for 200 years. The last hundred were held with the memory of dragons and a king's madness. What does this tell you?”

“That you speak in riddles?”

“I apologize, my queen. I will be more clear.” Varys leaned close; the scent of him reminded Arya of the Free Cities. “Dragons make people nervous, make them wonder if mayhaps the power they hold is too great. See, stags, lions, direwolves, even krakens can be felled; they appreciate their precariousness of their positions. Dragons do not have any such fears.”

“And that is why the maesters hate them?”
“There are whispers,” Varys continued, ignoring her question. “Eight heirs to the throne: a wild princess with a dragon, a quiet princess kept in a tower in Dorne, a princess betrothed to Riverrun with another soon to be betrothed to the Eyrie, and a little princess who has always been sickly stand little chance of inheriting with three princes before them. But that is the problem, isn’t it?”

Arya said nothing, waiting.

“One prince would rather rule over knowledge than people and one prince is not really a prince at all. All that leaves is the little prince who bears a startling resemblance to his mad uncle. Now, children change, of course; sometimes the bad behavior of youth can be molded into a suitable leader. But some things are just in the blood.” Smiling solicitously, he finished, “But a queen should not concern herself with whispers.”

Arya hated Lord Varys and always had; he was the worst type of man, the king who sowed dissension everywhere he went. But Arya had to admit he often wasn’t wrong; Varys was a necessary evil to people in power, people who had no idea what truly happened outside the walls of the Red Keep.

She couldn’t help but think of Varys's words now as she watched Brandon and Alysanne embrace and laugh, holding each other tightly before turning their attentions on Daeron and Daena. Daena greeted them politely, cautiously; she knew Alysanne from her brief visits, but Brandon seemed a giant alongside his youngest siblings. Daeron only stood off to the side, eying his siblings distrustfully; when Alysanne bent to embrace him, Daeron stepped back, a look of utter disgust on his face.

“Won't you hug me, brother? I've missed you,” Alysanne said, a sweet smile on her face.

“You're supposed to take the knee before me. I am going to be king.”

Arya barely had time to open her mouth before Brandon burst out laughing, making Daena jump at the volume. “Who told you that, Uncle Viserys?”

“Certainly sounds like him,” Alysanne mumbled under her breath, and Arya heard an undertone to her words, as if the conversation between Alysanne and Brandon was one she was not privy to.

They were dining in the queen's ballroom at Aegon's insistence. As Arya lead the children into the room, she saw the expected crowd: Aegon and Jessa, Daenerys and Viserys, Elia and Olenna, Allyria and Ashara, Renly, Rhaego and Elinor, Margaery and Joffrey, and finally Sansa and Gendry. Immediately she saw the startled recognition in everyone's eyes at the sight of Brandon, but it was Sansa's subtle flinch which made shame gnaw at her gut.

Arya could not bring herself to look at Gendry.

Aegon's smile was genuine enough as they all took their seats, but Arya had known him long enough and well enough to see he was unnerved; not knowing with any true certainty that Brandon was Gendry's child was very different from seeing the young man who bore such a startling resemblance to the Baratheons. She thought of the conversation on Dragonstone so long ago, thought of Aegon's confession about how he did not want Brandon to be the last child she bore because he was Gendry's, and she wondered how all of court would be able to refer to her son as “Prince Brandon” when it was so blatantly obvious his father was not the king.

Well, not the Targaryen king. Arya was sheltered in the Red Keep, but even she knew there were still Baratheon loyalists throughout the kingdoms, men and women who longed for the halcyon days of King Robert and his court. Varys's little birds weren't necessary to know the smallfolk thought
Aegon was too stingy, too serious; whereas Robert spent gold as if it was going out of fashion and threw tourneys to celebrate the rising of the sun, Aegon was subdued, careful. Though the Tyrells were always much loved, there were those who though Garlan was an ineffectual Hand, nowhere near as capable as Ned Stark; there were whispers the Kingsguard was nowhere near as great as it once was when dearly departed Ser Barristan served alongside Arthur Dayne, Gerold Hightower, and even young Jaime Lannister. And, as always, there were those who still wished Sansa to be their queen, those who still fumbled and referred to her as “your grace.”

As Arya always knew, Magister Illyrio had lied; the people of Westeros hadn't been sewing dragon banners longing for the return of the Targaryens. The smallfolk only cared about who kept them well-fed and amused, and neither of those desires were being met by House Targaryen. Of course, as Varys pointed out: rebellion was not an option, not with dragons.

“I barely recognized the two of you,” Aegon declared as the servants began to bring the food. “I believe you have grown even more beautiful since your last visit, Alysanne.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“And the Stormlands certainly seem to agree with you,” he continued, looking to Brandon who met his gaze steadily. “You've been keeping up with your lessons?”

“With Maester Rhys and with the master-at-arms,” Brandon answered with an easy smile.

“Should we expect you to join the Citadel as well?” Jessa asked, her voice deceptively kind.

Brandon laughed as he gestured for a servant to fill his wine cup. “I believe my talents aren't best suited for Oldtown.”

As conversation began to flow around the table, Arya was certain only she heard Alysanne tease her brother with a murmured, “Since when is trying to make the eight a talent?”

For awhile, dinner went smoothly; conversation was polite, Olenna seemed to blossom under discussion of her betrothal, and, though pointed looks were being exchanged, no one said anything about Brandon. Arya was listening to Aegon describe the tourney being planned to celebrate the betrothal, a grand affair at the restored Summerhall, when the conversation took a shocking turn.

“Hopefully Aemon will be able to attend. Surely the maesters can spare him for a fortnight, and the ride isn't so long.”

“If he could book passage, it would take, at least, a moon’s turn,” Alysanne corrected.

“Booked passage? It makes no sense to sail from Oldtown to Shipbreaker Bay; a horse would be much quicker.”

Arya watched as Alysanne froze for a moment, blinking in surprise. Finally, after a beat, Alysanne said, “But Aemon isn't in Oldtown.”

“What do you mean he isn't in Oldtown?” Aegon asked. “He's at the Citadel; he's been earning his chain.”

Alysanne and Brandon exchanged nervous glances, making Arya's stomach twist anxiously. It was Brandon who finally answered, Alysanne's eyes trained on her plate.

“He left the Citadel a year ago to go the Free Cities.”
“The Free Cities?” Arya gasped. “What’s he doing there?”

“Visiting Rhaenys.” Alysanne looked between her mother and father before explaining, “Rhaenys went to the Free Cities two years ago. She wrote and invited all of us to come; she’s gone all the way to Asshai and back. But she - “ She broke off, uncertainty on her features; Arya saw Brandon shake his head, and frustration swelled at her daughter’s reticence.

Aegon did not notice the silent conversation between the children; his anger was too strong. “You will write them both and tell them they are to return to court, that they will be present at Summerhall.”

Alysanne nodded meekly, but there was something in her face – the quirk of her mouth, the way she looked up beneath her lashes, the tilt of her head – which told Arya there was nothing meek about Alysanne at all.

“Of course, Father. I’ll send a raven the moment we’re finished.”

Arya wondered when her daughter started playing the game of thrones and, more importantly, when Alysanne became better at it than Arya was.

Thought she was nearing seventy, Ashara Dayne was still one of the most beautiful women Arya ever knew. Her dark hair was now silver, her face lined and tanned by the Dornish sun; her movements were slower, joints swollen by arthritis. As Arya helped her down into a seat in the gardens, Ashara clasped her arm as tightly as she could for support. She thought of the last time she saw Ashara, nearly three years earlier; she had still been vibrant and active then.

When did she get old?

“Do not look at me like that,” Ashara chastised as if reading her mind. “I am not feeble. My body may be failing, but my mind is not. Stop looking at me as if I’m half in the grave.”

“Yes, my lady,” she replied, laughing as Ashara batted at her with a gnarled hand.

It was an unbearably hot day, the end of summer in sight; the scent of flowers hung heavy in the air, and Arya could feel sweat rolling down the back of her neck beneath her heavy hair. If Ashara was uncomfortable, she gave no indication; Arya had never spent a summer in Dorne, but, judging by the way Alysanne was teasing Brandon when they broke their fast, it was significantly warmer there.

“Alysanne told me you spent time at Sunspear a few moons past.”

Ashara nodded. “She and Prince Trystane’s son have grown quite close. House Martell is interested in a betrothal, but Myrcella is opposed.” A wry smile played at Ashara’s lips as she added, “She doesn’t seem to hold a particularly high opinion of you or Aegon.”

“I find that so hard to believe, what with Aegon taking the throne from her family, beheading her uncle and grandfather, and having her mother kept as a virtual prisoner at Casterly Rock.”

“And you?”

“Oh, my sins are legion, and you were present for enough of them.”

“Not all of them.” Sipping from a glass of iced honey milk a servant brought, she stated, “He’s a good boy, your Brandon.”
It was a compliment Arya heard often since Brandon's arrival at court. Despite uncanny resemblance to Gendry, most of the whispers concerning Brandon Targaryen had nothing to do with his origins. Brandon was charismatic, boisterous, and good-tempered; he behaved the same with lords as he did the smallfolk, and it quickly endeared him to all. Arya could not stop marveling at how much Brandon had changed in six years; the silent boy had been replaced by a man who made Renly seem reserved. Just this morning Arya had watched as he and one of the Tyrells sparred in the yard, and she was genuinely shocked to see ladies watching, whispering behind hands and blushing when Brandon turned his smile upon them.

“Hardly a boy anymore. I feel as if I went to sleep one day and, when I woke up, all my children were grown.”

“Not all of them.”

Arya blushed at her mistake. “You know what I mean.”

“For what it's worth, I feel the same way when I see Aegon or you. Age has a funny way of changing things.”

“I suppose it does.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, the lingering sounds of a singer reaching them. Arya knew the melody but not the words; Sansa would know both, even lifting her voice up to join in.

Finally, Arya asked, “Did you know Aemon left the Citadel?”

Ashara sighed heavily. “He and Brandon both came to Starfall before he left. I do not know what Rhaenys's letters said; all I know is the three of them hid themselves away in the Palestone Tower for hours and, when they emerged, Aemon's face was bruised, Brandon was furious, and Alysanne was just beside herself. I've never seen Alysanne so devastated; when I asked her about it, she wouldn't explain.”

“Why didn't you write me?”

“I assumed you knew. You and Aemon were always close, and he was always the most reasonable; I didn't think he'd flee Westeros without so much as a word.”

“And Rhaenys?”

“I do not know what happened on the Gift, I truly don't. The only letters which arrived at Starfall from Rhaenys were for Alysanne, and I did not ask to read them. A year-and-a-half ago, I received a letter from Illyrio telling me that Rhaenys had come to him shortly after arriving in Pentos. Balerion was not with her; she would not tell him where the dragon was. She wanted gold in order to book a ship, which Illyrio provided. By the time I received the letter, Rhaenys was halfway to Asshai.”

“Why did Illyrio write you instead of Aegon?”

“I stopped trying to understand Illyrio's motivations long ago.”

“What could she possibly want in Asshai? What could make her send for her siblings?”

Ashara grinned. “Oh, Rhaenys's motivations have always been clear. What's the one thing she has always wanted?”

“You think there's something in the Free Cities which will get her the Iron Throne?”
“No.” She sipped her milk. “But, if there is, I guarantee you Rhaenys will find it.”

The sight of Gendry and Brandon seated at the table in her solar, both laughing, stole Arya’s breath. Though Gendry's black hair and beard was now shot through with silver, he still carried himself like a young man, even sparring on occasion with his nephews; Arya could easily accept the fact that he still found Gendry handsome. What was more difficult to accept was Brandon knew what they had done – the lies they told, the people they betrayed, the vows they broke – and every time she met her son's eyes, she wished she could explain.

“What's so funny?” she asked, trying to feign composure.

“Uncle Gendry was telling me of the first time he met you and how you bribed him with gold to sneak you to your room,” Brandon answered.

It had been so long since Robert and his court came to Winterfell, it felt as if it was someone else's life; they had all been so young then, so certain and so stupid.

“There was a bit more to the story than that.”

“Isn't there always?”

Gendry rose from the table, a sad smile playing at his lips. “Well, I should be going. Thank you for listening to an old man's stories, Brandon.”

“I would like to hear more if you're willing.” For a moment, Arya glimpsed the little boy who used to ask to hear stories of his father in Brandon's grey eyes. “Mayhaps you, Renly, and I can go riding tomorrow.”

“I would like that.” Gendry smiled at her, a hint of irreverence on his face. “With Your Grace's permission, of course.”

“Oh, shut up!”

Gendry's departing laughter brought a smile to her face; she could not remember the last time she had heard Gendry laugh, the last time they had spoken to each other like they were friends.

“I like him,” Brandon announced as she took Gendry's seat, pouring himself a cup of wine.

“I always thought you would.”

“Who loved him first, your or Aunt Sansa?”

Arya started at the blunt question, wholly unprepared for Brandon to address the issue of his paternity directly. Even Viserys, who no one would ever refer to as subtle, had never directly questioned her about Gendry; it was the polite fiction of court, denying unhappy truths in order to curry the king's favor. Aegon had declared Brandon to be his trueborn son, and thus he was; no matter how blatant a falsehood it was, no one argued with the king.

When her voice returned to her, she managed in a carefully measured tone, “I suppose it would depend on who you are asking.”

“But you did love him?”

“Yes.”
“More than Aegon?”

“Different from Aegon.”

“Did he know I wasn't his or was it all a trick to get me legitimized?”

Taking the wine skin when he began to pour another cup, she snapped, “Aegon gave you his name because he loves you.”

Brandon scoffed. “Loves me? He can barely look at me or haven't you noticed? He has midday meal with my siblings every day but not me. I suppose a little boy who follows him around like he's the Warrior returned is more lovable than a man-grown who reminds him he's a cuckold.”

“Brandon - “

“Did he tell you the good news?” Not waiting for a response, he shared, “King Aegon has given Renly permission to name me as his heir, the Lord of Storm's End. There is a catch though; the small council insisted upon it. From henceforth, I am not longer Brandon Targaryen, Prince of Summerhall; I am Lord Brandon Baratheon, heir to Lord Renly Baratheon and officially removed from the line of succession.”

“What? He – He removed you from the line?”

“You can't be surprised. The moment I walked into the Keep, the moment everyone saw for themselves I'm not a true dragon, I knew the council would make him. I don't care. I never wanted the damn throne anyway. I'll leave the fighting to my mad little brother and my grasping sisters.”

“No speak of your siblings that way.”

Brandon scoffed. As he got to his feet, swaying uneasily, Arya realized he was drunk. “Why not? Jessa's girls, they're nothing to me now. Daena is a little puppet and Daeron, he is Viserys in miniature. Aemon and Rhaenys, they can ride their dragon straight through the seven hells for all I care. Alysanne is the only one worth anything, and they're ruining her too.”

“Brandon, you've had too much wine. You don't know what you're saying - “

“I know!” he shouted, his voice breaking as tears shimmered in his eyes. “You know why I didn't go to the Free Cities? Do you?! Because I did not wake a dragon! I am their brother, their pack, and they left me! I would lay down my life for them, and it isn't good enough because I'm their bastard brother!”

Emotion began to rise in Arya's throat. “Brandon...”

“I'm their brother.” Wiping angrily at his face, he growled, “Well, to seven hells to the whole fucking lot of them: the king, his queen, the princesses, the princes. I don't need them, and they don't need me.”

“That's not true.” Stepping forward, clasping Brandon's face between her palms, she declared, “All of you need each other to be strong. That's what a pack is.”

“Except they're not wolves; they're dragons.” Shaking his mother off of him, he stumbled to the window, staring out at King's Landing. “We're the only wolves left here, Mother. Our pack left us.”

The words chilled Arya to the bone.
“Why did Rhaenys go to Asshai?”

Alysanne looked up from her needlework, smiling pleasantly. “Mother! I was just making - “

“Leave us,” Arya ordered the small retinue from Starfall who served as Alysanne's companions. When the room was empty save for the two of them, she repeated, “Why did Rhaenys go to Asshai?”

“I do not know - “

“Do not lie to me! I am not your father; you cannot play the weakling with me.”

Nodding minutely, Alysanne set aside her work, giving her mother her full attention. She sighed softly, tucking a stray lock of silver hair behind her ear before offering, “She went there to find a Red Priest.”

“Why would she need a Red Priest? And why would she need you and Aemon to go with her?”

“Rhaenys fell ill her third year on the Gift, and Uncle Jon insisted she stay at Castle Black until she recuperated. While she was there, she read Maester Sam's books and found something, a prophecy. She became obsessed with it. The prophecy talks about a Prince Who Was Promised, and, for whatever reasons, she believes it is her. She wanted us all to go to Asshai and see a Priest who could tell us if it was true.”

“And then what?”

Alysanne shrugged. “I don't know. She wrote me this rambling letter about going to Valyria, finding more eggs, proving we were worthy of the throne like Aegon and his sisters. Rhaenys doesn't want the throne for herself; she wants the three of us to rule in tandem. Promised princes or not, she doesn't understand why, if we woke dragons, no one accepts us as heirs.”

“But I sent her to Mance, to have what she wanted - “

“She wants to rule, Mother. What good is freedom when you know it cannot bring you what you desire most?”

“And Aemon believes in this?”

“Aemon believes in Rhaenys.”

“And you don't?”

“I believe Rhaenys and I have always been very different people who wanted very different things.” Smoothing her skirts, she revealed, “The prophecy talks about when stars bleed, like the comet did the night I was born. I woke a dragon from stone. I as much fit the prophecy as she does, but Rhaenys thinks it inconceivable someone like me could be a destined warrior. And even if she succeeds, what then? She and I marry Aemon and bring back a tradition best left dead? I do not want that.”

“Is that why Aemon and Brandon fought at Starfall?”

She shook her head, face folding in regret. “Brandon offered to come, to help them however he could, but Aemon refused him. He said the trip was too dangerous for someone who did not have dragon's blood. Brandon was so hurt. I don't think he meant to strike Aemon, but to realize all of these plans were being made without him...”
“I don't understand. I gave you all a chance to escape this, to not be bound to the Iron Throne - “

“We were bound to it the moment we were born.” Alysanne rose gracefully, and, for the first time, Arya saw her daughter for the woman she had become rather than the girl who clung to her when they were to be parted. “For someone who is so uncomfortable with power, I've never understood why you chose to have children with kings.”

“What's going to happen when Rhaenys and Aemon come to Summerhall?”

“What always happens: Rhaenys ends up disappointed, Aemon ends up soothing her battered ego, and I smile so no one knows anything is wrong.” If anything, her smile became even more pained. “Our roles were decided long ago, Mother. You can't protect us forever.”

Arya wasn't sure if she had ever been able to protect her children.

Arya awoke in the middle of the night to someone touching her face. Jerking awake, tangling in her blankets, she was stunned to find Daeron standing by her bedside in his nightclothes, his Targaryen face wet with tears, mouth in a pout. She could count on one hand how many times Daeron had sought her out in the middle of the night; the last time he had done so, he had still been a toddler, still had some sweetness to him.

“What's wrong, sweetling?”

“Monsters,” was all he mumbled, sounding small and pitiful.

Arya pulled back the sheets, allowing Daeron slip in, his body curving around hers instinctively. He sniffled, pressing his face to the front of her nightgown, and she could feel a slight tremor to his body as his hands clutched at her.

“It's alright, my love. No one can hurt you while I'm here.”

“Fire,” he whimpered nonsensically, eyes already drooping shut as he headed back towards slumber.

“Fire cannot burn dragons. There is no reason to fear it.”

In the morning, he would be cranky and frustrating; she would find herself correcting him a half-dozen times and wondering how he could be so different from his siblings. But for now, with the darkness around them, Daeron was just a little boy who wanted his mother.

Arya adored Summerhall. Unlike Dragonstone, which was harsh and unyielding, or the Red Keep, which forever felt like a battlefield, Summerhall was bright, airy, and beautiful. The restoration which took place shortly after Aegon's ascendance had made the summer palace of the Targaryens great once again, and the gardens were all in full bloom when the court arrived. Often, when she was feeling particularly stifled in the Keep, she would come to Summerhall and enjoy the Stormlands the way she once had. On her last visit, the twins had actually managed to get along with each other, she had managed to coax Sansa into a ride around the grounds, and, for a short time, she felt peaceful.

There was nothing peaceful about Summerhall now. Tournament grounds had been assembled, and camps were set up for the numerous lords coming to compete. There had been a time when Arya loved nothing better than a tourney; there was beauty to a well-ridden tilt, and there was not nearly enough beauty in the world. But, as she surveyed the activity from the balcony on which she and Sansa supped, Arya realized she did not recognize most of the young men who had come to prove themselves; those she did recognize looked past their prime. There were no Ser Barristans left; only
“You have the most peculiar look on your face,” Sansa remarked, sipping her wine. As the sun hit Sansa's auburn hair, making it shine like copper, Arya felt the jealousy from childhood flicker in her chest; Sansa was still easily one of the most beautiful women at court, still admired and adored by every man who crossed her path. It was silly, of course; they were both far too old for petty jealousies and imagined slights. But Arya wasn't sure if it would ever die, the combination of awe and inadequacy Sansa inspired in her.

“I was thinking about the first tourney I ever attend, the one from your betrothal. It all seemed so exciting then.”

Sansa smiled wryly. “Tournaments or marriage?”

“Marriage never seemed exciting.”

“For you, no, but I thought it was going to be like the songs. I imagined myself Queen Naerys and Gendry would be Aemon the Dragonknight.”

“Queen Naerys wasn't wed to Aemon.”

“I know. Mayhaps I should have listened a bit more closely.”

They both laughed, but it wasn't funny; if anything, Arya thought it was a bit sad. Sometimes she forgot Sansa hadn't gotten what she wanted either.

She didn't mean to ask the question; it flew past her lips before Arya even realized the thought had formed in her head. After so many years in the Keep, Arya thought she broke her bad habit of saying whatever flew into her head; only with Sansa did her manners always seem to fail her.

“Do you ever regret wedding him?”

Sansa didn't answer immediately, her face folding in contemplation. Finally, after what seemed like hours, she answered, “No, no, I don't regret it.” Fixing her blue eyes upon her sister, Arya heard a bit of a challenge in Sansa's voice as she asked, “Are you certain you wish to hear this?”

She nodded.

“In the beginning, even knowing he wished to end our betrothal, I was still in awe of him. He was so handsome, so chivalrous, and I was his princess; one day I'd even be his queen. And mayhaps our love wasn't passionate or desperate, but it was still love. He always treated me so tenderly, nothing like his father; some nights he would come to my chambers, and we'd talk until the sun came up. There were so many good years, years I would not trade for anything.”

“You were lucky.”

“Lucky?” Sansa echoed incredulously. “I said I was happy; I did not say he was. Gendry loves me; I do not doubt that. But he loves me the way he loves Myrcella. He gave me children because it was his duty; he prepared to rule because it was his duty. Duty means so much to him; he's like Father in that way. He wed me out of duty, not because he wanted me.” Sansa looked down into her wine cup as if she was trying to divine the future. “He never wanted me.”

“Sansa -“

She turned to face Arya then, and, for a brief moment, she glimpsed the same exhaustion and
frustration she always felt in Sansa's eyes. “You were the only thing he ever wanted. Do you think he fought Aegon's war for the throne? He didn't. It was for you, to get you back. When Aegon and his men entered the Keep, we were in Maegor's Holdfast. All of us were terrified; we all remembered what the Lannister men did to Elia Martell and the children; none of us knew if Aegon was going to do the same to us. And yet the first words out of Gendry's mouth wasn't a plea for our lives or a declaration of fealty; instead, he asked if you were alive. That's when I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That I would have made a far better queen than Gendry ever would have made a king.” Sansa looked out at the tents, waving her hand. “When men look at me, they see a pretty face, a comely figure; they whisper and laugh about how I must be as cold as the North for Gendry to have taken to your bed. But do you know what they always fail to recognize?”

“What?”

“House Stark has stood for 8,000 years; our people were kings from the moment they came into existence. But House Baratheon? Orys Baratheon was a bastard who fought for his brother, and, as a result, he got to keep the Storm King's holdings. The Starks were kings; the Baratheons were just soldiers.” Sansa exhaled sharply through her nose. “Gendry is a good soldier; when someone tells him what to do, he performs admirably. But making the decisions, facing difficult choices...In that way, he is his father's son. He would have been a popular king but hardly effective.”

“Did you truly want it, to be queen?”

“More than you ever did.” Reaching for her wine, she declared, “I had ambitions, you know. When we were young, you always thought I was frivolous, but I did have wants of my own. And once I came to King's Landing, I wanted even more: for me, for my children, for our House. We were never as different as you thought us to be.”

“I never understood you.”

“You never tried,” Sansa replied mildly. “To be fair, I never tried with you either. I saw you as my enemy, the woman who stole my crown, my son's throne, and my husband.”

“I did not want to do all of that.”

“No,” Sansa conceded, “the only thing you wanted was my husband; the rest just came along with it.” As Arya began to sputter a denial, her older sister laughed with a shake of her head. “Oh, Arya, if we cannot jape about it after all this time, it just remains sad.”

“I don't want to jape about hurting you.”

“Oh, the hurt faded long ago. If we are being truly honest, Gendry and I have not shared a bed since Aeron passed. What exists between us now is, what I imagine, exists between you and Aegon: mutual respect, even friendship, but I don't think either of us has the strength to pretend any longer. We're too old for games and lies, and I confess I never quite had the stomach for them.” Sansa removed a sachet from the folds of her gown; the small bundle of white fabric was tied with a bit of grey ribbon. Pressing it into Arya's palm, she said, “Consider it an early name day present.”

Puzzled, Arya tugged at the ribbon, opening the fabric; she did not recognize the scent but she could identify the herbs: tansy, mint, wormwood, pennyroyal. Jerking her head up in shock, she gasped, “This is moon tea. Why would you give me this?”

“Because I do not wish to be embarrassed again.” Sansa stood, resting her hands on the balcony's
railing, staring off into the distance. “It took me a very long time to realize all the things I was angry at you for stealing away from me were never meant to be mine. If I had not interfered, if I had not let my ambition cloud my judgment, I suspect both of us would be living vastly different lives.”

Quickly knotting the ribbon around the sachet, Arya shook her head and declared, “I cannot use that. I cannot do that.”

“Why not? You've done it before; Brandon's proof enough of that.” Sansa turned, her face perfectly calm. “I'm not being selfless, Arya. This is not some grand sacrifice I'm making for you. It isn't about you at all.”

“Then why?”

“Because I loved him once, and he deserved better than me scheming with his mother behind his back.” For a brief second, Arya thought she saw the shimmer of tears in Sansa's eyes, but her voice betrayed no hint of emotion. “You do not have to use it. But should you choose to, I just ask that you be discreet.”

“Sansa...”

She held up her hand, silencing Arya's words. “This will be the last time we discuss this, yes?”

Sansa made so few requests of her, Arya nodded, tucking the moon tea into her bodice. She was not sure if she intended to use it, wasn't sure if Sansa could truly be suggesting what she was suggesting.

All Arya knew for certain was Sansa never seemed to stop surprising her.

They arrived on the third day of festivities at supper. Arya sat upon the dais with Aegon and Jessa, Alysanne and Brandon beside her when, through the throng of dancing couples, they entered. Almost immediately the crowd parted, allowing Rhaenys and Aemon to pass, bending in deference as they passed.

Aemon wore Pentoshi clothing, his silver hair cut so close to his head, the pink of his scalp visible; his violet eyes seemed to glow bright in the candlelight, and Arya felt a lump rise in her throat at how old he looked. The young ladies of court were staring at him in awe, the beautiful prince who looked so much like the king, but it was not Aemon who was inspiring whispers.

If Rhaenys had been beautiful when she left for the North, she was positively breathtaking now. Her black curls, which she had often kept contained in a braid, now flowed freely over her shoulders, the ends brushing against the curve of her lower back. The dress she wore was only slips of fine silk held together with thin chains of gold; nearly every inch of her warm, bronze skin was visible through the silk, and, with her eyes lined heavily with kohl, she looked like a lord's fantasy brought to life.

It touched Arya's heart to see the instinctive smile which spread across Aegon's face at the sight of their children. Though she never voiced the belief, Arya always thought Aegon fought harder for Rhaenys's and Aemon's affections, as if he was trying to regain the bond he once had with them in the Dothraki Sea. Brandon's and Alysanne's love had come easy; the twins knew him and only him. But Rhaenys remembered every slight, every moment spent Rhaenys Snow, every unkind word the Tyrells said about her, and Aemon's allegiance had always been to his sister.

“Welcome back to court,” Aegon greeted, his jovial voice carrying throughout the hall. “You've come to celebrate your sister's betrothal?”
“We've come because you summoned us like dogs,” Rhaenys replied, her face bright with mockery. “But I suppose we can celebrate Olenna's good fortune as well.”

Jessa's face soured considerably, but Aegon, to his credit, did not falter. “House Targaryen is reunited once more, and that is certainly cause for celebration. Music!”

Arya was on her feet the moment the music resumed, rushing past Alysanne and Brandon to embrace her eldest children. Aemon wrapped her up tightly with a soft chuckle before allowing Rhaenys to do the same; as she stepped back, assessing them the same way she once had when they were small, Rhaenys laughed with a shake of her head.

“Why are you looking at us so strangely?”

“Because I am trying to determine whether or not to kiss you or kill you. Leaving the Citadel without a word? Traveling to Essos without notifying anyone - “

“That's not strictly true,” Rhaenys interrupted. “We didn't notify you; we notified others.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“It is not supposed to be anything.” Rhaenys sighed. “Must we fight, Mother? It has been a long journey, I have not seen my family in so long, and there is truly nothing to say.”

“Did you, at least, find what you needed to find?”

“We found many things,” Rhaenys replied evasively before moving past her mother to embrace Alysanne.

Arya was not certain her daughter even knew what she was looking for anymore.

Gendry found her prior to the start of the first tilt. She was walking with Ser Daemon Sand of the Kingsguard, hardly aware of anything but fulfilling her promise to Brandon to watch him ride, when Gendry fell into step beside her. He did not say anything at first, simply walking beside her in silence, before finally venturing, “I spoke to Sansa.”

“Not here,” she hissed, her eyes darting to Ser Daemon, who pointedly looked away, pretending as if he was not listening to the exchange. “Not now.”

“Then when? Where?” Gendry challenged. “She's given us leave - “

“But Aegon has not, and I'd much prefer you keep your head.”

“I'm not afraid of Aegon Targaryen; I never was.”

“That is not the point!” Inhaling deeply, she struggled to find the right words before finally settling on, “We cannot be brazen about it. We must have a plan.”

“Then let us make a plan.” Inclining his head so his words would not carry, he implored, “Think of how long we have waited for each other. Sansa has given us her blessing. This is the finest opportunity we will ever get, so I do not want to squander it.”

“We'll discuss it after the tilts. Brandon is riding - “

“I know. I'm the one who paid for his armor.”
“What? He said Renly - “

“He did not want to upset you.”

As they reached the stands, Gendry nodded, moving alongside Sansa and Elinor while Arya allowed Ser Daemon to help her to her place in the king’s box. Aegon, Jessa, their girls, and the twins were all present; none of Arya's children were present. She was prepared to ask Aegon if he knew where they were when Alysanne hurriedly climbed the stairs, her skirts in her hands, taking a seat beside Arya.

“What are Aemon and Rhaenys?”

Her pretty face was rich with anger and irritation, the first true break in her facade since returning to court. “Aemon has chosen to ride.”

“Aemon is riding? Aemon? Why?”

“Because he listens to Rhaenys too closely and listens to himself not enough.” Alysanne exhaled sharply through her nose, folding her arms over her chest. “This was meant to be Brandon's day. Why did they stop considering him?”

“Because he is not a dragon,” Arya murmured.

“Well, he is still a wolf, still ours.”

Arya's heart swelled at the fervent loyalty in Alysanne's voice; it reminded her of the love which existed between herself and Jon Snow. She did not know what was going on between her two sons, but she knew Brandon and Aemon had not so much as looked at each other since Aemon's arrival. It was the first time Arya could ever recall sweet-tempered Aemon behaving like a surly man, like Aegon when he was angry; it was the first time Arya wondered how much time and distance had changed all of her children, if all this was her fault.

Aemon acquitted himself well on a horse, unseating one of the Royces from the Vale easily. The crowd cheered for him, their dragon prince, and Arya was glad for it; with his decision to leave the Citadel, Aemon was, once again, Aegon's heir. Nothing good happened for kings who were not loved. Her eldest son was not an exceptional tourney knight, but it had never been his intention to be one. Arya wondered what Aemon's intentions were.

But if the crowd cheered for Aemon, they positively roared for Brandon, who knocked a hulking Whent from his saddle with such force, the poor man seemed to bounce when he hit the earth. Arya's eyes flicked towards where Gendry sat, and she saw he was cheering along with the crowd, pride blatant on his face. It was not until she glanced at Aegon that she saw unhappiness, saw something troubled on his handsome face.

She did not know what bothered him more: the crowd cheering for Brandon or the prancing stag upon his chest.

“I never knew you wished to be a knight.”

Aemon looked up from the book he was reading, the hint of a smile playing at his lips. As she crossed the room to sit upon the edge of his bed, she remembered when he was young at Winterfell; every night she had come to his room and he would tell her about his day: his lessons with Maester Luwin, his time spent with his grandfather, anything on his mind. Once, when she was clashing with Rhaenys, her daughter had accused her of loving Aemon more; sometimes Arya thought it might
have been true.

“You’ve become more tactful.”

“You’ve become more evasive.”

“One of the skills I learned in Oldtown.” Marking his page, Aemon closed his book, setting it aside. “I wondered when you were going to come. I had hoped our reunion would be happier than this.”

Arya wanted to ask him a thousand questions, wanted to stay in his room and refuse to leave until Aemon described each and every reason for leaving the Citadel, for going to Rhaenys, for spending the past year in the Free Cities. Aemon was always the most honest of her children; she did not think he’d lie.

Instead, she said, “You should make peace with your brother.”

“I did not start this fight.”

“But you can end it.”

“No, I can’t.” Aemon sighed with a shake of his head. “You cannot reason with Brandon; I tried. His temper overrides his logic every time. I never meant to hurt his feelings, but he takes everything so personally.”

“He loves you; he wants to support you.”

“And I love him. It is not a matter of love, Mother.”

“Then what is it a matter of?”

Aemon was quiet, staring into the dancing flames in the fireplace, before offering, “You know, sometimes I wish we had remained with Uncle Jon at the Wall. I barely remembered who Father was then; he was half of a memory, stories and nothing more. I liked it there with Val and Dalla; I even liked those horrid cakes you’d try to make for our name days. When I was at the Citadel, I thought of taking the black when I earned my chain; I wanted to serve with Uncle Jon and then I could be close to Rhaenys as well.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because Rhaenys needed me more than I needed a maester’s chain.” His smile became even more sorrowful as he said, “You gave up what you wanted for Father. We aren’t so different.”

“But your father was my husband. Rhaenys is your sister. It is different.”

“Not for Targaryens.”

Something akin to nausea began to rise in Arya’s throat. “Are you and Rhaenys - ”

Aemon’s face was resolute as he pronounced, “All I am saying is the bond between Rhaenys and I isn’t that different from the one you shared with Father. She needed me, so I went to her. Isn’t that what you taught us to do?”

Arya got to her feet, her stomach still churning from the way Aemon was speaking about his sister. Taking a steadying breath, she repeated, “Make peace with your brother.”

In her lifetime, Arya had found herself often caught off-guard by the events in her life, but never had
she even thought to consider that the feelings Aemon harbored for his sister were anything less than brotherly. Brothers and sisters should not feel the way she once felt for Aegon; it was not natural.

She had to summon Haldon for a dram in order to get to sleep that night.

Rhaenys presented the dragon's egg to Olenna during the feast on the second to last night of the tournament. It was a truly beautiful thing: green and gold, the Tyrell colors on fossilized scales. There were rolls of whispers and gasps as Rhaenys – draped in violet silks this time – handed it to her half-sister. Olenna's eyes were wide with surprise, murmuring her thanks as she ran her palms over the textured egg.

“Consider this a gift from us all to you and your future husband,” Rhaenys said. “We have dragons; the least we can give you is a pretty egg to stare upon.”

“This is an incredibly generous gift, Rhaenys,” Aegon offered. “Where did you find another egg?”

“I won it from a man in Asshai. Aemon and I thought it would be selfish to keep it, and Olenna is as much a dragon as we are.”

While everyone clapped and celebrated her daughter, Arya watched. Years may have passed, but Arya knew her daughter; Rhaenys had never looked upon Olenna and Elia as equal to her and her siblings, never considered them to be true dragons. It made absolutely no sense why Rhaenys, more immovable than the Wall, would suddenly decide to give a priceless egg to one of Jessa's daughters.

It was not until the dancing started that Arya got the chance to ask Rhaenys why. She smiled, pushing her curls behind her shoulders, and answered, “Olenna is no threat to me; let her show the egg as proof of what a fine, Targaryen princess she is when she goes to Riverrun. It's just rock in her hands.”

“And you don't want to wake another dragon from stone?”

“There's no need now. We woke the dragons to prove we were true Targaryens. Aemon will be king.”

“And you? Will you be his queen?”

Rhaenys said nothing, getting to her feet and moving to exit the hall; Arya moved quickly, following her into the corridor, demanding she stop. Rhaenys kept moving until suddenly spinning on her heel, her face twisted with anger and frustration.

“I should be queen! I am smarter, savvier, more capable than any of my brothers! Had I been allowed, I could have bested any man on the field today, and we both know it! Did you think you could send me to Mance and I would just forget that?!”

“I sent you to Mance because I thought you could live how you wanted!”

“No, you send me to Mance because that is how you wanted to live! You wanted to be a wildling, you wanted to be near Uncle Jon, you wanted to be a spearwife! I wanted to be queen! I wanted what was promised to me! Aemon knows I was meant to be queen; he supports my claim.”

“He is your brother! To wed him to get it - “

“Targaryens have wed brother-to-sister for centuries! We love each other in a way you'll never understand! You cannot give me a throne! Father won't name me as heir! Aemon is doing what is
best for the realm!"

“And what about what is best for Aemon?”

“I am what's best for Aemon!”

“He is your brother!” she repeated, nearly exploding with anger.

“And what, we only fuck our good-brothers in this family?”

Her hand swung before Arya even consciously thought of striking her daughter. With a peculiar detachment, Arya saw her hand crash against Rhaenys's cheek, saw Rhaenys's head jerk to side and crimson bloom upon her cheek; Arya had never struck any of her children before, and, judging by the shock on Rhaenys's face, she was as stunned as Arya was.

“Rhaenys...”

Her daughter disappeared down the corridor, leaving Arya to her guilt.

She couldn’t breathe.

Arya awoke coughing, certain she was having a nightmare about drowning only to find smoke filling her chamber. Throwing back the bedclothes, Arya pushed up the bar on her door to find the corridors so heavy with smoke, she could not see. Her eyes burned, instantly watering; she pulled her nightdress up over her face, trying to breathe as she ran down the corridors. People were shouting, she could hear crashes as wooden beams and stone fell, but Arya did not look back. She could not, the smoke becoming denser as she moved. It was not until she managed to stumble out of one of the servants' entrances, greedily sucking fresh air into her lungs, that Arya realized the flames engulfing the castle were not orange; they were green.

“Wildfire,” she gasped.

The grass was cold and wet beneath her feet as she moved towards the camp; she could see others from the castle coughing, their clothing black from smoke and soot. A flash of silver hair caught her eye and, using every bit of oxygen in her lungs, she shouted, “Daenerys!”

Daenerys turned instantly, rushing towards her. It was only then Arya saw Alyssanne, Aemon, and Rhaenys, their clothes also smudged with smoke. As Arya collapsed onto the grass, she rasped, “Where's Brandon? Is he - “

“He's searching for Renly and Ashara,” Alyssanne cut in, bending down beside her. “Aunt Sansa, Uncle Gendry, and Elinor are safe, but most of the Kingsguard is still inside, Elia's been badly burned, no one can find Jessa - “

“Where are Daeron and Daena? Duck would have brought them out. Where are they?”

Tears shimmered on Daenerys's cheeks as she said, “Rhaego and Jorah went to get them from their beds, but we haven't seen any sign of them.”

Arya could feel the urge to scream starting to bubble up in her chest, but she knew she could not fall apart now, not when her children were missing, not when her children who were safe looked as if they were on the brink of discomposure as well.

“Your father?”
“Still inside,” Aemon managed before becoming too choked with emotion.

“How did this happen? How did wildfire - “

“Viserys,” Daenerys spat, the name poisonous in her mouth. “He wanted to hatch Olenna's egg. None of us knew what was happening until the screaming started; the fire burnt him so quickly, there was no chance of saving him. But the wildfire moved like it was alive, and now...”

The fire raged until midday, until it had consumed every inch of Summerhall, until there was nothing left but ash. Those who had been injured were being treated in tents by the men who had served during the wars; as Arya wandered through them, she saw limbs amputated, people whose skin was burnt black, people who begged for death. Little Elia, not quite eleven, was burnt on the left side of her body; Alysanne remained in the tent with her, helping to hold her down while Aemon shouted orders for what to bring, what plants to find. A half-maester was better than none, and soon Aemon's clothing was saturated with the blood of those he was treating.

Rhaenys and Brandon mounted horses to search the grounds for anyone who might have escaped the blaze and, in their disorientation, wandered into the nearby woods. Daenerys volunteered to gather the ladies, to have them find food and drink for the wounded, while Sansa remained with Elinor, who was in shock. Arya found a strange numbness begin to work its way through her body as she gathered the lords with holdings nearest Summerhall, ordering them to bring help: maesters, silent sisters, septons, able bodied men, anyone who wished to assist. Now was not the time for grief or weeping; for now, she had to be the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

Even as she was giving orders for men to ride to Highgarden to alert the Tyrells of the tragedy which had befallen Jessa, Arya began to make a list of all those who had perished in the fire: Daeron, Daena, Aegon, Rhaego, Jorah, Renly, Ashara, Jessa, Olenna, Duck, Haldon, Ser Daemon. It seemed as if she was forced to add another name, another person she knew, another person she cared for, another person she would never see again. She thought of the twins as she last saw them, safe and sleeping soundly in their beds, Daeron already tangled in his blankets, Daena clutching her favorite doll. She did not understand why three of her children had once been untouched by fire while two others perished, but she could not consider it now.

When the last of the flames flickered out, when it became obvious there were no survivors, Arya found Aemon bandaging a man's leg. Waiting until he was finished, she pulled him aside and said, “You need to find fresh clothing. You'll need to address the people.”

“What? Why?”

“Because, as of right now, you are King Aemon Targaryen, the First of His Name, and your people need you.”

Lord Redwyne gave Aemon a pair of pants; a Santagar lent him a tunic. Rhaenys, Alysanne, and Brandon spread the word to gather to hear Aemon speak, and Arya watched as her son began to address the crowd. He was not perfectly eloquent or a graceful politician; at times, he became too emotional for a king, but no one faulted him for it. Anyone could see the crowd needed a calming presence, and, above all, that was Aemon's specialty.

While he spoke, Arya found herself ducking into Renly's tent. She sat upon his bed, the scent of the Stormlands and her old friend surrounding her, and she felt her control beginning to unravel. Her children were dead. Her husband was dead. Ashara and Renly, who had often been the only people in the world who understood her, were dead. Tears began to well in her eyes, teetering on the brink, when she heard someone enter the tent. Jerking her head up, blinking back her tears, she saw it was only Gendry, his own face twisted with sorrow.
Arya was not sure how long she and Gendry remained in Renly's tent, how long he held her as she cried for her children; outside the tent, she would have to be strong, would need to guide Aemon and help him hold the realm.

But right then, as she sat in Renly's tent with Gendry's arms around her, all Arya had to do was be herself. With Gendry, that was all she ever had to be.
The Crown of King Aemon Targaryen, the First of His Name, was a somber affair. There was a pall hanging over everything, so many houses having lost loved ones at Summerhall, and Arya insisted the ceremony be small and lacking the opulence the realm was accustomed to; Rhaenys tried to fight her, but Alysanne agreed, managing to sway Aemon into recognizing the wisdom of Arya's words. As Arya stood in the Great Sept of Baelor in her black gown piped with grey – mourning colors for a woman who had lost her children, her husband, the people she loved – with her eyes focused on her eldest son, she wondered if every mother felt like this when handing her son over to the realm.

Arya started as Alysanne's hand slipped into hers, and Arya squeezed it tightly. In the weeks since the fire, she had seen so little of Alysanne, who stayed at Elia's bedside while she teetered on the edge of life and death. The poor girl was in near constant pain, the milk of the poppy required to keep her from screaming; the maesters were still not certain an infection would not claim her, and Alysanne remained at her bedside, clasping her good hand. The Tyrells wanted to take her back to Highgarden, their ruined princess, but the maesters insisted they wait until she was healed. Arya visited Elia a few times, the closest thing to a parent she had left, but Arya doubted she was even aware of what was going on, that she had lost her parents, her sisters, her baby brother.

Rhaenys stood silently on Arya's other side, Brandon on the other side of Alysanne. As the High Septon placed the crown atop Aemon's head, Arya bit her tongue to keep from crying out in protest. He looked so much like Aegon, like every Targaryen king, but Arya knew this was never what Aemon wanted; Aemon cared so little for power, and Arya could never understand why anyone would want a crown for their child. She thought of the cutting words once thrown at her, challenging her decision to have children with powerful men if she so disliked power, and Arya wondered how long the decisions she made with childish impulsivity would affect her children.

“He'll be a good king.” Arya murmured, more to comfort herself than anything else, and she caught Alysanne nodding in agreement out of the corner of her eye.

As the crown was placed atop Aegon's head, the Sept burst into applause, but Arya could not seem to cheer for this turn of events. How could any woman cheer for such a burden being placed on the shoulders of her son?

The Great Hall was decorated in Targaryen splendor, the aromas of so many courses filling the air; Arya's stomach growled and she tried to remember the last full meal she ate since the fire. Since that horrible night, Arya tried to keep moving forward, tried to do anything except sit still and think about what happened. There were no bodies to inter, no bones to be blessed. That was the hardest thing for Arya to accept: that she could not say goodbye to her babies, to Ashara, Renly, and Aegon.

It was a peculiar thing, being a widow again after so long. Arya knew most thought she and Aegon hated each other by the end, but it wasn't so. Life would have been far easier for them both if hatred was ever an emotion they experienced towards the other. The timing and circumstances were never quite right, but, as Arya took her seat at the great banquet table, she looked at her children and knew there was certainly nothing to regret about her last marriage. Aegon Targaryen was a good man, and, though she was not sure how much she believed in the seven heavens, she hoped Daena and Daeron were there with their father.

A lump rose sharply in her throat as tears burned her eyes. She drained her wine cup, signaling a servant to refill it, and she looked towards the center of the table. Aemon sat in the position of honor, already looking weighted down by his new role; Rhaenys was at his right hand, Alysanne at his left.
Arya did not think she had ever seen Rhaenys look so beautiful before, her brilliant crimson gown a perfect complement to her dark coloring; her smile was genuine, the smile Arya remembered from when she was a girl, and if there was any good to come from this whole affair, she hoped Rhaenys's happiness would be it.

Unlike Rhaenys, Alysanne wore a cerulean gown, her silver hair woven into an intricate crown of braids held in place with onyx and sapphire combs. Alysanne had never been as beautiful as her older sister; too many of the long Stark features gave Alysanne a plainer look than Rhaenys the same way they made Arya plainer than Sansa. But even though Alysanne would never be heralded as a great beauty, there was something more pleasing about Alysanne, something which drew the eye. Arya thought it was her grin, always so open and inviting, and today was no exception; she watched as Alysanne inclined her head towards Brandon, both of them whispering before breaking into loud, boisterous laughter that made Rhaenys hiss at them in chastisement. There was a clear division now between her children, and Arya did not know how to repair it. So long as Rhaenys and Aemon kept their foolish plan to marry, Arya wasn't sure there was a way. Brandon seemed convinced such a marriage would give Rhaenys the kind of power she always wanted, and, as Alysanne confessed to Arya, Rhaenys did not seem to wear power well.

Her Stark family filled a table nearest theirs, a place of honor; Arya forced herself not to look at the Targaryen table, which sat empty. Daenerys chose not to participate in the day’s festivities, and Arya certainly couldn’t blame her. She remained with Elinor, locked away somewhere with their grief. Arya knew her niece was not taking Rhaego’s death well. For all of the fury their betrothal caused, Elinor truly loved Rhaego. Arya wondered if Rhaenys mourned her cousin and lost love as well. It was so hard to read her these days, and Arya hated how inept she felt now with her children. Though she never considered herself a roaring success as a mother, she always thought she understood her children in a way her parents never understood her. Now that she was older, now that they were, Arya found herself at a loss so consistently, the urge to apologize to Ned and Catelyn was near constant.

Her parents had not come for the coronation, sending their regrets by raven. Ned was ill, his arthritis keeping him nearly confined to a wheeled chair, and it would be impossible for him to make the journey. Arya still felt a stab of panic every time a raven arrived from Winterfell, terrified it would bring word her father was gone. Even as old as she was, Arya did not think she was ready to live in a world without Ned Stark in it. In his place came Robb, Jeyne, and their boys; Robb’s beard was fully grey now, and it startled Arya when she saw him. She didn’t know why; both she and Sansa complained of the lines on their faces and the silver finding its way into their hair. Even Bran and Rickon were starting to show their ages, and Arya wondered when they all got old.

"This isn’t our time anymore, she realized as the musicians began to play. Our days have passed and now the world belongs to our children.

“They’re not ready,” Arya murmured aloud, but no one heard. Sometimes she thought people stopped hearing her years earlier.

She waited for Aemon to rise and start the dancing, but her shy son stayed stubbornly in his seat, speaking with the lords and ladies who came to offer their blessings. Arya leaned towards Rhaenys, telling her to encourage Aemon to do his duty, but Rhaenys waved her away, insisting Aemon would move at his own time. With an irritated huff, Arya looked towards the other end of the table and saw Alysanne and Brandon were already rising, Brandon leading his older sister towards the dance floor. Alysanne looked downright child sized in Brandon’s arms, but they both moved with a grace Arya was certain neither inherited from her. Brandon whispered something to Alysanne, which made her face bloom with a smile, and Arya stared for a moment at the picture they made.
The floor began to fill with other couples, and Arya soon lost sight of her children amongst the throng. She pushed to her feet, moving towards her siblings in hopes of finding some sort of sense among the madness.

Gendry found her in the library the following night, her torch burning bright amongst the darkness. Arya sat in one of the high-backed chairs, one of the large, leather bound tomes which recounts the history of the Seven Kingdoms before her. There, on the sprawling list of monarchs, was Aemon’s name, recently entered by the Grand Maester. She ran her fingers over the curves of the letters, and, as Gendry sat beside her, her eyes flicked to the names above Aemon’s, to the brief dates which recounted the rule of Gendry Baratheon, the First of his Name.

“Do you ever miss being king?” she asked.

“I was only one for a fortnight and even that was during a war. It was hardly a pleasant time to rule.”

“Is there a pleasant time?”

“My father seemed to find the whole thing quite pleasant. Of course, he left the ruling to Jon Arryn and your father while getting drunk and whoring, so that likely affected his perceptions.”

“I don’t want Aemon to be king.” Arya sighed, heaving the book closed. “He isn’t built for it. He never was.”

“He’ll learn. You can teach him.”

“What do I know about being a king?”

“You were wed to one for years.” Gendry shrugged. “No one truly knows how to be one, Arya. Everyone muddles through and hopes their advisers know better than they do.”

“And if they don’t?”

“You pray for peace.”

She snorted. “Peace. I don’t even remember it anymore. It feels like I’ve always been at war in some way.”

“Wars of your own making.” He smiled wryly at her offended expression. “We’re too old for false pleasantry, aren’t we? There was a time you’d have run me through for even suggesting it.”

“True.” She settled back in her chair, absently waving a loose lock of hair from her eyes. “I thought of that today, how we’re not young anymore.”

“We haven’t been young in a long time. I think I’ve forgotten what it was even like.”

“Do you ever look at your girls and see all the ways you did them wrong?”

His sigh was deep and weary. “I would like to believe I didn’t do them wrong, that they always felt happy and safe and loved by me. But I… I wonder if it was right to wed Elinor to Rhaego, if I erred in never allowing Rose the freedom she wanted, if Alisa has been soured by the amount of time she spent with my mother. It’s a dangerous game though, Arya, playing at what might have been.”

She nearly commented on how strange it was to hear him say that when it was all they had ever done, play at what-ifs and what might have been. Gods, Brandon was proof enough of that. Arya felt as if she and Gendry had been trying to rewrite history for nearly as long as they had known each
other, and all it ever seemed to do was hurt everyone around them.

But rather than point it out, she offered, “Something bad is coming. I can feel it in my bones.”

“Because Aemon is king?”

“Because Rhaenys will be queen.” Arya’s eyes began to burn. “And because I don’t know what is going to happen when she has that sort of power.”

“You think she’ll abuse it?”

“I think so many people made enemies of my children, and Rhaenys does not forgive her enemies.” She quickly brushed away an errant tear. “But mostly I fear what the kingdoms are going to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“The people have always been distrustful of my children. And now with the fire…You’ve heard the whispers?”

Gendry nodded just as Arya knew he would. Though the words were exchanged in hushed voices, Arya heard them all the same: Princess Rhaenys gave the egg to little Olenna knowing mad Viserys would try to hatch it, that it was all a plot to eliminate the rest of the line of succession and leave the Iron Throne empty for her children to fill. She certainly did not want to believe it. After all, Arya could still see the shock and disbelief in Rhaenys’s eyes as Summerhall burned, as she realized her siblings, her father, the men and women she grew up alongside were dead. But there was also the niggling doubt in her belly, the constant thrum that compelled Arya to wonder why Rhaenys would travel around the world to procure a dragon’s egg only to give it to a little girl she never considered a true sister.

“I also know they’re lies. No child you raised could ever kinslay.”

Arya wanted to find comfort in the words, but she feared comfort was a thing of the past now.

Elia Targaryen’s room reeked of death. Arya blamed the maester the Tyrells brought from Highgarden for it. He refused to allow anyone to open the windows of her chamber for fear of letting in disease. If the burns festered, the old man explained, it would certainly spell death for Jessa’s remaining daughter. Arya knew nothing of burns or healing, but she doubted anyone could get better in a dark room with such a foul stench.

There was always a Tyrell with Elia, as if they thought Arya or one of her children would do something to the poor child. Arya did not fight it; she knew the paranoia in her own heart, the urge to leave her bed at night just to make certain her children were still safe and alive. With Jessa and Olenna both gone, the Tyrells lost not only their royal hopes but daughters as well. Margaery spent the most time with her great-niece, and today was no exception. As Arya let herself into the shadowed room, she sat Margaery seated next to the bed, a bit of embroidery on her lap.

Margaery Tyrell was as beautiful as she had been all those years ago when she and Sansa competed to be Gendry’s bride. Though there were a few lines around her mouth and a few threads of silver in her hair, Margaery could easily pass for someone much younger than her true age, and as she turned her gaze upon Arya, she saw the Tyrell shrewdness burned bright there.

“Your grace,” Margaery greeted with an inclination of her head.
“Lady Baratheon.” Arya crossed to the foot of the bed, looking down at her injured stepdaughter. The maesters would not let her have blankets and pus from the burns was seeping through the silk coverings, a truly horrifying sight given that so much of her body was hidden by silk. If she survived this, more than half of her body would be covered with thick scars. Arya dimly remembered the man who used to serve Joffrey, the one they called the Hound, and for the first time she thought about how the man earned those horrific marks.

“How is she today?”

Margaery tried to smile but even a courtier as skilled at deception as she was could not hide the genuine pain in her heart. “There is the start of an infection on her leg. The maesters think they might need to remove it.”

A wave of nausea rose in Arya. “Take her leg? Is she strong enough to survive that?”

“No,” Margaery stated matter-of-factly, staring at Elia’s still form. She was given milk of the poppy almost constantly to keep her from screaming and crying. Arya could not even remember the last time Elia was awake. “My father has asked the High Septon to say the rites over her.”

“Seven hells,” Arya breathed, her throat tightening. No matter how she felt towards Jessa Tyrell, Arya certainly never wished ill on her daughters. Olenna and Elia were always doting big sisters to Daena and Daeron, and she doubted anyone could find girls with sweet temperaments. She could still remember when they first returned to King’s Landing, how Alysanne adored playing the older, wiser sister to Jessa’s girls, how Arya would laugh as Olenna and Elia would try to mimic everything Alysanne did. Even when Alysanne would return to court from Starfall, they would rush to meet her, begging for Alysanne to style their hair in the Dornish fashion, demanding Aegon purchase them gowns like Alysanne’s. For the first time since the fire, Arya truly considered what it meant for Jessa’s daughters to be gone.

“It would have been a kinder death for her to perish with her sister,” Margaery offered, brushing a lock of hair away from the unblemished side of Elia’s face. “This is no way for anyone to live, let alone a child.”

“I do not understand,” Arya began before trailing off.

There was so much she did not understand, least of all how to finish her sentence.

For three days and nights, Arya waited for word that Elia finally perished due to her injuries, to hear the peel of bells from the Great Sept of Baelor signaling the death of a member of the royal family. And yet, after three days of waiting, Alysanne came to breakfast and announced the infection receded from Elia’s leg and the Tyrell maester thought she might just live after all.

What kind of life Elia would have was another matter.

It was the saddest excuse for a small council meeting Arya had ever seen. As she entered the chamber, all she could see were the empty seats, the reminders of how many good men perished at Summerhall. All four of her remaining children were seated around the grand table: Aemon at the head, Rhaenys at his right hand, Alysanne and Brandon seated beside each other on the opposite side. Bran sat further down the table, his face a pensive mask, and Arya wondered what position Aemon wanted to install her younger brother in; only last night Aemon lamented the lack of men and women he trusted throughout the kingdoms, and even Rhaenys agreed they could hardly fill the entire small council with Starks without raising a rebellion.
“We have six positions to fill,” Rhaenys announced, and Arya already knew this would be how Aemon’s kingdom was run: by proxy, “and not nearly enough people to fill them.”

“What position are you filling?” Arya asked Bran.

He gave her a small smile. “Aemon has asked me to be Hand of the king.”

Arya hoped her surprised didn’t show on her face. She expected Aemon to appoint Rhaenys, making her queen and Hand, the same graceless offer Aegon once offered her. In so many ways, Aemon was different from his father, but their lack of political savvy, their inability to see the larger picture was a fatal flaw shared by both Targaryen men. Arya scarcely considered herself gifted at the game of thrones; it was a game she always had so little interest in, but even she knew there were certain moves you could not make without telegraphing aggression to your enemies.

“The kingdoms always operated well when Grandfather was Hand,” Aemon explained, “and the people trust House Stark. And I have offered the position of Grand Maester to Maester Sam. I’ve written to Uncle Jon, agreed to send any amount of men he’d like to the Wall for Sam to be released from his vows.”

“You should offer Lady Allyria or Lord Beric a seat,” Alysanne spoke up, her voice markedly softer than either of her siblings. “Starfall has always been loyal to our cause, Lady Allyria cared for me as if I was her own child, and it would have been what Grandmother Ashara wanted.”

“What seat would you give her?” Aemon asked.

Alysanne was quiet for a moment, contemplating, before declaring, “Master of Laws. Lord Beric believes very strongly in fairness, which is what you would need, isn’t it?”

There was such genuine affection on Aemon’s face at Alysanne’s declaration, for a moment Arya could pretend they were children again and Alysanne mastered a task rather than decided who should sit on his council. And then Brandon shifted, drawing Aemon’s eye, and both of her boys scowled.

“You have to give a Tyrell a seat,” Brandon stated.

“Are you mad? The Tyrells hate us!” Rhaenys exclaimed.

“All the more reason to do it. They hate you, they blame you for Summerhall, think you planned to steal the throne and cut them out of everything. Do you truly want to fuel the rumors by taking away their seats and sending them back to Highgarden to plot?”

“Let them plot,” she said dismissively. “Have them march 20,000 men of the Reach towards King’s Landing, and I will let Balerion do the rest.”

“Rhaenys, do not even joke about that,” Arya snapped. “Hasn’t there been enough death without you threatening to sic a dragon on the countryside?”

“We shall not bow to the fucking Tyrells!”

“Then bow to basic commonsense,” Alysanne requested. “I don’t want to go to war with anyone, and I don’t want to lose any of you. Isn’t it bad enough we’ve already lost Father and the twins, Grandmother Ashara, Rolly, Haldon? I couldn’t bear it, Rhaenys, and I wish you wouldn’t even say it.”

It was a deft manipulation, and Arya had no doubt that’s what it was. Immediately Rhaenys
apologized, her face softening as much as Arya had seen it since her return, and Aemon reached over, covering Alysanne’s hand with his own in comfort. Arya believed Alysanne meant what she said; none of them were eager to bury another. But the way she made certain her voice trembled, the way she looked pleadingly towards Aemon for support, it was downright masterful. Though Arya didn’t understand the dynamics of her children’s fighting, she knew Alysanne always seemed to be the frailest of them and all strived to protect her. If Arya knew that, no doubt Alysanne did as well, and what better way to put down a fight she did not want to hear?

But even as Arya admired the way Alysanne defused the situation, she couldn’t help but notice the twinge of hurt and jealousy on Rhaenys’s face as Aemon assured Alysanne nothing would ever happen to anyone so long as he was king.

Nor did Arya miss the anger and jealousy on Brandon’s handsome face.

The bickering over appointments took far longer than Arya wanted it to as names were suggested and promptly shut down. Even Bran, whose patience always seemed to be infinite, looked as if he wanted to be anywhere but in the chamber, and when the list was decided, Arya wanted to cheer. She felt as if she was 9-years-old again, bored out of her mind while Septa Mordane tried to correct her embroidery, and she needed to be free of the stifling room.

“Wait, we haven’t chosen a Lord Commander.”

It had been difficult enough to select an entirely new Kingsguard. There seemed to be so few knights now who were renowned for their ability; there was no Loras Tyrell or Barristan Selmy or even Jaime Lannister. Both summer and peace bred men who enjoyed the trappings of knighthood without a real talent for it, and it made it all the harder to decide who should be honored with a white cloak.

“Why not Brandon?” Aemon suggested, the chamber instantly falling into dead silence. “That is what you have always wanted, isn’t it? We used to speak of it when you were young. I would be king and you would be Lord Commander.”

“But he is the Lord of Storm’s End,” Arya eventually managed. “Renly left no other heirs.”

“There are a dozen Baratheons about,” Aemon reasonably pointed out, “between Robert’s children and grandchildren. Even Stannis Baratheon’s daughter has a child or two. Storm’s End would certainly not go empty.”

“He is not even a knight. And he cannot take the vows because he does not worship the Seven.” Arya turned to look at Brandon, who suddenly looked every bit as young as he was. “Renly named you his heir. That was a great honor.”

“Greater than Lord Commander of the Kingsguard?” Rhaenys drawled skeptically. “It was always meant to be like this. Don’t you remember, Brandon, when we lived on Dragonstone and you used to say you’d protect us when we took our thrones?”

“That was a long time ago,” Arya continued, a sickness swirling in her belly, “and things are different now. Brandon, you wanted to be Lord of the Stormlands. You…This is what you wanted.”

Brandon finally looked at her, and it took everything within Arya not to go to him, to try to comfort him as if he was small again instead of a man-grown. “I want to protect my pack. I have always wanted to wear a white cloak.”

Aemon and Rhaenys both grinned, Aemon getting to his feet to embrace his brother. The sight
should have made Arya happy; all she wanted was for her sons to be friends again, to put aside the petty resentments and slights to be whole. But she had never wanted the white cloak for Brandon in the same way she never wanted the crown for Aemon; the Red Keep was a dangerous place for those who sought to wield power within it.

Alysanne did not join the embrace. As the meeting was finally adjourned, Bran joining Aemon, Rhaenys, and Brandon in discussions of what would come next, Arya sidled up to her youngest daughter and admitted, “I do not know what just happened.”

The bitterness on Alysanne’s face startled Arya. “The people like Brandon; they whisper about how good life was under Robert. In the Stormlands, who knows what a man could plan, especially an angry one? This was no honor. This was the two of them scheming to keep Brandon close so they could watch him.”

“I cannot believe – “

“You will believe what you want to believe,” Alysanne interrupted, shocking Arya with the steel in her voice, “just as you always have. You have no idea what Rhaenys is capable of doing. You’ve never wanted to see.”

“See what?”

“See who anyone us truly are, Mother. You have had your ideas since we were small, and you just expect us to behave that way.” Alysanne wrapped her arms around herself and sighed. “You cannot raise dragons as wolves and expect for them to change into wolves.”

“Is that what you are, Aly, a dragon?”

Alysanne turned her Stark grey eyes on her and said, “It is what I am going to have to be for what comes next.”

From the time she was small, Alysanne seemed to speak in riddles, but for the first time, Arya began to wonder if mayhaps there wasn’t some evil coming their way.

He looked like an excited little boy.

It was all Arya could think as she entered Brandon’s room to see him standing before the full-length looking glass in his very best clothing. The white cloak would be given to him at the ceremony; Aemon was paying a small fortune to have white armor made for all the new Kingsguard and Arya wondered if that would be how she came to see her youngest son: always wearing the white armor she still associated with men like Jaime Lannister and Meryn Trant. She never much cared for the Kingsguard both before and after being queen, but she recognized it was many a boy’s wish to become one of the white swords. Gods knew it had been all Brandon spoke of when he was running around with Winterfell with his cousins.

“That is a fine shirt,” Arya commented as she came to stand beside him, touching the sleeve of the white linen embroidered with black and gold. “Did Alysanne make it for you?”

“Aunt Sansa. She said it is like the one my – my father wore when he was made king.” Brandon blushed as he fidgeted with the collar, and Arya nearly asked if he wished to refer to Gendry as his father more freely. It was certainly no secret, but the actual acknowledgment of his origins was still something Brandon lacked. She thought of Jon Snow on the Wall, of finding out about his own true parentage, and she wondered if there was some sort of curse on Stark women.
Arya thought of little Aeron and the baby born without breath, and she wondered how many times Sansa dreamt of doing something like this for her own sons. She remembered after Brandon was born, how she thought Brandon belonged to everyone at Winterfell for the way he was doted upon, and Arya did not think she’d mind if Sansa wanted to do kind things for her son. There was a time Arya didn’t think it would even be a possibility for she and Sansa to be friends, let alone for her sister to make the bastard son of her husband and sister a gift.

“The ladies of court will weep today when you vow to never take a wife.” Arya absently brushed off his shoulders. “Are you certain you understand what you’re giving away today?”

“Mother – “

“Wearing the cloak means giving away Storm’s End, never having a wife or child of your own – “

“I’m not some green boy who is trundling into this blindly. I have known women – “

“Bedding a woman is not the same as understanding what you’re giving away,” she interrupted. “Your uncle Jon learned the hard way that making an unbreakable vow so young can be a difficult thing – “

“I won’t regret this,” Brandon insisted with all the arrogance of youth. “Aemon asked me to be Lord Commander, Mother. Any man in the Seven Kingdoms, and he trusts me the most. How could I say no to that?”

When they were small, it never surprised Arya to see Brandon trailing after Rhaenys or Aemon with blatant hero worship on his face. Back then, all Brandon wanted was to be included; it certainly seemed as if nothing had changed. She wished she could be happy Brandon wanted to be with his siblings, that his siblings wanted to give him this honor, but Alysanne’s words still rang in her head. How well did she truly see her children? Did every mother have such blindness?

“Be happy for me,” Brandon requested, taking her hands in his. “Renly would understand why I’m making this choice.”

Renly would tell you it is a fruitless struggle to earn the praise of a king, especially when he is your brother. Arya reached up, smoothing the stray lock of his hair which always seemed to stand straight up. “You shall be a wonderful Lord Commander.”

Brandon smiled and kissed her forehead. “You worry too much, Mother.”

Before she could reply, Arya heard the chamber door open. She turned and saw Alysanne standing in the doorway, her face looking nearly as unhappy as Arya’s own. Her silver hair was unbound today, falling in gentle waves over her shoulders; combined with the pale blue of her gown, it made Alysanne look like one of the princesses in the stories Daena used to beg to hear at bedtime. But it was not Alysanne’s appearance that gave Arya pause; it was the way Brandon could not seem to look at her at all.

“I shall see you at the Sept,” Arya said to Brandon, rising on her toes to kiss his bearded cheek. As she moved past Alysanne, her daughter brushed her fingers against Arya’s wrist, and Arya knew in that moment Alysanne would do everything she could to talk Brandon out of this decision.

Whatever Alysanne said, it did not work. Arya sat in the front pew of the Great Sept with her daughters on either side of her as Aemon wrapped the white cloak around Brandon’s shoulders. She could not resist glancing over her shoulder to see Gendry beaming with pride beside Sansa, whose face seemed caught between pride and sorrow. As Aemon declared Brandon Baratheon to be Lord
Commander and the Sept erupted in applause; Gendry looked at Arya; for a moment they only stared at each other before Gendry inclined his head and Arya understood perfectly. The past was the past now. Starting that moment, the slate would be clean.

The applause continued. Arya began to turn back around but paused as Alysanne tugged a lock of hair behind her ear, revealing a bright pink love bite behind her ear. It was then Arya saw the sheen of tears in her eyes, the trembling of her chin, and Arya realized Alysanne had been right.

She did not know her children at all.

“Do you know your children?”

Sansa looked up from her embroidery, a look of confused amusement on her face. “Yes, I am familiar with them.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Do you know them? Do you think you know the deepest parts of them, their secrets?”

“What are you talking about, Arya? Is this about those rumors again? Because I’ve told you time and again, I don’t believe Rhaenys – “

“No, not Rhaenys.” Arya sighed, afraid to give voice to her fears, afraid of how Sansa would react. Instead she asked, ‘Do you know your daughters’…dalliances? The boys they’ve kissed, the love affairs they’ve had?’

“I – I do not know. I heard rumor that Rose had some sort of affair with one of the Marbrand boys, but if she did, she was wondrously discreet. Elinor was so proper, I know she went to her marriage bed a maid. And Alisa, she is so emotional, I can’t imagine she’d be able to keep a secret long. Why? Do you think one of your girls is having a love affair?”

“I know Rhaenys is no maid. Rhaego saw to that years ago. Ashara mentioned Alysanne having a flirtation with one of Myrcella’s sons, but I don’t…” Arya huffed, her tongue tangled. “I thought life would become simpler the older they got but I swear it’s harder now.”

Sansa laughed. “Mother told me once that you never grow out of it, fretting over your children. When you were gone, I think she lit a thousand candles for your safe return. The smaller they are, the more you can fix things. A cut knee, a hurt feeling, they can be soothed with a hug and a kiss. But now…How can I make Elinor feel better about being a widow? How do I convince Rose to wed? How can I convince Alisa that Gendry and I don’t prefer her sisters?”

“You and Gendry do prefer her sisters.”

“We do not!” Sansa argued, looking at Arya with the same irritation she had when they were at Winterfell. “My point is that once they can make their own decisions, their own mistakes, that’s when everything starts flying out of your control.”

“I don’t feel as if anything has ever been in my control.”

“Oh, Arya, I would have killed to have half as much control over my life as you have had over yours.” Setting aside her needlework, she asked, “What is it you think you cannot control?”

“You’ve heard the rumors about Aemon’s…marriage intentions?”

“That he intends to wed Rhaenys in the Targaryen fashion? Yes. Most of court expects the
“I did not raise them that way. They weren’t taught it was right; they weren’t raised like the Targaryens of old were. I raised them like Starks. How can they make this choice?”

“Mayhaps it is in their blood. They woke dragons from stone, Arya. The Targaryen in them is certainly stronger than the Stark.”

“It disgusts me. Gods, even the idea of it…” Arya pushed to her feet, pacing the floor in agitation. “And I think it is worse than I know. I think I turned a blind eye to everything, that I was so wrapped up in myself and Aegon and the drama of it all, I didn’t even realize what was going on beneath my nose.”

“Arya, I know you are loathe to accept advice from anyone, let alone me, but sometimes the only answer to the problem is to realize there are no answers.”

“‘There are no answers?’ That’s the advice you give me?”

Sansa smirked as she picked up her embroidery. “I did not say it was good advice.”

Sometimes Arya liked Sansa better before she developed a sense of humor.

It never ceased to amaze Arya that she and Allyria Dayne shared the same blood. Arya’s fascination with Sansa’s beauty ended when they were still children; it was hard to stay in awe of a person you saw every day, whose life was so intrinsically tied with your own. With Allyria, the fascination never quite seemed to fade. Though Alysanne was the only one Arya ever shared the truth with, Arya wondered if others saw in Allyria the similarities to the Starks Arya recognized. Did they notice she gnawed her lip like Arya did? Did they see the way she studied something for a while before making a decision in the same patient way Bran did? Did they recognize her flares of temper as being like those of Robb or Rickon? Arya doubted it. Allyria looked so much like Ashara had, all dark hair and violet eyed; no one would ever expect the secrets which would likely to go to the grave without being revealed.

This morning Allyria sat in Arya’s solar, her dark hair falling in a tumble of curls over her shoulder. She did not look her age, and Arya thought mayhaps she even looked younger than Arya did. Arya never considered herself a vain person, but she thought it impossible not to compare one’s self to Allyria when she wore her beauty with the nonchalance of someone used to it. It was the same way Sansa and Rhaenys wore theirs, as if it was some pesky detail they were tired of discussing. As Allyria told tale of one of her daughters – Arya could never quite seem to keep track, what with all of the A names – Arya tried to figure out how to ask the question weighing heavily on her mind.

“I swear, I’d sell my soul to the Stranger if she had half the good sense Alysanne does.”

“Speaking of Alysanne, when she was at Starfall, did she have any…romances?”

Allyria smirked. “You mean that flirtation with Landyn Martell? I think it was far more serious in his mind than it was in Alysanne’s. I scarcely think they had time to do anything beyond hold hands. Why, are you matchmaking?”

Arya snorted. “Gods, no. I was simply wondering because she seems so…disinterested in it all.”

Hoping her voice sounded casual, she asked, “Did Brandon often come to Starfall?”

The older woman paused as she thought. “Renly brought him about once a year, I think. Ashara took
Alysanne to Storm’s End as well a half-dozen times. Why?”

“I just – Have you ever – Do you ever suspect – “

“That Alysanne and Brandon loved each other as Targaryens do?” Allyria suggested dryly. “I never thought so.” Allyria’s face softened some as she reached across the table, resting her hand atop Arya’s.

“They are good children, Arya. The love they have for each other is pure.”

Arya nodded, relief coursing through her. *I have been working myself up over nothing*, she thought. *Alysanne must have a lover, and she was simply sad Brandon is being used by their siblings. That is all.*

She hoped she would never have to think of the subject again.

Most days Arya forgot about the dragons. Aegon’s reinforcement of the pits kept them out of sight, and though the sounds occasionally reached the Keep, Arya trained herself not to hear. Nymeria and Lady despised them, snapping her jaws every time one of the dragons became too loud, and Arya knew they likely never left the minds of the smallfolk. A dozen or so times, boys with too much stupid courage tried to glimpse the dragons, and each time ended in charred flesh and death. While Meraxes and Vhagar were always kept locked away both in body and in Arya’s mind, it was Balerion who worried her most. Rhaenys still refused to say where the massive black dragon was, and Arya feared some day the beast would fly overhead and destroy them all.

It was because she often forgot about the dragons that Arya did not immediately recognize the sound of the drums echoing through the courtyard. Only when one of the Kingsguard came rushing towards her screaming to get inside the Keep did Arya remember the drums were only to be sounded when one of the dragons escaped. She heard the flap of wings only a half-second before she was thrust into the Keep and she strived to see which of her children’s dragons was going to lay waste to the city.

“It’s Vhagar!” Alysanne gasped as the men inside the Keep began to gather as many arrows as they could find. “I can calm him!”

“Calm a dragon? Alysanne – “

“Would you rather I try or let Brandon die attempting it?” she challenged, and Arya could not bear the idea of losing another of her children in such a heinous manner. She watched as Alysanne rushed past Rhaenys, grasping Aemon’s hands and speaking to him urgently. Rhaenys appeared to be disagreeing, but Aemon nodded.

“What are you going to do?” Arya asked of them both, but Aemon ignored her, ordering her into Maegor’s Holdfast with the rest of the women and children. Arya hated it, the outright dismissal of her, but Sansa began shouting her name, tugging her by the hand towards safety.

They were the longest hours of Arya’s life. When Brandon and another white sword finally allowed them out, Arya saw Rhaenys standing behind them, a look of such total frustration on her face she looked like a petulant child. Brandon reported Vhagar was bound in the pit once again, held with fresh chains; the count of the dead was 20 so far, most patrons of an alehouse engulfed by Vhagar’s flames.

“You should have seen Alysanne, Mother,” Brandon said, genuine awe in his voice. “It was as if she was one with the dragon, like you are with Nymeria. She climbed right on his back and got him into
the pit without so much as a struggle. Can you imagine?”

“No,” Arya said, “I can’t.”

It was the talk of the kingdoms, the way Alysanne handled the dragon. When she and Aemon returned to the Keep, Alysanne’s gown was dirty with soot; her slippers were gone, her hair unbound, and Arya thought she looked like an illustration Maester Aemon had in one of his tomes. Aemon was equally as sooty, a small cut on his forehead, but he beamed with pride as he sang the triumphs of Alysanne’s efforts. Aemon declared they would have a feast in Alysanne’s honor for saving King’s Landing, and the people seemed eager to celebrate her success. It was only when Arya saw the genuinely puzzled expression on Rhaenys’s face that she knew something was amiss.

“I rode a dragon and all of Westeros feared me,” Rhaenys said, her voice sounding strangely hollow. “She rides a dragon, and she is a hero. Why do they love her so much but hate me?”

“No one hates you, Rhaenys.”

“They do. They will always love her better no matter what good I will do.” Rhaenys looked at her with dark eyes swollen with pain, and for the first time in years, Arya realized Rhaenys was nowhere near as tough as she tried to be. “How can I compete with her?”

“You do not have to compete. There is no reason to do it.”

But when Aemon announced at the feast that he would be wedding both of his sisters just as Aegon the Conqueror had, Arya understood Rhaenys was right. There was a competition taking place between her daughters, and Arya feared what the stakes were.

If Aemon’s coronation was a somber affair, his wedding was anything but. In the year that had passed since Summerhall, memories began to fade, suspicions began to abate; Rhaenys may not be favored by the people, but Aemon and Alysanne were both thought to be benevolent. The year’s prosperity helped fuel support, and, just as Aemon said it would, the choice of Bran as Hand gave the kingdoms the security of a familiar man helming the throne.

Aemon insisted no expense be spared for the nuptials. Both Rhaenys and Alysanne had new gowns made of the finest Myrish lace and silk from the Summer Islands; though neither of her daughters would wear maiden’s cloaks, the cloaks Aemon had made to give each of them were some of the finest cloaks she had ever seen. The feast alone cost more money than Arya thought the coffers could handle, but Aemon insisted the kingdoms needed a reason to celebrate.

“And what better to celebrate than love?”

Arya did not doubt her children loved each other; Gods knew she hoped she raised them to do that much at least. But she could not fathom they would love each other in the way a husband and his wife should. And, as Arya helped dress Alysanne’s hair, she suspected Alysanne felt the same way. There was a sickliness to Alysanne’s pallor Arya watched her cover with rouge, painting health and happiness onto her face. The gown Alysanne wore was ebony with intricate crimson beading on the bodice; Arya knew Rhaenys’s was the opposite, a brilliant red with black beading. Rhaenys insisted on dressing her own hair this morning, but Alysanne asked for help and Arya suspected it was due to the utter terror on her face.

“You do not have to do this,” Arya murmured as she clumsily attempted to weave black ribbons into Alysanne’s coronet of braids.

“Yes, I do.”
“Aemon would understand if you chose a different path.”

“I’m not choosing this path because Aemon asked me.” Alysanne sighed, running her hands over the silk skirts. “Though I do think he believes I love him the way a wife should love her husband. I think he wants that.”

“He has that with Rhaenys.”

“No, he doesn’t. Aemon and Rhaenys…It is an arrangement. They love each other the way you and Uncle Bran love each other. They are doing this so Rhaenys can be queen and Aemon does not have to truly rule.”

“Then why does he not abdicate – “

“Because no one will ever follow Rhaenys alone. She needs him in a way he doesn’t need her.”

“If that is the case, why are you doing this? Is it to stay in King’s Landing? Because you do not – “

“She shouldn’t be queen, Mother. You know it as well as I do. Aemon listens to me now, and he trusts me.”

“Then you can be his adviser. You do not have to be his wife.”

“And if Rhaenys has an heir, that’s it. Her children will inherit, they’ll be the next Targaryen dynasty, and what then? I love her. I know you doubt it, but I do. She is my sister, and I would die to protect her from harm. But there is too much of the madness in her, the paranoia, the fear. What do you think that will look like in 20 years? What do you think she’ll teach her children?”

Arya felt a lump rising in her throat as she understood what Alysanne was truly saying. “You’re marrying Aemon to have the first heir. You want your son to be king.”

“I don’t want him to be king, but I want it more than I want to see Rhaenys’s power solidified. This is for the good of the realm.”

“You should not have to sacrifice your happiness for the realm. It never ends the way you think it would.”

“Aemon is a good man. Mayhaps too good for these sorts of games. I could certainly have a worse husband. He’ll treat me well and he’ll treat the children I give him well. That will be enough.”

“But he is your brother.”

“And all we’ve ever had is each other, so it will not be so different now.” Alysanne sighed, turning her face up to look at Arya. “I am not asking you to understand. I am not asking you to support this. All I’m asking is that you try to recognize we are not like other people no matter how hard you try to think we are.”

“What of Brandon?” Arya blurted out, unsure why the old fear asserted itself at this moment, and from the way Alysanne looked away, Arya knew it hadn’t been her imagination at all.

“Brandon made his choice long before I made mine.”

“So it’s true then. You and Brandon…”

“When I was seven, Rickard told me I would have to marry Brandon someday, that it was the way Targaryens did things. He said Rhaenys would marry Aemon and I would marry Brandon.
We planned on that. From the time we were children, we always thought ourselves betrothed. Why do you think I sent back every suitor Father sent? When Olenna’s was announced, when Father summoned us all back, we thought he was going to announce ours as well. I told him it was what I wanted; it’s why he made Brandon Lord of Storm’s End. Didn’t he tell you?”

“No,” Arya whispered, her head spinning. “He never told me.”

Alysanne sighed, turning back towards the looking glass. She sat up straighter, pulling her shoulders back, and declared, “I will be Aemon’s queen, and Brandon will be his shield. We all made our choices.”

“You don’t understand how a single choice now can change everything.”

Alysanne scoffed. “My entire life has been the consequences of single choices you and Father made. If I could learn to live with those, I can certainly learn to live with this one.”

“Alysanne – “

“Just dress my hair, Mother.” Her voice cracked and tears welled in her eyes as she added, “Please.”

Seated in the Great Sept, Arya could admit her daughters were beautiful brides. Rhaenys’s smile was genuine as Aemon wrapped the cloak around her shoulders; Arya wondered if anyone else could tell how forced Alysanne’s was. As the High Septon declared them wed, Aemon brushing kisses against both of his sisters’ mouths, Arya looked to Brandon, who stared resolutely at the floor, his jaw clenched tightly. Arya recognized the expression well.

It was the same one Gendry wore every time Aegon touched her.

“I have to go to Storm’s End,” Gendry told Arya one afternoon after a meeting of the small council.

“Why?”

“Brandon joining the Kingsguard returned Storm’s End to me. There are matters to be settled, positions to appoint. It’s tedious work, but until one of the girls weds, it is my duty.”

“Oh.”

Arya hoped the disappointment did not show on her face. Since Summerhall burned, Gendry had been invaluable to her. So much of Sansa’s time was spent with Elinor, and, when Sansa returned to Casterly Rock with Elinor three moons prior, it left Arya bereft of true friendship. In her absence, she and Gendry began the sort of friendship they once had, and for once no one gossiped about it. There were no ugly accusations, no insinuations; by being public with their friendship for the first time, they had managed to erase suspicion in a near instant. Some evenings they even supped with Brandon, and it allowed Arya a small understanding of what it would have been like if she had made different choices in her youth.

“I was hoping you would come with me.”

Arya nearly stumbled over her own feet in surprise. “What? You cannot be serious.”

“I am. You ran Storm’s End for Renly during your marriage. You have an understanding of the Stormlands.”

“I did that twenty years ago. And if we ride out there together – “
“Sansa gave us her blessing a year ago, Arya,” Gendry reminded her, moving to stand before her. “She gave you the moon tea, she asked for discretion, but she did not say for us to deny ourselves. Haven’t we waited long enough for our time?”

They weren’t children anymore. The ache in Arya’s joints and the silver liberally appearing in Gendry’s black hair and beard were proof of that. Their children were grown, her husband was dead, his wife agreed; all of the things that stopped them in the past were gone now. Arya realized Gendry was right. They had waited long enough.

“There must be a reason I can tell Aemon, a true reason he will believe.”

Gendry’s smile started slow but it was bright as the sun. “Tell him you’re meeting with the Conningtons, that you wish to give Jon a posthumous honor. He’ll believe that, and it isn’t wholly a lie as I’m sure we can think of something to give him.”

“How long would we be staying?”

“A moon’s turn, mayhaps a bit longer.”

A moon’s turn. The longest she and Gendry had ever been alone was a few hours. The idea of so much time, of so much opportunity made Arya’s heart flutter as if she was a girl again.

“When do we leave?”

Aemon believed her story as easily as Arya knew he would. Rhaenys clearly did not believe her, and Alyssanne hid a smile behind her napkin but no one said a word against it. The only person who expressed any true opinion was Brandon. He came to her rooms the day before she left, clasped her to him, and said, “Have fun.”

Arya scarcely remembered fun, but she vowed she would do whatever it took to make sure it happened.

They were the happiest weeks of her life.

Storm’s End was how Arya remembered, right down to the disapproving looks its inhabitants gave her. But Gendry was well loved by the people of the Stormlands and Brandon even more so, and thus Arya was spared any true unfriendliness. Old Cortnay Penrose died years earlier, and the new castellan was a great deal kinder. He welcomed Gendry effusively, and Arya smiled to herself that, at least in the Stormlands, the Baratheons were still king.

Gendry was given Renly’s chambers and Arya returned to her old chamber, the one she had not been inside since the night she fled the Stormlands with Aegon. It felt like another woman’s life, the period of time when she was the Lady of Storm’s End, but Arya could admit she missed the smell of the salt water drifting through the window, the sight of the waves crashing against Shipbreaker Bay. Storm’s End was a beautiful place, even if it had not always been the kindest to her.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Gendry commented from the doorway.

Arya turned with a smile. “It feels a bit like it. I feel as if I’ve lived a dozen lives, but this one…I always regretted what happened here, what I did. I was so young and so painfully stupid.”

“We all were then. We all are still.” Gendry set his hands on her shoulders with deliberate care, almost as if he was afraid she’d turn to dust in his hands. “But we’re here now, and the past is the past.”
“The past is the past,” Arya echoed, turning her face up for a kiss.

It was some of the best weeks of her life. Arya would never say it aloud; in some ways, Gendry was more fanciful than she was and he would start to plan beyond this time. She could not allow herself the luxury of imagination; this time was limited, and Arya intended to joy it fully without thinking of the loneliness that would follow it.

Their days were spent riding through the countryside, walking on the beach, and indulging in everything they could possibly think of; Arya did not think she slept a wink the first two days, her desperation for Gendry’s touch rivaled only by his desperation for her. It was the most wonderful of routines, waking together, going about their days never far from the other. If the servants noticed, they turned a blind eye, and Arya sourly thought of old Cortnay Penrose reporting all of her misdeeds back to Robert.

Yet for all of the happiness, all of the indulging in everything they never had, Arya knew this was likely their last times together. This was a single escape. Once they returned to King’s Landing, she would resume the tedium of being Queen Mother, and Gendry would return to Sansa. Even with her blessing, Arya did not want to bed Gendry beneath Sansa’s nose ever again. They were too old to make the same mistakes again.

Sometimes Arya would catch her reflection in the full-length looking glass that once belonged to Cassana Estermont and would realize just how far from youth she was. She was still slim, but her breasts had lost their firmness long ago, the result of nursing her children; silvery marks covered her stomach and thighs, and her face bore the lines of a woman who lived a hard life. Brandon often touched the furrow between her eyes, telling her she looked as if she was constantly considering the end of the world, and Arya did not know how to impress upon him how much she fretted over everything. Arya studied herself now, touching the lines bracketing her mouth, and thought of her mother’s face, of how she wore her worry on her face as well.

“Do you think we’re destined to become our parents?” Arya asked Gendry that night as they lied in bed, Arya drawing random patterns on Gendry’s chest.

“Gods, I hope not.”

“Do you think the gods plan our lives and we have no control over it?”

“I think we make choices. I don’t know that the gods care about us at all.”

“There are times when I do not know which I would prefer, knowing I had no control for what has happened or that everything has happened because of what I did.”

Gendry brushed his lips against the crown of her head. “Let’s not think of it now.”

The raven arrived a week before they were to return to King’s Landing. She and Gendry returned from riding through the forest, both of them aching from such a hard ride after so many years in King’s Landing, and all Arya could think of was how wonderful a hot bath would be. They were barely inside the castle before the maester found them, presenting Arya with the letter. The bright red wax of the dragon seal made Arya’s chest tighten, and she found herself afraid to open it.

“If it were truly bad news, you would have received more than one raven,” Gendry logically pointed out, and Arya nodded, breaking the seal with a trembling hand.

“Alysanne is pregnant,” she read, numbness settling into her limbs.

And with that, the time for pretending ended and reality returned.
By the time Arya and Gendry returned to King’s Landing, Alysanne’s stomach was beginning to gently curve beneath her gown. While Alysanne smiled peacefully as Gendry offered his congratulations, Aemon grinned wider than Arya thought he ever had. It was not until Aemon was in the midst of explaining his plans for the child that Arya realized Rhaenys and Brandon were nowhere to be found.

“She is having a difficult time,” was all Aemon would offer when Arya mentioned his older sister, his smile wilting for the first time, and Arya knew something was amiss.

As Arya knew she would, she found Rhaenys in the stables grooming her horse. Rather than the elaborate gowns she had taken to wearing since her coronation, she wore riding leathers and an old tunic, her dark hair haphazardly braided down her back. When she saw Arya, Rhaenys paused for a moment before spitting, “Don’t you dare look at me with such pity in your eyes.”

“It’s not pity,” Arya argued calmly. “It’s concern.”

“For what? House Targaryen is blooming. There will be an heir in the cradle in only five moons time.” Rhaenys tore the brush through her horse’s mane, her hands gripping it so tightly, her knuckles were white. “Gods bless the good Queen Alysanne. Where would we be without her?”

“I know this isn’t what you wanted – “

“What I wanted?!” Rhaenys exploded, throwing the brush to the ground. “She has taken everything from me! The only constant I have ever had in this world is Aemon’s love, and even that Alysanne has wrangled away with a single pregnancy!”

“That is not true. You have had so much more than that – “

“No, I haven’t! Father loved us when it was convenient, you were wrapped up with Father and Gendry and Aunt Sansa! The only one left to care for me was Aemon, and you know it!”

Arya cringed from the assessment of her parenting. She knew she had mayhaps not loved Rhaenys as well as she should have, that she had relied on her independence a bit too much, but she never believed her daughter would feel so abandoned by her. “Rhaenys, I am sorry – “

“I was meant to be queen! I found the way to wake the dragons, I worked constantly to learn everything I would need to know, I built an alliance with the wildlings should we ever need their support, I learned to speak languages so I would be a learned queen, and in the end it hasn’t mattered at all! Alysanne did nothing but sit around, play at being pretty, and flirt, and she will forever be higher than me for whelping his first child!”

“You know there is more to Alysanne than that. It is unfair of you – “

“Yes, please, lecture me on how one is meant to treat her sister when you have returned from a holiday with your good-brother!” Rhaenys growled.

Arya took a calming breath, trying desperately to control her temper. “I know you are disappointed – “

“No, Mother, what I am, is angry. I did everything a good queen is meant to do. I did everything I could to make certain Aemon and I would have the future we planned together on Dragonstone. And now I realize it wasn’t me he wanted. He had no intention of ruling these kingdoms with me by his side. From the beginning he insisted Alysanne wed us as well, and now I see why.” A tear began to course down her cheek but Rhaenys pushed it away immediately. “He loves her. He’s in love with
her. Of course she is pregnant with his heir. He comes to my bed once a moon’s turn but spends every other night with her.”

It was a peculiar thing, hearing Rhaenys’s assessment of her marriage. On the one hand, Arya was repulsed by the idea of her children lying together, of Aemon getting a child on either of his sisters; on the other, Arya understood the complicated dynamics of a group marriage, of how even knowing that jealousy might come it still leaves you unprepared for the intense feelings which come from knowing your husband is bedding another woman. She wanted to tell Rhaenys that, wanted to assure her Aemon was simply like his father and would go in phases of fascination, but she couldn’t. It was obvious Rhaenys wanted none of her kind words.

“Rhaenys…”

“Everyone has always loved her better,” Rhaenys declared, wiping the tears now falling steadily on her face. “I sold my soul to the Stranger to ensure our family’s survival, and now Aemon is punishing me for it. We made the choices together, but only I have to live with the consequences.”

In that moment, Arya understood perfectly what Rhaenys meant. The image of Daeron and Daena tucked into their beds at Summerhall swam before Arya’s eyes, and bile rose in her throat. She could not even look at Rhaenys, could not consider how she’d ever look on Aemon; she did not want to believe her children were responsible for such a terrible thing, and as she stepped backwards, she saw panic flood Rhaenys’s face.

“We did not know!” Rhaenys sprung forward, grabbing Arya by the forearms to keep her in place. “Fire did not burn us. We thought it would be the same for the twins, for Father; even Olenna and Elia, we thought they would be spared. Aemon thought they would wait to try, that they would have learned from the past and not attempted to do it inside the castle. It was only supposed to show the kingdoms that Jessa’s daughters weren’t true dragons – “

“Stop – “

“Not like us, not like – “

“Stop it!” Arya screamed, startling Rhaenys into silence. Jerking her arms out of Rhaenys’s grip, she could only stumble away, her head spinning so quickly she thought she might pass out. How could they have done this? How could they live with it? It was kinslaying. Only the vilest of people ever did such a thing.

She sent the raven the moment she entered the Keep, sealing it with her direwolf and waiting until the bird departed before returning to her chambers. For nearly an hour Arya sobbed out her frustration and grief, sobbed for the innocent lives lost to her children’s machinations, and when she was done she realized she did not know what would come next. Did Alysanne and Brandon know what truly happened to their siblings? Had they played a part in it?

At supper, Arya could scarcely look at her oldest children, struggling to stay focused on the conversation around her. It was near the end she announced her plans.

“I am going to visit Sansa at Casterly Rock.”

“You never go to the Westerlands,” Alysanne pointed out.

“I am feeling restless.”

Arya saw Rhaenys and Aemon exchange glances, but she hadn’t much time to consider it as Alysanne suggested, “Why don’t I go with you? I’ve never seen the Westerlands, and I do miss my
“No,” Aemon immediately protested, “absolutely not. The Westerlands have always been hostile to the Targaryens – “

“They Then Brandon can come as my personal shield,” Alysanne reasonably pointed out. Her smile was pure innocence as she leaned forward, touching Aemon’s arm. “It will be the last chance I have before our son is born. You know Brandon would never let any harm come to me, and you can send a score of men with me if it will ease your mind. Please, Aemon?”

It was masterful, the way she handled Aemon, and in that moment, Arya wondered which of her daughters was more dangerous. Given their differing strengths, if they worked towards a common goal, Arya knew they would be unstoppable. The idea of it was both inspiring and terrifying.

“Do you mind if we stop at Highgarden on our return to visit Elia?” Alysanne queried a fortnight later as they climbed into the litter that would take them to Casterly Rock. “I made her a new scarf to wear for her head.”

“I’d like to see her as well,” Brandon chimed in, offering his hand to help Arya into the litter.

Arya could not believe her youngest children played a part in Summerhall. It would break her heart too entirely if she did.

They were at Casterly Rock for nearly a week before Arya glimpsed Cersei Lannister for the first time in nearly twenty years. The former queen was still beautiful, though her golden hair was now white and held back with hair pins set with rubies. Her gown was in good repair though the material had faded somewhat, and her slippers were a bit worn. It was nothing like the woman she had been at Storm’s End, the one who took pleasure in making her thank Robert for treating her so shabbily. The years had been unkind to Cersei in so many ways, but any sympathy Arya managed to have for her evaporated as she fixed her emerald eyes on Brandon and drawled, “You must be the bastard my son got on his good-sister.”

“Leave him be,” Arya ordered fiercely, stepping in front of him, but Cersei only smirked, craning her neck to get a better look at Brandon.

“A Baratheon in a white cloak,” she chuckled. “I thought the only talents Baratheons had were drinking and whoring.”

Brandon said nothing, staring at Cersei with a blank expression.

“Your great-uncle wore the white cloak. He was Lord Commander as well. Mayhaps you look like Robert but fight like Jaime.” Cersei lifted her hand as if to touch Brandon’s face before pulling back with a scowl. “No, Baratheon and Stark could never make someone as gifted as Jaime.”

Arya opened her mouth, prepared to tear into Cersei with a viciousness she had been storing up for most of her life, when Brandon said instead, “It’s nice to meet you, Grandmother.”

Cersei left then, disappearing down a hallway even as she muttered under her breath, and Arya turned to look at Brandon curiously. “She did not upset you?”

Brandon shook his head. “No, Gendry warned me she would be like this. He said I should be kind to her.”

“Be kind? Why?”
“Because she is not much used to kindness.”

Arya never thought Cersei would be a pitiable thing. But as she witnessed the fallen queen repeatedly attempt to get a rise out of Brandon only to be output by his kindness, Arya thought pity was all she had left for Gendry’s mother. It had to be terrible to be the only one left, to have seen the ones you loved most executed and be left with the ones you felt betrayed you.

Arya hoped she never lived long enough to find out.

“A curious thing happened today,” Sansa said as she and Arya walked on the beach mid-afternoon two moons into their visit. It was unseasonably warm today, and Arya wished she was still young enough to bathe in the sea.

“Curious how?”

“Alysanne asked me if she could stay until her child is born.”

“Did she say why?”

“She said she missed the sea, that the Blackwater just wasn’t the same, and she’d like to spend her pregnancy in a place that made her happy. I told her it was fine, that we are happy to host her, but I cannot imagine Aemon will be quite so excited about the news.”

“No, he won’t. She did not mention this at all. I can’t imagine it’s as simple as all that.”

Sansa paused for a moment, clearly struggling with whether or not to say something else. Finally she said, “I think Alysanne likes being free of Aemon and Rhaenys.”

“Has she said something?”

“No, not to me or Elinor. It is more…Watch her when someone mentions their names. She always looks so sad at the prospect of returning. I think life as a queen is weighing on her.”

Arya tried to speak to Alysanne that night about the matter, but Alysanne repeated the same reasoning she gave to Sansa: she wanted to be by the sea. Sansa arranged for her maester to send a raven to Aemon, stating it would be unsafe for Alysanne to travel the Kingsroad so late in her pregnancy, and Alysanne included her own missive telling Aemon he should not come when there was so much work to do in King’s Landing. Arya still thought Aemon would appear with a retinue of men, but instead he sent presents for Alysanne and books to keep her from being bored.

“He seems excited for the child,” Arya ventured one afternoon as Alysanne sat with her feet up, her ankles swollen to twice their size.

“Yes,” was all Alysanne said in return, rubbing her stomach.

Alysanne’s labor began during the hottest, stickiest night most in the Westerlands could remember. A summer storm raged outside, waves from the Sunset Sea crashing against the rocks, and Alysanne’s cries rivaled the booms of thunder. Arya had never experienced child birth as an observer, and she found herself terrified by the sight. It was different when she was bringing children into the world. The pain and the goal of delivering a healthy child were all she could think of then; never once had she thought of how she looked to others, of how truly dangerous it was to birth a child.

As with most things, Sansa was calmer and more efficient in readying Alysanne for the childbed. While the servants and maester made their preparations, Sansa calmly explained all that would come
next. Alysanne nodded, her body coated with sweat already, silver hair sticking to her face, and Arya thought she looked too young to have a child of her own.

Sansa took Alysanne’s left hand and Arya, her right as she labored. They were five hours into the process when a shriek erupted from Alysanne’s mouth so loud and sharp, Brandon burst into the room with his hand on the pommel of his sword. The servants tried to dismiss him, assuring him this was what childbirth sounded like, but Alysanne cried out, “No, please, let him stay,” and Arya knew then an entire army couldn’t remove Brandon from that room.

Her son looked sick as he watched Alysanne strain and push to bring the heir of the Iron Throne into the world, looking as young as Arya often forgot he was. He was only recently six-and-ten, and the expression on his face reminded Arya of the one he wore so often as a child. Arya winced at the bite of pain in her hand as Alysanne squeezed it particularly tightly, and the sound which came from Alysanne’s chest seemed like a roar as she bore down. For a moment, there was silence and then the indignant shriek of a newborn baby.

“It is a boy, Your Grace!” the maester announced, cutting the baby’s navel cord before passing him to Sansa to be cleaned and swaddled. Alysanne sighed, sinking back into the pillows, and Brandon knelt beside her, taking the hand Sansa clutched and kissing her knuckles.

“Does he look like me?” Alysanne asked weakly, her voice raw from screaming.

Arya thought it was a queer question to ask. Though Alysanne’s features were more Stark, she and Aemon still bore a strong resemblance to each other. There was little doubt the babe would look like them.

Sansa came to the bed, Arya’s grandson nestled in her arms. Arya could scarcely believe she was a grandmother now, and though she was still uneasy with the idea of her children having children together, she found herself reaching for the baby, joy blossoming in her heart.

And then the baby opened his eyes and Arya saw brilliant, Baratheon blue.

“Oh, he has the Tully eyes,” Sansa said as she handed the babe to Alysanne, a serene smile on her face, “just like Daena did.”

“Just like Daena,” Alysanne echoed softly, turning her arms enough so that Brandon could see the babe’s face.

For a moment Arya wondered if Sansa truly believed the baby had their mother’s eyes, and then Sansa looked at her, her mouth set in a line, and she nodded minutely towards Arya. She knew then Sansa would never say a word about the truth of the baby’s paternity. Arya felt stupid for thinking even for a second Sansa would not recognize the same eyes her husband had, that her own children had.

“What will you call him?” Arya asked, struggling to keep her voice even.

“Baelor,” she answered. “Aemon wished to call him Baelor.”

Arya understood then why Alysanne wished to have the child at Casterly Rock, why she wanted to be so close to the sea, why she arranged for Brandon to accompany them. If Baelor had been born as Baratheon as Brandon, they would have had to leave Westeros as quickly as they could to avoid punishment for such treason.

A handful of days later, Arya sat in Alysanne’s solar, Baelor asleep in Alysanne’s arms, and said, “You took a terrible risk.”
Alysanne smiled at the baby in her arms. “Madness or greatness, Mother. That would have been too great of a risk.”

She sighed, exhaustion creeping into her body. “I understand you and Brandon feel…strongly for one another, but to gamble this way with your lives – “

“We will not have to gamble again. Baelor is Aemon’s heir now. No bad will come to him. He will grow to adulthood, he will become king, and that is enough.”

“There is no way of guaranteeing that.”

“I will guarantee it.” Alysanne looked up then, and Arya saw some of herself in the resolve there. “Don’t blame Brandon for this. I begged him to do it. The Baratheons are good men. I needed to make certain Baelor would be a good man.” When Arya said nothing, Alysanne insisted, “There is no more sin in Baelor’s origins than there is in Brandon’s. Aemon will never know the truth. He will love him all the same.”

Alysanne was right, of course. When they rode into King’s Landing, Aemon waited for them, so full of happiness he seemed to vibrate with it. As he took Baelor for Alysanne’s arms, he declared, “Oh, what a handsome son you have given me.”

Rhaenys looked away, her face twisted with pain.

So did Brandon.

Baelor’s first name day had come and gone when the raven from the Wall reached the Red Keep. Summer had faded quickly, the cool winds of autumn signaling what a miserable winter it was sure to be, and Arya was carrying Baelor through the castle when one of the Kingsguard came and found her.

“The king needs you immediately.”

Arya gave Baelor to his nurse before hurrying to Aemon’s solar where her other children, Bran, and Daenerys, returned from Dragonstone, already awaited her. Bran held out the letter for her, and Arya’s stomach flip as she saw it bore the black mark of the Night’s Watch and was written in Jon’s slanted hand.

For several moments she was not certain she was reading it correctly. Finally all she could say was, “White walkers? Is this a jape?”

“No jape,” Rhaenys answered, her face as serious as a septon’s. “I’ve seen them with my own eyes. Most anyone who has been Beyond the Wall has. Jon needs our help.”

“To fight White Walkers?” Arya looked to Bran, whose somber face provided her no comfort. “How does one even fight them?”

“Fire,” Aemon supplied. “Dragonglass and fire. There are too many for Jon and the Watch to fight. Even if Uncle Robb calls his banners to defend the Wall, they will be overrun. We must go. We have the means.”

“It will take over a moon’s turn to march north – “

“We will not be marching,” Alysanne cut in, and Arya understood then why Brandon looked so upset.
“You mean to take the dragons to the Wall.”

“If this is the Long Night, we have no choice. There was a reason we could wake the dragons. This is it.” Alysanne tried to smile. “What harm can come to us on the backs of dragons? When has a Targaryen ever failed on dragonback?”

Arya knew there was no argument she could make. She listened as Aemon explained that Bran would ride to Winterfell to join the Northern troops while Daenerys stepped in as Hand. They would leave Baelor in Arya’s care with the order that, should they all fall in battle, Arya would be Regent until Baelor came of age.

This is happening too fast, Arya thought wildly as they continued to talk of preparations, of ravens to be sent, of supplies that needed to be taken north.

Arya forgot how swiftly the world moved when war began.
Arya Stark of Winterfell

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arya never saw war up close, and for the first time she was grateful for that. When Ned sent her to the Red Keep during the Second Ironborn Rebellion, Arya resented him for it, convinced she could have been of some use to him at Starfall. She’d exiled herself during Aegon’s taking of the kingdoms, safely ensconced in the North with Jon and the wildlings, fretting every time Jon came with news, uncertain which man she wanted to prevail, cursing her uselessness but determined to stay apart to keep her children safe.

And it was all for naught, she thought as she watched the supply carts being loaded, the men mobilizing outside her window. Already Winterfell had called its banners, the Northern lords and their men marching to provide the first wave of defense. The Riverlands were moving north as well, her old uncle Edmure insisting on going to battle despite having more than enough sons to go in his stead. Arya thanked the gods her father was too crippled with arthritis to join the cause, but Robb and his sons were not. Bran and Rickon were with them as well, and it was not the first time Arya wished she had been born a boy so she could go and keep her brothers safe.

But being born a boy did not guarantee a place in the column, and Brandon was finding that out the hard way.

“I must go!” he shouted as Arya’s older children readied to climb onto their dragon’s back and ride to the Wall. “You cannot expect me to just sit here and wait!”

Aemon’s calm demeanor never faltered as he stuffed a skin of water into his sack. “You are the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Your job is to protect the king.”

“You’re the king!”

“I will be fine so long as our sisters are by me, but Baelor is just a babe in the cradle and has no such protection.”

“Mother can see to Bae! I am a knight, not a nursemaid!”

“Brandon, you’re being difficult,” Rhaenys declared, blowing a lock of hair from her eyes, her voice sounding so painfully bored with it all, Arya could have sworn they were children again with Rhaenys playing the long suffering older sister and Brandon, the baby used to getting what he wanted.

“You cannot leave me here!” he screamed, his voice cracking with emotion, and they all paused at that, turning to truly look at Brandon. It was an odd thing, the sight of such a large, heavily bearded man now openly crying with frustration, and Arya’s first impulse was as it always was, to go to him and make it better.

Alysanne reached him first, rising on her toes to cup his bearded cheeks, and Arya took a step back, the useless feeling creeping back into her heart again. She wasn’t sure when her children stopped looking to her and started looking to each other for comfort, but the guilt and shame of having failed them in that way ached in Arya’s gut. Her eyes flicked towards Aemon, wondering if he could sense the connection between Brandon and Alysanne, but her eldest son looked away, trusting as ever. Rhaenys, on the other hand, watched with sharp eyes, and as if Alysanne could feel her sister’s gaze
on the back of her neck, took Brandon by the hand into another room.

“You keep her secrets without a moment’s hesitation, don’t you?” Rhaenys drawled when Aemon left the room, leaving only herself and Arya. With her hair pulled severely back, face half in shadow, her daughter looked like a dangerous person. Normally it would upset Arya, but they were headed to war; dangerous people tended to return from battle.

“I keep your secrets as well.”

“But you judge me for them. You hate me for them.”

“I don’t hate you,” Arya said, surprised by how true it felt. “You’re my daughter Rhaenys, the first child I ever held in my arms. I hate what I let you become and I hate what you did, but I also think your father and I bear responsibility for it as well.”

Rhaenys looked down at her hands, and Arya swore she saw a tear roll down her cheek. After a moment she stated, “I know I will burn in every hell for what I did to Daeron and Daena, to everyone who perished at Summerhall. But I did not intend it. I swear it on anything, on everything. I just wanted to shame them the way we were shamed.”

“Intend it or not, they’re still dead.” Swallowing down her tears, Arya added, “And now I see you look at Alysanne the way you once looked at Olenna.”

Rhaenys’s head snapped up, disbelief on her face. “You cannot think I would hurt Aly.”

“You have never handled it well when you thought you were being usurped.”

“I cannot love her and hate her at the same time?”

Arya thought of Sansa then, of the powerful jealousy she’d cultivated for years, allowing it to grow until it choked them both. Yes, she knew how much you could love and hate your sister in equal measure, but she was not sure how much she trusted Rhaenys. Some days she was not sure how much she trusted Alysanne. They’d become strangers to her, her children, and it was hard to understand how they had ended up in such a precarious place.

“Why do you keep her secrets?” Arya asked. “If you are so concerned with Alysanne’s actions, why have you not revealed them to Aemon?”

“Because he’ll hate me.” She scoffed. “More than he does now anyway. He wasn’t built for any of this.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

Rhaenys looked at her then, her dark eyes sharp. For half a moment Arya saw the little girl who screamed for Aegon as they were loaded on the ship in Volantis, the one who scrapped with wildling children and outran her septas, and then she was gone, hidden behind her mask again.

Arya moved forward, pressing her lips to Rhaenys’s forehead. She felt her daughter stiffen at the contact, but she didn’t pull away. “Stay safe. Take care of your siblings.”

“I always do.”

Unlike you, her expression seemed to add, and Arya hoped she’d get the chance to make things right with Rhaenys.
He looked so small in his riding clothes.

It was all Arya could think as she entered Aemon’s chamber, her son placing items into his sack. Mayhaps it was because she’d grown so used to Brandon with his broad shoulders and barrel chest that Aemon looked small in comparison. He was built like Aegon, tall and lithe, and he’d let his hair grow nearly to his shoulders now. She suspected it was to draw comparisons to Aegon, but it reminded Arya more of Viserys. Though Aemon possessed none of Viserys’s ill temperament, there was something about the way he interacted with people that brought to mind Viserys’s lack of comfort with people.

She heard metal against metal and saw something dangling from his bag. His unfinished maester’s chain, only a few links forged, was tucked amongst the necessities. It was terribly sentimental, and it made Arya’s heart swell. She knew the girls always thought Aemon was her favorite until Brandon was born, and Arya knew there was some truth to it. Aemon always seemed to need to be cared for, tended to; Rhaenys and Alysanne needed nothing but themselves to survive.

“Are you certain this is the right course of action?”

Aemon didn’t seem surprised to see her. If anything, he looked relieved, and that didn’t surprise her. Aemon liked being told what to do. “It is the only one.”

“You’ve consulted with the Citadel?”

“Of course.” He smiled wryly. “Rhaenys doesn’t trust them. They hate the dragons. They’d like them gone.”

_So would I._ “You know nothing of war.”

“Does any man before he experiences it for himself?”

“Please do not treat this as a philosophical discussion, Aemon.”

He nodded, his shoulders hunching forward some. His fingers sought out that unfinished chain, worrying the links between his fingers. After a moment he looked up at her and said, “I would have been a fine maester.”

“Yes, you would have.”

“Mayhaps when this is over, when Bae is old enough, I will give him the crown and finish what I started.” He nodded. “That seems like a reasonable plan, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

Aemon smiled and got to his feet, coming around the bed and pressing the heavy links into Arya’s hand. She’d never held a maester’s chain; given the weight of so few links, she couldn’t believe Maester Luwin was ever able to wear his.

“None of this was your fault. I made my choices. You gave me what I wanted, and I chose to follow Rhaenys.”

Her throat tightened. “Are you happy?”

“No.” Aemon grasped her shoulders, meeting her gaze unwaveringly. “And that isn’t your fault either.”
“Aemon – “

“You’ll look after Bae if something happens to us, won’t you?”

“Please don’t – “

“Mother.”

Arya sighed, wrapping her arms around herself, the heavy links pulling down her hand. “Of course I will look after him.”

“Take him to Winterfell. I always loved it there, and he will learn the best lessons there. The North… It is best there.” Aemon’s calm demeanor began to melt away, emotion starting to fill his face. He looked like Aegon now, and the resemblance tore through her. “Do not let Brandon take him to Storm’s End. I do not want Bae to become that sort of man.”

“There is no reason for Brandon to take Bae – “

“Mother.” He scoffed, his face as close to irritated as it ever was. “Please do not pretend as if you do not know.”

“Aemon…”

His smile was pained. “Neither of them has ever been very good at deceit. I do appreciate the lie though. She has worked so hard to maintain it.”

“It was an accident.”

This time Aemon laughed, returning to the packing of his knapsack. “Alysanne does not allow for accidents. She may be poor at deceit, but she’s wilier than a fox. I could practically taste the moon tea on her lips each time I went to her.”

“Why her?” Arya found herself asking, her sick curiosity getting the best of her. “After all you and Rhaenys did, why did you turn to Alysanne?”

“Because Rhaenys…She’s more than my sister; she’s an extension of myself. I could never look at her the way I should a wife. But you sent Aly away when she was a child; I scarcely got the chance to know her. I thought it less of a sin.” He laughed mirthlessly. “Except now she hates me for it.”

“Rhaenys?”

“Rhaenys, Alysanne, mayhaps both. They’re far more alike than they’d ever admit. In another life they’d have been friends.”

“This one isn’t finished yet.”

Aemon looked away, and Arya understood her son didn’t believe any of them would return.

She found Alysanne in the nursery just as she suspected she would, Alysanne seated on the floor while Baelor scooted around on hands and knees. Arya considered joining her on the floor but perched on the edge of the bed instead; her body did not take kindly to crawling around the way it once had.

“I remember when the twins were born,” Alysanne said after a moment, holding out a block to the baby, “how Brandon and I would come in here and play with them. Sometimes Olenna and Elia
would come too, and we’d all play until Jessa came and hurried them away. I always felt so bad for her.”

“For Jessa?”

Alysanne nodded. “It couldn’t have been easy for her, placed in Father’s way so the Tyrells could win his favor, having to live in the shadow of you and us. They used her. I suppose all daughters end up used that way. It was half of the reason I was so happy Baelor was a boy.”

“You were not made to wed against your will.”

“Just because there was not a royal decree does not mean it was my will.” She ran her fingers over Baelor’s thick hair, brushing it from his brow. “When the war is over, mayhaps things will be different. Mayhaps we’ll make them different.”

“What would you do different?”

“I’d go to Dragonstone. I always liked it there. Then I’d go to Winterfell and Casterly Rock, and I’d see Elia at Highgarden and take her to Dorne. Mayhaps I’d even venture east this time, see the Free Cities. I would have adventures of my own this time.” She smiled. “I used to get so angry when I was small because it seemed like all the exciting things happened before I could even remember them.”

“You could still do all of that.”

“As if Aemon would let me gallivant around the globe with Bae in tow.”

“He seems to bend to your will easily.”

Alysanne laughed, a surprising chipper sound given the gloominess of the mood. “Even when you’re trying so hard not to sound judgmental, you sound like the High Septon pronouncing a sin. You should ask Brandon to do his impression of you; it’s absolutely uncanny.”

Irritated by the comparison, she did not bother hiding her disdain as she asked, “Will Brandon be accompanying you on this imaginary trip?”

Alysanne looked up at her, her Stark eyes sharp in her Targaryen face. “I have always wondered: do you disapprove of Brandon loving me more because he is my half-brother, because it means all of his love might not be reserved for you now, or because we remind you too much of what happened with Uncle Gendry?”

Though there was no malice in her voice, the words pierced Arya’s heart like a blade. “He shares your blood.”

“Rose thinks it is because you were in love with Uncle Jon,” Alysanne continued, getting to her feet and brushing off her gown, “and you could never act on it.”

“I love Jon as my brother!”

“Except he isn’t truly your brother; he’s your cousin or your good-brother, depending upon which connection you’d like to make. And when you were fleeing from Father, you could have gone to Uncle Robb or Uncle Bran or even Uncle Rickon, but you went to the Wall.”

“Because no one would think to look there.”
“Or because you’d spent every moment from the time you parted getting back to him?” Alysanne smiled. “I’m not accusing you of anything, Mother. But I also don’t want to ride into war thinking you’ll keep the truth from Bae if something happens.”

Still unsettled by her words, Arya managed, “Aemon wants me to take him to Winterfell if you fall.”

Alysanne rolled her eyes. “Of course he does. Aemon has all sorts of theories about how nothing ever would have gone wrong if we’d remained at Winterfell.”

“And you don’t believe that?”

“I think what is happening was meant to happen and would happen no matter what we did. It was written in the stars when we were born. There is only one way it can end.”

“How is that?”

This time Alysanne looked less certain, looking down at Baelor now tugging at her skirts. “I do not know. It has not ended yet.”

Fire and blood, that was how things ended for Targaryens, but Arya could not consider that as she wrapped her arms around her daughter and squeezed her too tightly.

As her three oldest children departed for the North, Arya went in search of Brandon. She’d been shocked he had not come to see them off and the devastation on Alysanne’s face lingered. After coming up empty in the White Tower, the Tower of the Hand, and the Keep itself, Arya wondered if he’d wandered out into King’s Landing to drown his sorrows. It was an unfortunate weakness of his, one that worried Gendry more than her; a weakness for drink seemed to be a curse on the Baratheons, and the gods knew her son had a higher tolerance for it than most.

She was breaking her fast with Baelor when one of the Kingsguard came to her. They all seemed so young now, baby faced and hardly a whisker in sight, and this one’s name escaped her. He looked terrified, which amused her; it wasn’t particularly a quality you wanted in the man who was to lay down his life in defense of her family.

“Your grace,” he stuttered, handing her a hastily folded piece of parchment.

She knew what it said before she even glimpsed Brandon’s nearly illegible scrawl. Brandon’s parting message was brief, ten words that would reverberate within her for years to come.

I have to do this. Take care of Bae. – Brandon

There was always too much Baratheon in him, too much fury and not enough logic, and if Arya was honest, she knew it would always land him in trouble. She felt the urge to unravel, a scream rising in her throat as she fully appreciated that now none of her children were free from danger. And then Bae babbled, “Gam! Gam!” to get her attention, and Arya knew she couldn’t crumble. Not now.

She summoned Baelor’s nurse before walking to the rookery. Arya quickly scribbled out two notes, one raven headed to Storm’s End to tell Gendry what happened, and the other bound for Casterly Rock.

Sansa arrived a fortnight later, and only then did Arya allow herself to cry.

Arya wondered when Sansa would cease surprising her. From the moment she arrived from the
Westerlands, Sansa acted with purpose, meeting with Daenerys to discuss what needed to be done and what potential problems were arising in King’s Landing. Arya sat in those makeshift small council meetings and watched in amazement at the ease with which both women navigated the situations. Somehow she’d forgotten Daenerys was not always Aegon’s sweet aunt, that she had ridden with her husband’s *khalkasar* for ages and knew what it meant to rule people; it seemed like such a ridiculous oversight, Arya found herself deeply embarrassed. Aegon loved his aunt but he had never given her much power; now Arya understood why. Daenerys was a threat to him, someone stronger and better suited to ruling, and she felt indignation burn in her chest on Dany’s behalf.

But Sansa…She seemed to come to life as she met with Daenerys, boldly making declarations with the sort of assurance Arya never felt when she tried her hand at ruling. Sansa’s reign as Queen of the Seven Kingdoms had lasted only a fortnight, but it was clear her true talent lied here.

“You would have been a better queen than me,” Arya offered one evening as they supped, the amount of wine in her bloodstream having loosened her tongue further than she preferred.

“I know,” Sansa answered with a teasing smile.

“No,” Arya insisted, “you are *better* at this. How? How do you do it?”

Sansa looked puzzled for a moment before shrugging. “I was raised for this. While you were running through the godswood and riding your horse, I was at Cersei’s side being taught what would be expected of me. I’ll say many things about the Lannisters, but they understood the business of ruling, especially Lord Tywin. I learned a lot simply watching.”

“But you *like* it, the ruling. You like it the way Daenerys does.”

“We have much in common, Lady Daenerys and I, and we became friends during Elinor’s marriage to Rhaego. Does it bother you?”

“No, I just – “ Arya laughed but it sounded pained to her own ears. “You have always been better at everything. It would make sense you’d excel at this as well.”

Sansa’s face became troubled. “I am only here to assist you, Arya. I have no desire to take what is yours.”

“Everything is already taken.” There were tears on her face now, too much wine having driven her to the sort of overly emotional displays she hated, but she could not stop herself. “There’s been no word from them. I know you hear the reports, that thousands are dying every day.”

“Just as I hear the dragons still fly – “

“But Brandon has no dragon, and it is not as if our wolves would die if we did.” Arya glanced towards the fire where Lady and Nymeria laid entwined, both of their coats shot through with white, neither moving as fluidly as they once did. “We do not even know if our brothers, if Winterfell – “

Sansa reached across the table, taking the wineskin out of her reach. “*Stop.* That thinking does no one any good, and I won’t have you speaking it. The only thing our family needs now are your prayers. I will spend every minute on my knees in the godswood if that is what you want to do, but I won’t sit here and listen to you declare everything for naught.”

Arya looked at the determination on Sansa’s face and nodded resolutely, wiping at her cheeks and exhaling shakily. Her stomach rolled, too much wine and too little food, and she knew she was going to be sick. As she heaved, the liquid contents of her stomach splashing across the stone floor, Arya vowed she would be more like Sansa in the morning.
The raven came from Winterfell two moons’ turns after her children left, and Arya could not bring herself to open it alone. She hurried through the castle, desperately searching for Sansa, and found her walking through the throne room with several of the older lords.

“Sansa!”

She whirled, a look of chastisement already on her face, when she saw the parchment Arya bore. Quickly bidding farewell to the lords, Sansa hurried towards her, and the fear on her older sister’s face made Arya feel as if she was not alone.

They sought refuge in the Tower of the Hand, and Arya thought it telling they went to the chambers that had been their father’s. For a moment they only stared at the gray direwolf seal and finally it was Sansa who reached for it, breaking the seal and reading the words silently.

The tears in her eyes brought tears to Arya’s, and she closed her eyes, waiting for Sansa to declare the worst.

“Father has passed,” Sansa managed before her voice broke, and though it was not the bad news Arya feared the most, it still felt as if she had been run through with a sword.

Ned Stark died in his sleep, a fever having turned into a cough that sapped him of his strength. Their mother’s letter relayed only the facts, but when Arya read it, she could see the spots where Catelyn Stark’s tears landed on the parchment. He would be interred in the crypts beneath the castle with his father and siblings, and that made Arya ache even more, to think of her kind father forever in such a cold, sad place.

While Sansa went through the motions required – writing their mother back, having the bells toll to celebrate the life of the former Hand of the King – Arya found herself thinking of Jon Snow. Rhaegar Targaryen may have fathered him, but it was Ned Stark who raised him, who made him the man he was, the brother Arya loved ferociously. Did he even know? Was he even still alive?

Though the snows were as deep as her knees, Arya went to the godswood and prayed no one else she loved would be joining her father in the Winterfell crypts.

People began to flee King’s Landing, desperate to head places further south. There were rumors the Others were pushing closer and closer south, that not even the Targaryen dragons could keep them back, and soon people were packing all they could carry and trying to reach Dorne, the Reach, and any ship in any port bound for the Free Cities.

“We cannot soothe the panic,” Daenerys declared one morning as they watched people moving through the snow-covered streets with packs and carts. “There is nothing we can say to make them feel safe.”

“Does safe even exist anymore?” Sansa drawled, folding her arms over her chest. Though she didn’t say it, Arya knew from a note she’d glimpsed in Sansa’s solar that Elinor, Rose, and Alisa were all on a ship bound for the Free Cities accompanied by Tommen’s wife and children. Officially they were touring the Free Cities, but Arya knew Sansa believed it was not safe for her children in Casterly Rock.

Arya could not even be angry about it. If she were able, she’d have sent her children away as well to guarantee their safety.

A handful of days later, Arya was shocked when Margaery Tyrell arrived at the Red Keep, Elia in
Her stepdaughter was as tightly bundled as her great-aunt, but a scarf covered her face, only her bright green Tyrell eyes visible. She’d grown since their brief visit to Highgarden, and Arya was surprised when Elia moved to embrace her. Jessa had not liked her daughters to spend much time with Arya, but Arya supposed she was the closest thing to a parent poor Elia had left.

“She is a princess of the Iron Throne,” Margaery pronounced, as fierce as Arya had ever seen her, “and she deserves the protection of Maegor’s Holdfast.”

“Of course,” Arya agreed, and though Arya did not trust the Tyrells any farther than she could throw them, the least she could do for Aegon’s daughter was protect her as much as possible.

The Tyrells did not know what Margaery did. Sansa gave her this tidbit of information the first night after Arya had rooms prepared for both Elia and Margaery. Mace Tyrell had wanted to send Elia away until the war was over and then place her on the throne, usurping Baelor. It was only Margaery who wanted to keep her away from the plotting, to keep her safe.

“She has been a pawn the same way we were, the way Jessa was,” Sansa said when Arya expressed disbelief Margaery would act alone. “If the war goes well, the last thing Margaery wants is for Elia to bear the brunt of her siblings’ displeasure.”

And if it goes badly, there is a chance she will be queen anyway, Arya silently finished.

On the cusp of womanhood, Princess Elia Targaryen would have been the prettiest of all Aegon’s daughters. When her scarf would droop, revealing the unblemished side of her face, Arya saw the same delicate beauty Jessa possessed, and she often wondered if Elia wished she’d perished in the fire at Summerhall. Though she’d managed to keep her leg, Elia walked with a pronounced limp, and her right arm was useless, usually kept tight to her body via a variety of silken slings. To her credit, Elia seemed to have adapted well, but it made Arya ache to recall the little girl who would clamor onto Alysanne’s lap, who chased at Brandon’s heels.

She’d offered Elia her old chamber, but Elia politely refused, stating it reminded her of her long and painful convalescence. Arya had Jessa’s old rooms aired out, and Arya wished she had stories to tell Elia of her mother. All she could offer were platitudes while telling tales of Aegon, but Elia seemed anxious to listen no matter what.

Baelor adored his aunt, squealing any time she came into view, and it helped to put Arya somewhat at ease. One of her greatest fears was Baelor would lose his entire family in one fell swoop, never knowing anyone. At least there was Elia.

Reports from the North came sporadically, short missives declaring gains and losses. Last Hearth was abandoned as it became overrun by Others, Asha Greyjoy’s fleet was helping to protect the coast, Lord Glover was struck down with half of his men. Each bit of good news came with news as equally bad, and Arya felt so damned useless, she could barely stand it.

One afternoon after Arya received word Rickon had taken a wound and was recovering at Karhold, Elia joined her, quietly sitting in the chair opposite of her. For a long time neither of them spoke, the soft sound of Elia’s breathing the only noise in the room, and then Elia said, “It was our fault.”

“What?”

“The fire, it was my and Olenna’s fault.”

Head spinning, Arya managed, “Sweetling, what – “

“Olenna wanted a dragon like Alysanne,” Elia began, her voice soft but strong, “but she knew she’d
need wildfire to break the egg open. I was little, sneakier; she asked me to steal a pot from the pyromancers. That night in Summerhall, we were trying to sneak outside so we could hatch it, but I tripped and dropped the pot.” Voice wavering, she continued, “It happened so fast. The second it hit the floor, Olenna’s gown caught fire and when I tried to put it out, I caught fire too. Father and Ser Rolly heard us screaming. They managed to put out the flames on me, and Father carried me outside but he had to go get the twins. I don’t quite remember much after that but...It wasn’t Uncle Viserys. It was us.”

For several minutes Arya could not speak as she processed poor Elia’s confession. And finally when she could, all she could manage was, “It was an accident.”

Elia shook her head. “They all died because I tripped.”

She thought of Rhaenys then, of the pain in her voice as she confessed her part in the fire, the wicked intentions she held when she’d brought that egg to Summerhall. Rhaenys and Aemon brought the kindling and Jessa’s girls provided the spark, and the guilt they all felt was eating them alive.

“You were a child who wanted to help her sister. You could not know what would happen.”

“They all died because I tripped,” Elia repeated, her voice a watery whisper now, and Arya found herself moving to embrace her. She’d grieved for her poor babies burnt in their beds, for her husband and her friends, but she’d never felt a responsibility for it. But Elia had lost everything in that fire: her mother, her father, her sister, life as she knew it. Even the siblings she had left were taken from her as the Tyrells hurried her away to Highgarden. Elia wore her pain on her skin while Rhaenys and Aemon carried theirs deep inside, and no one deserved so much punishment for pure carelessness.

If she hadn’t had the affair with Gendry, if she hadn’t made her children feel as if they had to prove themselves Targaryens, if Jessa hadn’t so desperately wanted her children to be recognized as trueborn children as much as Arya’s, would any of this had happened? Were the sins they’d committed as parents what drove their children to such desperate measures?

If her children returned from the North, Arya vowed she would do all she could to mend the divide between Jessa’s daughter and her children.

The ravens arrived together, and all Arya could think was the old saying, Dark wings, dark words. Both bore the direwolf seal of Winterfell, and this time Arya did not wait for Sansa. She broke them in Baelor’s nursery as he and Elia played on the floor, Elia’s eyes watching even as she helped Baelor build a tower he promptly knocked over.

Jon’s bold hand informed her that the war was over, the Others pushed back, the Wall fallen.

Alysanne’s delicate script bore only three words: You must come.

She rode North in a litter with Sansa and Baelor, Gendry and several of the Kingsguard accompanying them. Elia remained in the Red Keep with Daenerys, whom Arya named regent until her return. She had not the slightest idea what awaited them at Winterfell, but she knew Alysanne would not have summoned her so with good news.

Summer bloomed around them as they made the journey, the snows melting as the air became unseasonably warm. It was practically magic, winter turning to summer in a matter of days, and by the time they passed through the Neck, there was not a single flake of snow in sight.

It was a new world.
Winter town was full of people, refugees from further North who’d lost their homes during the fighting. She saw some of Robb’s men passing out food and supplies, but Arya knew there would not be enough. When they reached the castle, she would write Daenerys, order her to send provisions to the North. There were few positive things about being the Queen Regent but this was one of them.

They’d barely passed through Winterfell’s gates when Alysanne came running. Arya almost didn’t recognize her; in her drab grey gown, her hair unbound and half-wild, she looked nothing like the composed woman who’d flown North to fight. Even Baelor seemed confused for a moment before shouting for his mother, squirming in Arya’s arms to reach her.

It was only as Alysanne dissolved into tears, squeezing Baelor tightly, Arya understood just how bad things were about to become.

They were wrapped in linen, scented oils doing little to cover the odor of decay. Side-by-side, eyes closed, Arya thought of when they were children, sharing a pallet at the Wall. Whoever tended to them had arranged their bodies so their hands were joined, and it was that more than anything that finally tipped Arya over into tears.

It was Jon who gave her the details of what happened, Alysanne upstairs with Baelor and a bedridden Brandon. He explained how Aemon tumbled from Meraxes’s back while fighting, and a sword pierced his heart. Quick and relatively painless, that was how Jon described Aemon’s death, but neither descriptor gave Arya any sort of peace. It was Jon who collected his body from the battlefield, sending him back to Winterfell where his body would be safe.

Rhaenys did not go so easily.

“She was the fiercest warrior I’ve ever seen,” Jon declared as Arya stroked a limp curl uncovered by linen on Rhaenys’s head. “She cut through the Others like a woman possessed, and she saved so many lives.”

“Then what happened?”

It was the last stand, he explained, and Alysanne’s dragon was felled by a rain of arrows. As she struggled to escape where she was pinned beneath Vhagar’s body, an Other approached her, prepared to deliver a killing blow. Rhaenys came out of nowhere, bringing up her sword to block the strike, and as Alysanne fought to get to unpin herself, Rhaenys managed to kill the Other but not before his blade opened her stomach.

“The wound festered,” Jon offered before stopping, the rest of the message clear. Whereas Aemon died quickly, Rhaenys suffered as infection ate away at her. It was a terrible death, and Arya could not bear to think of her first child dying that way.

“Alysanne said Aemon would want to be buried here, but she also said Rhaenys wouldn’t want to be buried without Aemon. We didn’t want to do anything without your consent – “

“They should be together in the crypts,” she cut in, wiping at her tears. “That’s where they belong.”

Jon nodded in understanding. “I’ll talk to Robb.” Wrapping an arm around Arya’s shoulders, he said, “Come on. I’ll take you to Brandon.”

He was a shell of himself, having lost a shocking amount of weight during his convalescence. The broad muscular frame that made the girls of King’s Landing whisper when he passed was gone,
having withered away to barely more than skin and bones. His hair and beard were long and shaggy, hiding his sunken cheeks, and his long legs lay beneath a thin blanket, the toes of his feet pointed inward.

“Don’t worry, Mother, I’m not dead. I just look like it.” Brandon smiled weakly, gesturing to his legs. “Maester Padrick says I’ll never walk again. I can’t feel anything from my ribs down.”

“But you’re alive,” Alysanne stressed from beside the bed, Baelor asleep in her arms. “It could have been so much worse.”

“Some knight I’ll be now.”

“So you’ll be the Lord of Storm’s End,” Alysanne declared, smoothing a hand over Baelor’s hair. “The world didn’t end. We have a second chance now.”

Arya barely heard the conversation, perching on the edge of Brandon’s bed and running her hand over Brandon’s hair the same way Alysanne did to Baelor. She felt as weak as Brandon looked, grief so intense she could barely breathe, and all she wanted was to hold Brandon and Alysanne as if they were children again and never let them go. How had it come to this? How could she have lost so much so quickly?

“You need a shave,” she said with a half-hearted smile, running her hand over Brandon’s chin.

“Grandmother Catelyn says it makes me look like a true Northman.”

“It makes you look like a savage,” Alysanne corrected with a soft giggle, and for a moment Arya could pretend everything was normal, that Aemon and Rhaenys were simply in the other room, that they would all return to King’s Landing together.

But nothing would ever be the same again, and Arya knew it.

They gathered in the great hall, her siblings, her mother, and Jon. Arya sat between Jon and Sansa, and their familiar faces gave her a sense of peace. In Winterfell she was not “your grace” or treated with any sort of deference; she was just their sister, their daughter, another Stark, and even now when she was well past the age of being a child, Arya loved the comfort their presence provided.

“So all it took to get you all home was the end of the world,” Catelyn said with a smile.

Her mother was always beautiful, and age hadn’t changed that; her auburn hair was silver now, her face heavily lined, but there was a regality to her that still drew the eye. Sansa would be beautiful like this, Arya understood, and the jealousy she would have felt once was gone. Let other people compare her to her sister; Arya was finished doing it.

Her brothers were still handsome, Rickon especially, but they, too, had left youth behind them. Their was white in their beards, their auburn hair lightening and thinning; Jon’s dark hair showed his age especially, large portions of it as white as Ghost’s coat. The Starks of Winterfell were old now, and while it made Arya feel a certain sadness, there was a happiness to it as well.

Only her father made it to old age among his siblings; poor Aunt Lyanna had not even seen seventeen years. The safety and protection Ned Stark wanted for his children had granted them all longer lives than those who came before them.

Arya wished she could have provided her own children with the same gift.
Robb filled a cup of wine, passing the skin around until they all had some in their cup. He barely looked like the man who’d taken Arya to King’s Landing for her first marriage so long ago; the handsomeness of youth had given way to a paunch beneath his doublet and tremble in his hand. Robb lifted his cup and said, “To Father, to Aemon, and to Rhaenys.”

“May the gods bless them and keep them,” Sansa agreed.

Arya managed a sip of her wine but nothing more. She let her family reminisce about her father and her children while she rested her head against Jon’s shoulder, Sansa’s hand tightly squeezing her own.

After so many years spent with dragons, all Arya wanted to do was bask in the presence of her pack.

Arya was wandering the grounds of Winterfell when she heard Baelor’s laugh coming through the trees. Confused, she followed the sound and saw Gendry and her grandson in the pond they’d swam in together in another life, Baelor happily splashing away. The heat was only increasing with each passing day, summer having arrived faster than anyone expected. Arya froze as she fell through time for a moment, remembering the last warm day she’d swam in this pond.

“Would you care to join us?” Gendry asked with an easy smile, Baelor lifted against his shoulder. The resemblance between them was so strong in that moment, Arya couldn’t believe anyone ever believe Baelor was anything other than a Baratheon.

“No, thank you.”

She sat on the bank, watching as Gendry dragged him around the pond, dunking him and bringing him up as Bae’s squeals of laughter echoed through the trees. Arya didn’t know how long they swam before Gendry set Baelor on the grass, pulling himself out of the water. He sat beside Arya as Bae toddled over to a patch of growing flowers and said, “I offered to watch him while Alysanne sent letters to Daenerys.”

“The duties of a queen are never done.”

“I can see why you never wished to be one.”

Arya scowled, pushing at his shoulder with her own. “You will never let that go, will you?”

He laughed. “I’m sorry. I will never mention it again.”

“Thank you.” She sighed. “I worry it’s weighing on her too heavily.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because of all of your children, Alysanne was always the one who reminded me the most of Sansa.”

“Sansa?”

Gendry nodded. “A perfect lady in all things but hard as steel underneath. There’s a strength to her that will always steer her well.”

“Like Sansa?”
“Like Sansa. Baratheons, we were rather terrible at the whole ruling thing. But Sansa took to it. She understands people the way Alysanne does. She’ll be a good queen, and she’ll raise Baelor to be a good king.”

“And what of Brandon? Is he to be like you?”

“Oh, Brandon is already stronger than I ever was. What he’s going through right now, losing his legs, I couldn’t have handled it. He’ll be fine, and he’ll return to Storm’s End.”

“You don’t think he and Alysanne will marry?”

“I think mayhaps they missed their moment.”

Arya heard the undercurrent to his words. “Like us?”

He nodded solemnly. “Like us.”

Baelor rushed towards them, a clutch of weeds in his chubby hand. Arya welcomed him into her lap, pressing a kiss to his damp hair. She sighed, looking over at Gendry, and felt a sense of calm fall over them. There was no desperation to them now, no sense of hunger or need; they were too old for all that now, and what they’d had was a pleasant memory now.

“What will you do now?”

“The girls will return from the East, and we’ll return to Casterly Rock. With all the chaos, I’ll have work to do. The girls will get married, they’ll have children of their own, and I can finally be a fat, jolly grandfather.”

“That sounds nice.”

“I hope so.” He cracked a smile as Baelor climbed from Arya’s lap to his. “You’ll return to the Red Keep with Alysanne, help her rule?”

“I think I’m going to stay here,” Arya said, not even realizing she was thinking it until the words slipped past her lips.

“At Winterfell?”

She nodded, the plan solidifying in her mind. “There’s so much work to do in the North, and they don’t need me anymore. While I was trying to keep them small, they went and grew up. I cannot stay at their sides forever.”

“So Winterfell.”

“Winterfell.”

Gendry sighed, wrapping a bare arm around her shoulders and pulling her to him, brushing a soft kiss against her temple. “I will miss you.”

“And I, you.”

This time Arya knew their goodbye was true. There was no heartbreak, no tears, no feeling of being split in two. There was only her and Gendry and their grandson laughing happily in the afternoon sun.
She spent more and more time in the crypts, the cool darkness providing her a temporary refuge from the weight of her grief. The man Robb hired to make the likeness of their father was talented; Arya felt both saddened and unnerved by her father’s stone countenance. Aemon’s and Rhaenys’s likenesses were not completed yet, but Arya doubted they would be able to encompass all they had been in life.

Arya often found herself speaking to her children, alternately apologizing and telling them of the goings on at Winterfell. Some days she’d spend hours there, trying her best to make amends to her eldest children. They’d suffered the most, the two who came when she was still young and carelessly stupid enough to believe she could be free of everything. They were the ones who always understood that which Alysanne and Brandon had been spared from and in the end, they were the ones who bore the brunt of the Targaryen legacy.

She was standing before Rhaenys’s resting place, telling the darkness the story of how happy Rhaenys’s birth was, when Alysanne joined her in the crypts. Her remaining daughter was silent, listening to the story, and when Arya was finished, she said, “You need to come upstairs, Mother.”

“I will come—“

“They’re gone. They cannot hear you.” Gently clasping Arya’s shoulders, she begged, “Do not get lost with the ghosts. Neither of them would want it.”

“I never had the chance to make it right.”

“Make what right?”

“Rhaenys—“

“Rhaenys loved you, Mother, just as Aemon did. Just as Brandon and Baelor and I do. Being angry with you didn’t make them hate you.”

“They died thinking I blamed them for Daeron and Daena.”

“They died blaming themselves for that. Living down here won’t change that. And whatever sins they committed, they gave their lives to save us now. I do not believe any god would punish them after balancing the scales that way.” Alysanne’s hand slid down Arya’s arm, tightly grasping her hand. “Come upstairs. Brandon and I would like to have supper with you.”

Arya went, but her heart remained in the crypts. She could not bear the thought of her children down there in the dark, and she didn’t think she ever would.

Bran brought Brandon their father’s wheeled chair to use, allowing him to at least join the rest of the castle in the great hall. His extreme weight loss made it easy for Robb’s sons to carry him down, and though Brandon clearly hated being treated as a cripple, Arya also saw he was happy to be free of his chamber.

“Maester Padrick thinks I should stay here until I’ve regained some of my strength,” Brandon told her as she pushed him through the glass gardens, the sweet scent of the flowers nearly overpowering. “Gendry says he can make sure Storm’s End is kept running efficiently until I can return.”

“What of Alysanne?”

“Alysanne wants a brood of children and a quiet, happy life. I could provide the one but not the other. We’ve spoken of it. We’re in agreement.”
Though his voice was even, Arya heard the underlying pain. “I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t want your pity, so save it for someone else. It isn’t as if I’ll be lost to her forever. And there’s still Bae.”

“You can always visit King’s Landing?”

Brandon looked up at her, his brow furrowed in confusion. “King’s Landing? Alysanne is going to Dragonstone.”

“Dragonstone? She plans to rule from there?”

He laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. “I cannot believe she has not told you yet. She was speaking with Uncle Robb about it this morning.”

“Speaking to me about what?”

“She’s splitting the kingdoms, putting back what the first Aegon put together. Seven kingdoms plus King’s Landing, and she’s giving the Keep to Elia.”

“What? That – That’s madness!”

“Madness, greatness, who can even tell anymore? She’s only returning to the Crownlands to make the declaration. She’s calling all the Great Houses to her and granting them sovereignty. I will be King Brandon, the first Storm king in 300 years.”

Arya considered what he was saying in that moment. Seven kingdoms, seven kings, no Iron Throne…It would have made Rhaenys go mad to even consider it and Aemon would have supported her entirely, but they were gone now. Alysanne was the queen; the queen could do as she liked.

Even if what she liked was putting her own reign to an end.

The column was packed and ready, Alysanne and Baelor to ride in the finest litter, Sansa and Jeyne Westerling to accompany them. Gendry and Robb would ride South as well, Jon to serve as castellan in Robb’s absence, while Bran returned to the Neck and Rickon to the Riverlands. Arya stood behind Brandon’s wheeled chair as goodbyes were made, kisses and hugs exchanged.

“You must come visit when everything is calm,” Sansa ordered her, pulling her into an embrace so tight, Arya could not help but return it just as tightly. “Let us not become strangers again.”

“Never,” Arya agreed, breathing in the scent of Sansa’s hair before they pulled apart. There was a sheen of tears in Sansa’s blue eyes, and it made Arya go forward again to embrace her. “Thank you for everything.”

“It is what sisters do.” Pulling back resolutely, Sansa wiped at her cheeks and smiled down at Brandon. “And you! Rose has been positively begging me to let her visit you in the Stormlands when you return. Will you receive your sister when the time comes?”

Brandon was clearly surprised to hear Sansa’s words but he nodded, a smile spreading across his face. “Always.”

“And you must receive us too,” Alysanne chimed in as she exited the castle, Baelor in her arms. “Just because you will be a king now and I will be a simple lady does not mean you can turn us
Brandon laughed. “A simple lady? My, the lies you tell!”

“Shut up, you,” she ordered, face softening as she bent to kiss his cheek. He still wore the terribly messy beard, and when Alysanne pulled back, there was redness around her mouth. “You will write me?”

“Every week as promised.”

Arya felt as if she should look away from their parting, the air thick with longing and loss. She glanced away and saw Gendry swinging up into his saddle. As if he felt her gaze, he turned and for a moment looked at her. Then he inclined his head, a sad half-smile on his face, and rode to the front of the column.

She returned her attention to her children long enough to see Brandon embrace Baelor, ruffling his hair, and then Gendry was gone from her sight.

As the column made its slow progression from Winterfell, Arya thought of the last royal procession she’d watched leave Winterfell without her. It felt like a hundred years ago, like someone else’s life, and now something new was beginning again.

She remained in the yard after the departure, idly wandering about with Nymeria at her heels, when Jon exited the castle in his riding clothes.

“I was going to ride through the wolfswood. Would you like to join me?”

Arya nodded, gathering her skirts and following him to the stables. As she settled into her saddle, urging her heels into the horse’s sides to take off at a run, laughing as Jon called for her to wait up, for the first time in nearly thirty years, Arya felt like she was finally where she belonged.

Chapter End Notes

I’d just like to thank everyone who took the time to read this and left comments - positive or otherwise - on this story. I’ve always been amazed at the reaction this has received, and while I’m sure this ending didn’t please everyone (or maybe even anyone), thank you for reading it until the end.

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