**Crash Into Me**

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**Crash Into Me**

by [UnspokenDefinities](http://archiveofourown.org/users/UnspokenDefinities)

**Summary**

NOTE: On-going major revision for this work until Chapter 7. (as of 10 June 2019)

Arya Stark’s freedom is threatened when her parents agreed to forge a political alliance with another powerful house in the form of an arranged marriage with the Crown Prince.

She despised the idea of being reduced to a mere commodity by fulfilling her duty as a lady and eventually a wife. But most of all, she hated the stupid, loathsome, arrogant, handsome, irresistible prince.

She loathed him all the more for being the walking temptation that he is, and she hated how her stupid, traitorous body would react to his seductive charms.

**Notes**

*Currently revising everything in this work.*

You may follow me in Tumblr, although it is not really ASOIAF and GOT related. It's explicit, though, so be warned.
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The first rays of the sun bathed Arya’s skin as they peered through the open windows of her bedchamber. She could feel its heat seeping through her face then to her eyes causing them to finally flutter open.

It took a lot of willpower for her to decide to get up from bed as she continued to wrestle with her sheets, her lazy eyes threatening to close and claim some more sleep. She would have preferred staying in her featherbed a little longer, but she was well aware of its impossibility considering her duties as a highborn lady.

For some unknown reason, her thoughts suddenly drifted to those rare and random conversations she had with her father, most especially those that involved marriage prospects. It would be her name day soon, and she knew she would be having another one of those talks with him about getting her to accept that she would be wed to some lord someday.

She cringed at the thought, strengthening her resolve to stay in bed for the rest of her life than face the inevitable.

But then again, she had to consider the fact that aside from her favorite brother, Jon, it was her father who understood her much more than her mother and her other siblings. Lord Eddard knew that Arya was always the wild, stubborn, and free-spirited child in their family, so she knew not to take her talks with her father lightly.

She heaved a deep sigh as she sat up on her bed, dangling her bare legs just above the cold floor. The excitement of a new day died down the moment reality came sinking in—the reality of needlework, continuous lady lessons and social graces with her septa, her perfect sweet sister, Sansa, and the rest of the other ladies in the castle.

*Seven hells.*

She would pick history and language lessons with Maester Luwin over lady lessons any day since she found history and learning languages more interesting than perfecting how to act proper in front
of everyone else. She was never the type who would pretend to be someone else just for the sake of everyone’s approval. She never needed validation from other people, anyway.

Arya was entirely her own.

It was never her dream to become a lady, much less become a wife.

It was always swordfighting, and riding horses, and reading all those interesting books in the library for her, and not mastering the art of prancing around the castle like a simpering fool.

She despised how a woman was being treated as nothing but mere commodities in their time, child-bearers and simple housewives, and never a woman who had her own decisions.

Perhaps the only consolation she could see for now was how she had not flowered yet despite her age of seven-and-ten. She never did look forward to her first flowering, using what little freedom she still had to turn down potential prospects and savor the last moments of her childhood without the inconvenience of subtle political alliances masking as betrothals.

Finally standing up, she stretched her arms before removing her white cotton nightgown in the process. She changed into her favorite white tunic and brown breeches stolen from Bran’s closet some time ago. She did her usual morning ablutions before finally heading out to break her fast with the rest of her family.

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Arya emerged into Winterfell’s Great Hall where everyone was already indulging their first meal of the day, her direwolf, Nymeria, padding along with her.

She took a seat next to Jon, as always.

“What took you so long, young lady?” Mother asked her.

Arya only had herself to blame for their impatience because it did take some time for her to get up. Well, she’d always been a lazy fuck. That was the truth. But fuck it.

“I’m sorry, mother.” Was all she said, refusing to elaborate her evident procrastination inside her bedchambers because really, she’d had enough of her mother’s early morning chastisement.

But it seemed as though her mother always found a reason to berate her for she never failed to notice Arya’s clothes yet for the hundredth time.

“Why are you not wearing your dress, Arya? You’re supposed to be a lady and therefore you should act like one. By the gods, you’re not ten years old anymore! You ought to be wearing dresses starting tonight or I swear I will burn all your boy clothes if you do not heed my demands.” Her mother chided.

_They’re Bran’s clothes, mother, I stole them from him. It’s not like he still needs them, anyway. He’s taller than me now._ Arya said her snide reply only through her thoughts, and instead, schooled her features into fake contrition. She knew better than to engage in a verbal sparring with her mother at this time of the day, so she ate her meal silently.
Before their morning meal ended, her father silenced everyone for an important announcement. She noticed a piece of parchment on her father’s hand, her instincts telling her that the letter came from King’s Landing.

“We just received a message from the King himself.” He announced, loud enough for everyone in the hall to hear. “The King and his guards ride for Winterfell in a month’s time, so we all have to prepare for his arrival.”

They all looked at each other in surprise.

Never in Arya’s existence had the King visited the North after the war. But it’s not like it had an impact on her or anything. She didn’t care much about King Robert Baratheon, truth be told. He was nothing but a war-mongering drunk who loved to fuck whores all his life. Treasonous, but true.

In the midst of her hateful thoughts, a realization suddenly crossed her mind. She knew well that the King’s Hand, Jon Arryn, died all of a sudden (and if they were to ask her, his death was rather questionable in every sense).

“I think I know why the king’s travelling this far north. It’s easy enough to conclude that he’s meaning to make our father his new Hand.” Arya whispered to Jon.

Jon only looked at her and shrugged.

“You have a good point.” Jon told her. “Since when have you grown to be politically inclined?” He japed.

She rolled her eyes in annoyance. “It’s not difficult to put it all together, you know. Jon Arryn’s death means a spot open for the position of the King’s Hand. Obviously.” Then she drew closer to Jon’s ear, this time turning serious. “I don’t even see any reason why Father has to be the hand to some drunk, stupid king.” She added resentfully.

It definitely worried her that her father would be left to run the Seven Kingdoms in the king’s stead as the Hand. And it would also be because of this that her father would have to be away from Winterfell.

“Don’t call the king stupid. You know he’s not really that bad, all things considered.” Jon told her.

She scoffed at his remark. “Not bad? Really? The man drinks too much and goes on whoring like there’s no tomorrow. I doubt he could ever run Westeros without the help of that son he just legitimized. I bet the crown prince would be a better ruler even if I don’t really know anything about him. I don’t even see how father has put up to him all this time.” Arya said.

Jon just shrugged. “Well, King Robert’s our father’s best friend in the first place. There has to be a good reason why they’re still friends until now because Father has a reasonable judgment. Always remember that.” Jon explained.

Arya only sighed in resignation.

*****
Only three days were left before the King and his men would arrive for Winterfell. It was said that they were stopping at Winter Town in the meantime.

Since everyone in Winterfell was busy with all the preparations, it left Arya with greater liberty to escape her lessons altogether without anyone batting an eye on her. She found that the King’s visit wasn’t so bad after all.

It was only when she had been absent from her lessons for quite some time already that she took one day to attend her needlework just so that they wouldn’t be suspicious of her. They had their stupid needlework lessons with the septa just right after breakfast.

What a better way to start her day than prick her fingers with needles all because she had the clumsiest hands when it came to sewing stitches.

She frowned at her stitches with dismay and glanced over to where Sansa sat among the other girls. Her sister’s needlework was exquisite.

Everyone else said so.

She remembered when her Lady mother asked about Arya, the septa only sniffed and said, “Arya has the hands of a blacksmith."

Arya only rolled her eyes in frustration at the thought of their remarks toward her stitches.

If they think I have the hands of a stupid blacksmith, then they should have just let me work in the bloody forge instead of letting me do some stupid needlework. I’d rather forge my own sword that sit here to bitterly gawk at how stupid my stitches are!

Arya glanced furtively across the room, worried that Septa Mordane might have read her thoughts, but the septa was paying her no attention today and had her attention instead to Beth Cassel, Ser Rodrik’s little girl, who was very good with following her instructions with today’s needlework.

She studied her own work again, looking for some way to salvage it, then sighed and put down the needle.

Arya looked glumly at her sister.

Sansa was chatting away happily as she worked, and one of her friends, Jeyne, was leaning over to whisper something to her ear.

“What are you talking about?” Arya asked suddenly.

Jeyne gave her a startled look, then giggled. Sansa looked abashed. No one answered.

Arya huffed a frustrated sigh.

“Tell me,” she demanded.

Jeyne glanced over to make certain that Septa Mordane was not listening.

“We were talking about the prince,” Sansa replied, her voice soft as a kiss and giving Arya a knowing look.

Arya knew that they were not talking about Joffrey. When Sansa was as young as a toddler, she used to be betrothed to Joffrey Baratheon before the scandal of their lineage broke out—an abomination of the greatest sort. After it had been discovered that Joffrey and his other siblings were
not really the King’s children, thanks to the assistance and the brilliant mind of the great Tyrion Lannister and of course Jon Arryn, they had been stripped off their royal rights and banished out of King’s Landing and back to Casterly Rock with their mother, Cersei Lannister.

Her Lord father made sure to find another suitable match for Sansa immediately after the news broke out and now, she was betrothed to Willas from House Tyrell, who was nothing but smitten by Arya’s beautiful sister.

Arya was certain that they were talking about the true prince, the real heir to the Seven Kingdoms, who had been discovered by Jon Arryn many, many years ago. She couldn’t even recall the name of that prince they were eagerly talking about and she never even bothered at all. It’s not like she had plans on getting herself acquainted with him when their party arrived, anyway. She had far more pressing things to consider rather than mingle with royalty.

But then again, her curiosity always got the better of her.

Even if she couldn’t care less about the crown prince’s name, she still wanted to know what her sister and Jeyne were talking about. At least this temporary diversion would get her mind off her stitches.

Arya raised an eyebrow at them resentfully.

“What about the prince?” She asked.

“What do you think about the prince, sister? They say he’s very gallant, very handsome and very good-natured even if he came from the most humble of beginnings. I heard he used to be a smith’s apprentice in Flea Bottom when he was younger.” It was Sansa’s turn to ask her.

She noted how unusual it was of Sansa to ask for her opinion, especially about princes and whatnot, but Arya only shrugged, her eyes averting back to her stitches.

“I don’t really give a shit about what the prince is like, Sansa.” She retorted stoically.

Sansa and Jeyne giggled foolishly. “I heard that he rides for Winterfell as well, along with his King father and Lord Renly.”

Arya instinctively rolled her eyes and scowled at them. “So? He can bloody ride wherever and whatever he pleases even if it was some bloody whore in Winter Town for all I bloody care.” She finally said, unfortunately loud enough to garner Septa Mordane’s attention.

“Watch your mouth, young lady!” The septa chastised, her nostrils flaring angrily. Her face only irritated Arya more. “That is not how a highborn lady of the castle talks.” Then she averted her eyes to the stitches left forgotten on Arya’s lap. She rose to her feet, starched skirts rustling as she started across the room.

“Let me see your stitches.” She demanded.

Arya wanted to scream.

It was just like Sansa to go and attract the septa’s attention.

“Here,” she said, surrendering up her crooked work.

The septa examined the fabric, then shook her head, clearly disappointed by her work. “This will not do. This will not do at all.”
Everyone was now looking at her. It was too much.

Sansa was too well bred to smile at her sister’s disgrace, but Jeyne was smirking on her behalf.

The septa’s reaction irked her. Because no matter how hard she tried, Arya knew that that was all her hands could do as far as stiches would go. She’d had enough of all the berating for her stupid stiches and it’s not even her fault for using the wrong hand to sew.

She pushed herself out of her chair and bolted for the door angrily.

Septa Mordane called after her. “Arya, come back here! Don’t you take another step! Your lady mother will hear of this. You’ll shame us all with your unruly behavior!”

Arya stopped at the door and turned back, her eyes filled with searing rage. “By your leave, Septa Mordane, ladies.” She seethed.

“Just where do you think you are going, Arya?” The septa demanded.

Arya glared daggers at her.

“To find something better to do than waste my time on crooked stiches. I’m a hopeless case, anyway,” She said in a mockingly sweet manner, taking a brief satisfaction in the shock of the septa’s face. “Or better yet, go to the forge where I truly belong. I have the hands of a blacksmith as you said so, anyway.” Then she whirled and made her exit, running down the steps as fast as her feet would take her.

It was too early in Arya’s age to realize that life was not really fair. Her sister already had everything. Since Sansa was two years older, maybe by the time Arya had been born, there had been nothing left for her, or maybe if she believed that gods existed, she could have thought that they had created her just out of sheer mockery.

It often felt that way.

Sansa could sew and dance and sing. She knew how to dress. She played the high harp and the bells. Worse, she was very beautiful. Sansa had gotten their mother’s fine high cheekbones and the thick auburn hair of the Tully’s.

Arya took after their lord father. Her hair was a lusterless dark brown, and her face was long and solemn. Jeyne used to call her Arya Horseface, and neigh whenever she came near. It hurt that the one thing Arya could do better than her sister was ride a horse, and read books she considered more substantial than those cheap and mushy novels about love and romance.

Nymeria, was waiting for her in the guardroom at the base of the stairs. The wolf bounded to her feet as soon as she caught sight of her. Arya plastered a very wide grin, her burst of anger already forgotten. Nymeria loved her, even if no one else did. Had her lady mother not forbidden it, Arya would’ve gladly taken her to needlework.

By now, the septa must have already sent word to Mother of her misdemeanor but Arya did not care to be found as she had a better notion. The boys were at the practice yard as usual. Arya and her wolf headed toward the window in the covered bridge between the armory and the Great Keep where there was a better view of the whole yard.

As soon as they arrived, Arya was surprised to see Jon seated on the sill, one leg drawn up languidly to his chin. Her older brother was watching Robb and Bran spar at wooden swords, seemingly so absorbed that he was unaware of her presence until Ghost moved to meet them.
Jon gave her a curious look.

“Shouldn’t you be on your stitches, little sister?”

Arya grimaced at his remark. “I’m not so little anymore, Jon. Besides, my stitching is all too hopeless anyway.”

He smiled at her. “Come here, then.”

He beckoned for her to climb to the window to sit beside him. There was a chorus of thuds and grunts from the yard below.

“Is it another case of unsalvageable crooked stitches, then?” Jon observed.

Arya nodded in agreement, a smile threatening to break out.

Jon only grinned and reached over her, messing up her hair like he always did. They had always been close. Her favorite brother had their father’s face, as she did. They were the only ones. When she was still a snotty child, she had been afraid that she was a bastard too. But it had been Jon she had gone to in her fear, and Jon who had reassured her all the time.

He suddenly turned serious as he continued to look at her.

“No matter what happens, you will always be my favorite little sister, even if you’re not so little anymore… Gods, how time flies by so fast. I would miss you, you know.” He suddenly said, almost sadly.

Arya gave him a puzzled look.

“What are you talking about, Jon? It’s not like I’m going away or something. And it’s not like I’m off to marry some stupid lord and bear his stupid babes. You know I won’t let that happen.” She told him.

Then her eyes widened in realization.

“Wait, are you off somewhere? Are you going to be wed to some lady far, far away? Please say no…” She told him, her eyes giving away fear.

Jon grinned at her widely and brought his arm around her shoulders to draw her closer.

“No… I’m not going away, Arya. I’m just saying I’m going to miss you because you’re growing up too fast.” He told her.

Then he pulled away from her as he motioned to stand up.

“You had best run back to your room, you know. The septa will surely be lurking. The longer you hide, the sterner the penance. You’ll be sewing all through winter.”

Arya only snorted.

“Oh come on, I’m too old for that crap. I don’t care if they beat the pulp out of me, I hate needlework. The only Needle I love is the one you gave me a few years ago.” She said, her scowl turning into a smile.
Chapter Notes

*revised chapter as of 24 May 2019

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CRASH INTO ME

Chapter 2: Meeting

Arya

Before Arya decided to head back to her bedchambers and accept her fate of endless berating, she had thought better to escape Winterfell for the rest of the day by riding off to her favorite spot somewhere near Winter Town. It was a spot with a small lake surrounded by an overgrowth of trees on one side. The other side of the lake gave her a marvelous panorama of the Northern hills, which had always been her solace every time she would have her episodes of ungovernable temperament.

She was now clad in her boyish outfit consisting of her boiled leather jerkin over her tunic and thick black breeches and long black boots. This time she still kept her hair in a neat bun. To further protect her body from the weather, she also donned on her thick grey cloak around her back. She managed to hide some of the boy’s clothes she had been using inside a basket in a secluded part of the First Keep and that was where she had changed her clothes that day.

She always dressed herself as a boy every time she would head outside of Winterfell. Even when she would visit Winter Town with her brothers, she would always be mistaken for a boy. But the more the people would mistake her as a boy, the better. She didn’t want any of the townsfolk to suspect who she really was or else her companions would be scandalized for riding with a girl like her.

When she arrived at her spot, the lake was peaceful and serene as usual. No one else knew of her secret spot, not even Jon. For a few days of the week she would escape to this place and just be herself, either by practicing with Needle or lying on the soft grass only to fall asleep. Sometimes, she would even dip her bare feet on the lake despite the freezing temperatures of the water.

This time though, as soon as she got off her horse, she noticed something moving on the opposite
side from where she stood. Right after she hastily tied the reins of her horse to the nearest tree, she squinted her eyes for a closer look, making a few silent steps toward the moving object.

When she was only a few meters closer, she was startled upon the realization that it was a destrier tied to one of the trees. It was the most beautiful horse she had ever seen. Her grey eyes widened as she studied the horse, drawing herself closer to it. Then as if by instinct, her hand lifted up on its own accord to feel the destrier’s shiny mane. The horse didn’t seem to mind her presence, which was a bit surprising. It may be because Nymeria was not with her at that moment, choosing that hour to go into the deepest parts of the woods for a hunt.

As soon as her hands finally touched the destrier’s mane, a voice suddenly broke out somewhere behind the horse, concealed by the thick packet of trees.

“Who goes there?” Came a very deep and authoritative voice.

Arya was taken aback by the deepness of the voice that she almost fell when she moved away. She was lucky enough that her back had landed with a loud thud onto the next tree.

“Where are you?” Came her shaky voice, but she tried to remain as calm and composed as possible, holding the hilt of Needle as if she was prepared for a sudden attack at any given moment.

She heard the footsteps getting closer with every heartbeat.

“Show yourself to me!” She demanded in an equally authoritative voice, sounding like a boy.

As she squinted her eyes for a closer look, a very tall and brooding figure finally emerged from the darkness. Despite his massive frame, she found herself very surprised to see a young lad who was about Jon and Robb’s age but larger than her brothers standing right before her. His eyes were seriously fixed on her which obviously made her queasy.

When her grey eyes finally lingered on his, she was so stunned to be looking at the bluest pair of eyes she had ever seen. It was as blue as the crystal-clear sky that she couldn’t help but find herself drawn to them for no reason at all.

She involuntarily bit her lip at the hint of the growing stubble on his jaw and chin, just plain evidence that he had not shaved in days. His boyish hair was a contrast to his blue eyes as they were the blackest color she had seen in her life, all messy and mussed up but not entirely unattractive.

In fact, inasmuch as it was the hardest for Arya Stark to admit it, she found him very, very attractive that she couldn’t take her eyes off him no matter how much she tried to look away. If anything, his gaze was very bewitching.

Under his dark grey cloak, he was wearing a grease-stained tunic, a leather jerkin, black breeches and brown boots. His leather jerkin was kept open and untied, revealing the opening on the top of his tunic, showing a hint of some hair on his broad and chiseled chest. The sleeves of his tunic were folded halfway up only to reveal the bulky muscles in his arms.

They continued to study each other for a few more heartbeats until Arya felt her breath hitch. She literally forgot how to breathe.

When she finally realized that she was standing right in front of a potential enemy, she kept her guard up and positioned herself for a possible fight.

“What are you doing in my spot, Ser?” She asked him indignantly, raising an eyebrow at him.
He gave her a very subtle yet serious glare that made him look even more stunning. It made her insides twitch involuntarily. She noted how his serious face made him even more attractive.

“I am not a Ser, as you so thought. I am merely a blacksmith’s apprentice. I came from Winter Town.” He told her a matter-of-facty.

His deep voice suddenly made her shudder.

She shook her thoughts away from thinking about what else she could say about his features and focused instead on guarding herself. Her eyes turned to the outfit he was wearing which now made sense to her.

Arya felt the need to relax a little as she loosened her grip on Needle’s hilt. She released a sigh of relief.

“But why are you here in my spot? Winter Town’s far away from here. Why don’t you just go get some place else and find some other person to bother?” Arya spat at him disgruntledly, her hands now on her hips.

He only gave a sarcastic snort.

“Your place? Does it have your name on it anywhere? The last I checked I am also entitled to stay in this place as much as you are.”

Arya rolled her eyes at him and heaved a sigh of defeat.

“Fine.” She resigned. “It’s just that, I’m not used to having company around here, is all.” She told him as she looked back into his cerulean eyes.

This time, he shook his head at her insolent behavior. One way or another, it might have also been a relief for him to know that she was way too small to be an opponent.

There was that very small hint of a boyish smug grin plastered on his face and for the first time in her life, Arya Stark was speechless. She felt her blood pooling all over her face, specifically on her cheeks.

He finally started pacing closer toward her direction as he held her gaze. Arya bit her lip once more as she tried to step back, trailing her hands around the bark of the huge oak tree for support. It was rather strange that her legs felt weaker. He only followed her direction as he carefully placed his large hand on the tree. Arya looked away from him as she turned around to continue trailing her fingers around the tree.

“This place is breathtaking. Do you come to this place often?” He suddenly asked her in a good-natured yet curious tone.

She could swear that she could feel his warm breath just at the back of her neck. The sensation gave her a different kind of unexplainable shiver throughout her body.

“Sometimes.” She replied, trying to feign indifference at the sudden burst of alien sensations she was feeling. “This is my favorite place in the North.” She added calmly as they both continued to walk carefully around the huge oak tree.

“How about you? What’s a smith’s apprentice doing this far from Winter Town? Haven’t you got some work to do at the forge?” She asked with a guarded voice, refusing to turn her head back to him and his blue eyes, afraid that it would only lure her into a state of trance.
“My master has given me leave to take the day off so I rode away from Winter Town and happened to have passed by this place.” He replied casually. “How about you? What’s a young and skinny lad doing up here? Gone to escape from your duties? Where do you live by the way?” It was his turn to ask her.

Arya made a silent gasp at his question, somehow fearing that he might discover who she was. But then again, he had called her a lad.

She only continued walking around the tree.

“I’m one of the stable boys back in Winterfell. Lord Stark wanted me to give his horse a ride outside and get some fresh air so I decided to take his horse to this place.” She replied with practiced words. She needed to be very careful not to give away her real identity.

“Winterfell.” He whispered breathlessly.

“Have you ever been to Winterfell?” She suddenly asked him.

“No, but I might be visiting there a couple of days from now with my fa—my master for some important business.” He replied gingerly.

Arya stopped in her tracks as she stood with her hand leaning on the tree. “Really? The King will also arrive in Winterfell in a few days. The rest of the people in the castle are busy. Do you really think that Lord Stark will be able to entertain your master when you arrive?” She asked him curiously.

“I think so.” Was his short response as he shrugged.

Arya walked back around the tree once more with him following behind.

Suddenly, a realization came to knock her senses off.

“Wait, so if you’re visiting Winterfell in a few days, then you must be visiting with the King then? Am I right?” She surmised.

She continued with her slow paces. When she turned around the corner, she got surprised when she almost bumped into him and his massive form. It turned out that he was waiting for her on the other end of the tree. Her heart leapt the moment she stood frozen right before him, her eyes fixed into his blue eyes once more.

“Yes.” He replied in a low, gruff voice.

“So what’s really your business with coming to Winterfell with the King?” She asked again suspiciously.

His eyes were now piercing into her grey ones as if he was looking through her very soul—as if he had finally figured out that she wasn’t really a boy.

“I don’t really know. I’m just a lowly smith’s apprentice. I don’t know what matters are needed to be discussed with my master and the Lord of Winterfell.” He replied plainly, huffing out a long sigh.

He looked tired.

Arya wanted to tell him that the King was stupid and that he never should have travelled to Winterfell all the way from King’s Landing, but she knew better than blurt that out. She had to hold
her tongue for he might be one of the Baratheon guards or even one of the Kingsguards disguised as a smith, given the destrier he brought along with him. Her sharp words might one day lead her to her own demise for being accused of treason.

“Maybe that answers why you are bringing a horse from the King or his guards… were you also tasked to take that horse somewhere?” She tried to pry in a suspicious tone, narrowing her eyes at him.

“You’re a smart lad for your age. And yes, I had to take this destrier for some fresh air because we have been travelling for almost a month now. Since I took leave from my master, I was also tasked to bring the horse along… So, you don’t really have to be suspicious of me, by the way.” He assured her good-naturedly although his face remained emotionless.

“I wasn’t really suspecting you of anything. I was merely asking.” She spat sharply, moving away from him and finally walking toward the lake.

For a moment she thought of letting her hair down to let the cool northern breeze run through her long dark brown tresses, but she remembered that she was pretending to be a boy.

Instead, she just made herself comfortable by dipping her bare feet on the cool waters of the lake as she found her seat on one of the huge rocks. Needle was gingerly placed on the spot next to her.

The smith’s apprentice seemed to have followed what she was doing. He was now sitting beside her as they savored the coldness of the northern wind breezing through their faces. She noticed his eyes averting to look at Needle.

“That’s a fine sword you have there. But it’s not like any of the typical swords I see.” He remarked, regarding her carefully.

Arya gave him a very curt smile.

“I call that sword Needle. It’s very thin but it could kill any man, or woman, so don’t be fooled.” She told him smugly.

He furrowed his brows and squinted his eyes as if to study the sword right beside her. “That looks like castle-forged steel.” He remarked.

Arya nodded her head.

“Aye. It is castle-forged steel made by the finest blacksmith from Winterfell. He gave it to me some years ago.” She told him, making sure to formulate the smoothest lie as quickly as possible.

He nodded at her and only replied, “I see. So you know how to swordfight then?” He asked once more.

Arya nodded her head. “Yes. I can swordfight.”

She had wanted to tell him she was one of the best but she had to remember to be very careful with her words this time.

After allowing a few moments of the coolest winds to sweep over the vicinity of the lake, he finally broke the silence.

“We’ve been talking this entire time, but I don’t even know your name yet.” He suddenly spoke.
Arya bit her lip for a second. “My name is Ary—Arry.” She lied. She had to.

“Arry…” The smith’s apprentice repeated her fake name. “Your name’s weird for a boy. Say, how old are you?” He asked her again.

“Seven-and-ten.” She replied nervously but she still dared herself to look him straight in the eye without faltering just so that he would believe her lie.

He knit his eyebrows in confusion. “Really? You don’t sound like a boy of seven-and-ten.” He told her incredulously.

She pretended to shrug it off nonchalantly. “Haven’t gotten past my growth spurt years yet. That happens to some of the boys my age.” She tried to explain. “What’s your name by the way?” It was her turn to ask him just so that he won’t have to ask her any more questions.

“I’m Gendry.” He told her casually, his blue eyes gazing at hers for a few heartbeats then averting it to the view of the lake and the Northern hills.

“How old are you, Gendry?” Arya asked.

“I’m two-and-twenty.” He replied.

She was surprised to see how massive he was built compared to her brothers who had the same age as him. She would have wanted to tell him about her brothers but that would give away too much information already, so she held her tongue once more.

“So, if you came with the King on the way to the North, then you must be a Southerner then? Straight from King’s Landing, I presume.” She asked him.


“What’s it like in King’s Landing?” She asked him as her eyes were fixed on the greenest hills.

“Miserable.” He retorted sternly.

Arya looked at him this time and saw the gloom in his eyes.

“It’s everything and nothing all at once. It’s a combination of the most extreme of living conditions.” He added, wincing slightly at the thought of the capital. “Poverty and sickness is everywhere. It’s the worst you could ever encounter in your life.”

Arya nodded her head in understanding.

If anything, despite her often brazen and strong personality, deep inside her heart she still held a soft spot for those at the bottom rung of society. There was a pang in her heart the moment he mentioned about their living conditions.

She took a sharp intake of air before swallowing the invisible lump on her throat. At least she only had to worry about getting away or delaying any impending betrothal planned by her mother and father. She hoped to the non-existent gods that her parents would not be able to find a suitable lord for her.

“That’s…” Arya trailed off, searching for a word to describe it as her eyes looked up to the blue sky. “Horrid.” She finally said, heaving a sigh.
She heard him sigh as well. “Yes. It is indeed. You’re lucky you belong to the North. At least you won’t have to endure the stench surrounding King’s Landing.” Came his statement.

It sounded very realistic. She definitely didn’t want to live in a place that stank so badly. Perhaps she’d never visit King’s Landing if it was that desolate.

“I guess so. If I was to choose, I’d rather be living in Winterfell than in King’s Landing. I’ve heard stories about the capital too, read about them in books as well.” She retorted, suddenly feeling comfortable in his presence.

“How did a stable boy like you learn how to read?” He asked her suspiciously, narrowing his eyes at her.

Shit.

She bit her lip as she tried to formulate the fastest lie she could think of.

“You see, Lord Stark is a very generous lord. He makes sure to also educate the help around the castle, including stable boys.” She tried to explain, hoping that he would buy her idea.

She was more than relieved to find him nodding his head in approval.

“Very generous indeed.” He agreed blankly.

They stayed that way in the lake for a few more hours until her stomach finally grumbled. She could practically hear Gendry let out a mocking snort. She glared at him and rolled her eyes.

“I’m getting hungry, alright?” She hissed through gritted teeth.

Gendry raised his hands in mock surrender.

“I know, I know. I think I am too.” He told her equally but he was trying to stifle a smile.

Her eyes were fixed on his face for a few short seconds before finally realizing that it must be in the early afternoon already because she was getting very hungry and the last meal she had was when during breakfast.

“How do you want to go to Winter Town? We could have our midday meal there.” He suggested.

Arya hesitated for a moment. Someone would definitely recognize her to be Arya Stark of Winterfell in Winter Town. But the excitement of a new adventure thrilled her more than her fear of being discovered. That’s the point of sneaking out of Winterfell and going to this place. It was the thrill she was seeking.

A smile slowly crept through her face for the first time as she looked up at him.

“Do you ride fast in that horse?” She asked him, flashing a devilish grin.

“Are you challenging me?” He asked, arching an eyebrow.

Arya shrugged her shoulders casually, holding a smug look on her face. “I’ll race you to back to Winter Town.” She told him as she stood up.

She bolted toward her horse and untied the reins.

Gendry on the other hand strode toward the destrier in big and quick steps and mounted on his
horse swiftly. The next thing Arya knew was she was already racing with him to Winter Town.

After long minutes of racing, she got off her horse with a very triumphant smirk on her face the moment they arrived at the entrance to Winter Town. Gendry got off his destrier as he walked toward her, pulling his horse with him through the reins.

“You’re a very fast rider. Impressive.” He remarked.

She was rather surprised by his remark. She was expecting him to be a sore loser, but he instead gave her something positive.

“Thanks, I guess.” Arya replied as they walked along the streets of Winter Town.

She gingerly scanned the area for any of her father’s guards from Winterfell but she was relieved when she found none. She tried to duck her head low to conceal her face and her eyes from the people. She tried to keep a low profile.

Leaving their horses tied near the entrance of Winter Town, they headed to the markets where hot chicken broth and boiled potatoes with fresh herbs were sold and cooked. They were about to buy their food when she suddenly saw her father’s head of the guards, Jory Cassel, talking with one of the vendors selling pork and chicken. Her heart leapt for fear of being recognized, especially by Jory. He knew her too well even in breeches.

She cursed silently. “Shit!”

It wasn’t enough to be out of Gendry’s earshot though for he turned back to her and questioned her. “What’s wrong?”

She grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the market. The moment her hand touched the skin on his strong arm, she felt a sudden jolt in her insides that she really could not explain. She was not even sure this time if her heart was beating faster because she found Jory or if it’s entirely for a whole new different reason.

Before she could make her reply, she noticed Gendry having the same look of fear as hers. When she turned around, she saw some Baratheon men heading their direction but she doubted if those guards even recognized the two of them.

This time, it was Gendry who grabbed her to a dark, secluded alley. She got even more surprised when he pressed his strong body to her as he pinned themselves on the wall to hide from the guards. She realized how tall he was that she had to tilt her head up for her to reach his eyes. Her face was very close to his chest that she could breathe in his scent.

It was unexpected.


He smelled of wood, soot and something entirely different, something entirely his own. And he smelled so… good. Her lips were slightly parted the moment she looked up at him.

He had his eyes fixed on her as well as if trying to study her. Her face suddenly betrayed a blush.

When they were sure that the guards were gone, he finally pulled away from her as she tried to lean on the wall to hold herself. Her legs suddenly felt jelly-like. She released a long sigh as if she had been holding her breath for a long time. She had forgotten how to breathe again.
Arya tried to stand still to steady the beating of her heart as Gendry faced her once more.

“Let’s just go to some inn or something.” He suggested seriously.

Arya narrowed her eyes at him.

“Why are you hiding from the guards?” She asked him.

Gendry only shrugged nonchalantly. “I just don’t want them to see me. They might ask me to mend their armor or their swords. It’s my time off, remember? I don’t want to do some work today.” He explained calmly.

Arya started to walk. “Oh, alright then. Come on, let’s get something to eat. I’m really hungry now.” She told him.

As soon as he finally caught up with her paces, he suddenly looked at her suspiciously.

“You also acted as if you didn’t want anyone to see you here in Winter Town. Why? Are you hiding something?” He asked.

Arya tried to remain calm instead of stopping in her tracks. “I’m not hiding something. I just don’t feel like greeting people right now because I’m so hungry.” She lied.

She heard him heave a sigh as he uttered an almost incoherent, “As you say so.”

Then she led him to an inn she knew was secluded from the rest of the village people.

They ate a hearty meal of creamy chicken soup with pease, some bread and fresh cow’s milk. Arya was so hungry that she had to order another two more servings of the same meal which left Gendry in shock.

“You eat like a full-grown man. Just exactly where do you keep your other stomach?” He remarked, shaking his head playfully.

Arya was still chewing the huge piece of bread in her mouth, making both her cheeks bulge. If Mother could see her right now surely Arya would not be allowed to eat dinner not only because of her unladylike behavior, but also because of the amount of food she was eating.

“What? I’m hungry. I eat a lot when I’m hungry.” She told him, the bread stuffed inside her mouth muffling her voice while the small crumbs sputtered in all directions.

“You can have the rest of my food too, if you like. I’m already full.” He told her as he passed the bowl of soup to her with his last piece of bread.

She looked up at him, confused.

“That’s your share so you eat it.” She told him.

Gendry shook his head. “No, really. You can have it, Arry.” He insisted seriously.

Arya breathed a sigh of resignation and took his food.

When they were finished with their meal, Arya was more than surprised with his offer to pay for all the food they ate. She politely turned down his offer, insisting that she brought money with her but Gendry stubbornly declined her coin.
“Just keep your money and save it for the rainy days, okay? I got this. I have more than enough right now.” He assured.

It was a bit odd how a blacksmith like him had more than enough money. Perhaps his master always paid him more or maybe he saved a lot of money in his years of work.

She continued to study him curiously as he paid the innkeeper for their meal. It was the first time she had seen someone give so much considering his state in life. He was not even a highborn lord, and yet he was very generous.

Arya blinked twice and only muttered a hurried “Thanks” after everything was settled.

As they headed out of the inn, Arya finally decided to go back to Winterfell as it would take almost an hour riding back to the castle.

“Just so you know, I’m not a charity case like what you think I am. So next time, I’ll pay for myself… and for you as well. We could do that. To be fair.” She told him albeit calmly.

If anything, she wasn’t mad at him, it’s only that her pride was slightly shaken. Gendry gave her his warm response.

“Allright then. I’ll let you pay next time.” He finally agreed.

Then he inched closer to her as he inclined his head to her ear. “So there really is a next time for us, isn’t it?” He whispered then he pulled away from her, smiling impishly.

It was her first time seeing him flash a full-toothed smile. And the words he just said suddenly made her blush profusely. She tried to open her mouth to speak but the right words failed to come out.

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow then? The same spot and the same place in the lake?” He asked her.

Arya gave him a smile that actually looked like a sheepish grimace.

“Sure. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.” She told him but regretted her words the moment it came out from her mouth.

She sounded like some stupid bloody lady who was ‘looking forward’ to having a rendezvous with him.

She shook her head mentally as if to shun those thoughts away.

“Just make sure to get back to Winterfell in one piece. I heard that there are wolves in the road.” He told her.

Arya snorted at what he just said.

If he only knew that she lived with direwolves her entire life.

Before she could walk away, Gendry extended his hand to her. “It’s was nice meeting you, Arry.”

Arya took his hand in hers and made a firm grasp. “Nice meeting you too.” She said good-naturedly but careful enough not to show him she was a girl.

His hand was very warm. As warm as the furnaces in Winterfell and as warm as Mikken’s forge. Little did she know that her eyes were drawn back into his eyes once more and what’s worse was
she may have held his hand for more than what was necessary.

She immediately but reluctantly let go of his hand.

She finally arrived back in Winterfell after less than an hour of riding her horse with Nymeria padding behind her. Her direwolf met with her along the road to Winterfell. As she got off her horse, she felt tired but very much content to be having another adventure that day, especially now that she had made a new friend in the form of Gendry.

After she reluctantly walked to her bedchambers, what she saw was worse than Jon had thought.

It wasn’t just Septa Mordane waiting in her room.

It was Septa Mordane and her mother.

Despite the fact that she had been used to an endless bout of chastisement, she still hated the fact that they wouldn’t just let her be herself. She had been escaping sewing lessons her whole life and getting scolded afterwards.

It’s as if it’s all just a never-ending cycle.

She’d been meaning to break it, only, she just didn’t know how.
Chapter 3: Sentencing

The following morning, Arya awoke to the sound of thunders growling in the skies above. As she peered through her window, she noticed a formation of dark, massive clouds. The wind breezing through her window was also colder than the usual as she felt goosepimples on her arms and neck.

She had to snuggle up more under her blankets to keep herself from the chilly air circulating her room. As she wriggled with her sheets to savor whatever warmth that’s left from her featherbed, the events from yesterday suddenly filled her thoughts, most especially about her encounter with the young smith’s apprentice, Gendry.

For some reason, the thought of him made her warm in all the right places and made her forget about her anger from yesterday following her sewing lessons. In fact, she had to admit that meeting Gendry was the best part of her day yesterday.

She couldn’t even bring herself to admit that this was because she found him ultimately attractive. It was an unwilling denial on her part because Arya Stark did not do attraction.

She’d never been with any other boy like him in her life except for her direct relations and Theon, so it might have been understandable that she felt different around him.

Sure, she had other friends from before who were of the opposite gender in the form of Mycah (the butcher’s boy), and Ned Dayne from Starfall, she still could not put together why it was so different being with Gendry. Maybe it was because both of her other friends were boys, while Gendry was clearly already a man.

She never felt her heart beat faster with Mycah, nor had she ever flustered profusely when Ned was
around. But with Gendry, she somehow felt … reactive. His touch always had an effect on her and his intense gaze always made her bare-naked and open right before him.

She shook her head to rid her mind of more unbidden thoughts of him before finally rising from her bed lazily.

As soon as she finished washing her face, she tied her hair in a tight but messy bun then proceeded with binding her chest with the piece of cloth she had been keeping for that purpose. She had made it a habit to bind her chest every time she would head out of Winterfell when wearing boy’s clothes.

After donning on her blue and grey dress (because she had to wear a dress that day to at least try to look behaved in front of her mother and her septa), she carefully opened her wooden chest drawer and pulled out a clean set of tunic, boiled leather jerkin, her cloak and breeches.

She wore her loose breeches under her dress and she had to fold them until her knees to conceal them altogether. As for her boiled leather jerkin and white tunic, she had to wrap them with her grey cloak.

Nymeria was patiently waiting for her to finish dressing up at the foot of her bed.

When she looked at herself in front of the looking glass, she was content to see herself fairly presentable to her lady mother.

After a few minutes, she was already breaking her fast with her family.

She was in the middle of nibbling a small piece of potato in her fork sleepily when her Lord father cleared his throat as if to silence everyone around their table. He was specifically looking in her direction, which was quite unusual for him to do especially if she was not being berated for her unruly behavior.

“There’s one very important thing we have been meaning to tell you, Arya. And we feel that now is the perfect time for you to be informed about it…” Her father suddenly spoke up, looking closely at her, then at her mother.

Her mother nodded in approval, but she noticed how her father plastered a worried look on his face.

Arya only gave them a curious look, raising an eyebrow. Her instincts suddenly churned up uncomfortably and right then and there she knew that this was something bad.

“What is it?” She had to ask anyway just to get it over with.

She kept her face guarded and her voice stern.

Her father held a lingering stare until he finally spoke. “Since your sister is already betrothed to the heir of Highgarden—“ Arya was smart enough to surmise what her father was about to say next. But she spoke before he could.

“No, no, no, please. This can’t be happening! You will not have me married to some stupid lord, Father! I’ve got no plans of getting married! Not now, not ever! I have specifically told everyone, including Mother, and Jon, and Robb, that I won’t be shipped off somewhere just to be married to some lord to join our houses. I don’t want to be a lady!” She fumed, her rage slowly clouding her sensibility.

No wonder all her siblings were having those knowing looks on their faces. They bloody knew already.
She had a firm grip on her fork and knife. Had she been strong enough, her knife and fork would have already bended to her will. She gritted her teeth to try to calm herself. This was exactly what she’d been dreading her whole life. She didn’t want to be regarded as some lady wife bearing some lord’s babe. She wanted to be free. She wanted to be like Brienne of Tarth. She wanted to be more. And this prospect right here, it wasn’t her.

Father broke her train of thoughts when he spoke once more in a calm manner. “No, you will not marry some lord, sweetling.”

She managed to let out a sigh of relief but deep inside, she still had that impending feeling of doom looming and crushing her slowly. Somehow she could foretell what her father would say next and she knew it was going to be worse.

Her gut feeling told her so.

When her father spoke again, she was all too sure that she would definitely not be liking the next words he would utter. “You are to marry King Robert’s one true son and heir to join our houses, Arya. The real crown prince of Westeros.”

Arya’s eyes widened in shock and then it turned to full raging anger in a few heartbeats.

No! No! This can’t be possible!

The grip on her fork and knife were only growing tighter that at any given moment, she’d be drawing blood. Gone were her dreams of riding the rest of the North with her horse and besting her brothers at sword fighting. She thought that becoming a wife to some pompous lord was the worst thing that could happen to her, but she was wrong.

The worst was just an understatement.

Becoming the future Queen of Westeros was a total disaster.

It was an end to her life—an end to Arya Stark of Winterfell.

Seven fucking hells!

Arya shook her head in horror, strongly appalled by their sudden decision without even consulting her. Her heart was pounding so hard, it felt like it’s about to leap out of her chest.

“NO!!! You can’t do this! You haven’t even asked for my consent regarding this matter!” She exclaimed angrily.

Her father was still calm. Her mother keeping a stern face as if telling her she didn’t have a choice in this betrothal. The rest of her siblings had mixed reactions of worry and apprehension, especially Jon. They knew. All of them knew, except for her.

What a fucking mockery.

“The King had wanted this to happen, sweetling. And your mother and I both believe that it’s high time for you to find a husband. And King Robert’s son would be a perfect match for you.” He retorted.

“You’re almost a woman grown now.” Her mother added. “Gods, you’re seven-and-ten already! Any given time now, you’ll flower and have your first moon-blood and you’ll be ready to get
married and bear children.” Mother continued as if she was just talking about the sky being naturally blue.

Her heart only raced faster. She could feel all of the blood draining from her face.

“You’ll be married by the time you will have your first moon-blood.” Lord Eddard told her.

She rose from her seat angrily, glaring at them murderously.

“You all know I’m not just some mere object that you would readily ship off to whoever potential husband you want for me, right? Why haven’t you consulted me about this? Why make this decision without me knowing, when in the first place, it is me who is going to be married?” Came her bitter questions, her heart breaking more than they could ever understand. No, they never understood her at all. Shaking her head, she continued with seething rage, “What makes you think that I will allow this betrothal to happen? You’re all deluding yourselves if you think that I would just willingly accept what’s been laid out for me without my own say in this matter.

“I will never ever submit myself to becoming a wife even if he was the bloody prince of the Seven fucking Kingdoms! You will not make a pawn out of me just to strengthen your fucking political alliances!” She screamed, her voice echoing over the granite walls of the Great Hall.

Her poor knife and fork flew and hit the stone walls before she stormed out of the hall angrily. The rest of her mood unsalvageable by any gods forsaken miracle.

She ran as fast as she could toward her secret place in the First Keep so that she could change into her boy clothes. After donning on her cloak, she didn’t waste time running to the stables with Nymeria following her suit. She pulled out the reins from her horse and mounted it hastily.

“M’lady, where are you going?” One of the Winterfell guards asked her, wondering where she was off to as soon as she led her horse to the back gate of the castle.

The guard clearly had no idea what had transpired in the Great Hall.

“I’ll be back before sundown. Don’t bother catching up or I’ll have your head in a spike when I get back!” She threatened the guard angrily with her domineering voice.

Arya felt sorry for what she said but she had to do it so that no one would come following her. Nymeria came running with her as soon as she rode out of Winterfell. She needed to breathe and let herself be free from the misery of belonging to a highborn family.

Rage fully enveloped her senses now that even her tears ran cold as she was riding her horse.

She went to her usual spot in the lake where the temperature was getting more frigid due to the obscure weather. Rain was also threatening to fall at any given moment. Nymeria was once again bound for the dark woods to hunt, allowing her this kind of solitude to release her wrath.

“Fuck!” She silently cursed, her words cut short as fresh warm tears finally fell down her pale face. She allowed herself to feel all the pain and welcome the reality of her situation as she continued to sob and let her fat tears fall without reservations.

This could not be happening. Clearly they knew she’d always been against fixed marriages, and yet they still made that fucking agreement to marry her off to none other than the crown prince of the whole bloody Seven Kingdoms!

She felt betrayed by her entire family. Because they all fucking knew except for her. And they had
the nerve to tell all this to her in the last minute.

It was humiliating at its best. Degrading and downright unfair.

They all knew… Those traitors… While they were watching her being constantly reprimanded for her behavior, they all knew that she’d soon be traded off like this like some bloody cattle!

Her rage was now in full bloom and she had the urge to hit something. Anything.

She ran toward the nearest oak tree and began punching it. Her left hand now badly bruised and blood beginning to mar the soft, sensitive skin of her knuckles.

The first few blows were excruciatingly painful until she got used to the pain, the bones from her hand threatening to break from the impact. Blood now coated her entire left fist, leaving stains on the bark of the tree.

Just when she was about to make another blow to the poor oak tree, she heard a familiar voice from behind her.

“Has that tree ever done something wrong to you?” Came the voice of Gendry.

As soon as she turned around, she glared at him angrily.

“What do you care? It’s none of your bloody business!” She spat.

Gendry only looked at her intently with those ice blue eyes. He still held his usual serious face as he closed the distance between them.

“I heard you crying. I thought you were in danger, so I had to check.” He retorted.

Then his eyes averted to her blood-soaked fist before she could completely hide her bruised hand behind her back.

“My troubles are none of your concern.” She told him, her voice still hoarse from her crying fit.

Gendry only looked at her intently as he remained silent. He regarded her without any judgment, albeit worry was evident in those blue eyes.

The unbearable pain from her damaged hand betrayed her façade until she winced in obvious pain.

“You’re hurt.” Observed Gendry, carefully taking her hand in his.

“It’s nothing.” Was all she said.

Despite the calluses from his fingers, Arya couldn’t help but feel how gentle he was in holding her injured hand.

He pulled out a white cloth that looked like a handkerchief from the pocket of his breeches and began wrapping her hand with it. He was busy tending to her wound while all she could do was stare at him and those eyes hidden under thick, dark lashes and thick raven hair. Arya Stark was rendered speechless once more, her tears finally forgotten.

“There. It’s best that you have someone see to that wound.” He finally told her after tying the last knot, breaking her sudden trance.
She was suddenly too tried to say anything, so she settled for sitting on the wooden stump by the lake as he followed her carefully. Her earlier rage was suddenly tamed by his presence. They stayed quiet for a long time; Gendry’s silence was surprisingly very therapeutic.

It was broken when he finally decided to ask, “You look like you could kill someone with the way you were hitting that tree. What happened?”

Arya looked at her boots, refusing to meet his searing gaze. “Nothing.” Came her clipped response.

“Didn’t look like it was nothing to me. Perhaps telling me would make you feel better. Talking to someone always does.”

Arya finally heaved a sigh of defeat before replying. “Just…family duties.” She muttered.

“I see. Seems like we have that in common, then. It’s that moment when you come to realize that you have to live up to your family’s expectations and make sure that you do your duty to uphold your family name, even if it’s against your will. But there’s nothing you can do but accept your responsibility without question. Because that’s what you ought to do.” He explained, all of a sudden lost in his own train of thoughts.

But she completely felt for him, because he just told her exactly what she felt earlier at the Great Hall. The look she gave him just confirmed his prior statement.

“Is that what this is about, then? Or am I to believe that your troubles right now are entirely different from what I just spoke about?”

Arya raised an eyebrow at him, confused.

“Well, no, you were actually right the first time. Why? What else were you thinking?”

The stolid look on his face softened until his lips curled into a knowing sinister smirk.

Maybe he already knew her secret.

No, that couldn’t be possible. She was being very cautious about hiding her identity. He couldn’t possibly know that she’s actually a girl posing as some random lad.

“Well, you know, I thought you were infuriated by the fact that someone discovered that you are actually a girl hiding in boy’s clothes.” Came his casual retort.

Arya’s eyes widened in shock. Fear was evidently etched on her face right now.

How in Seven Hells did he bloody know that she was a girl when she was being very careful of not blowing her cover?

“I’m not a girl!” She spat indignantly.

Gendry was obviously unconvinced.

“Yes, you are.” His eyes never left hers as he continued to study her, perhaps waiting for her to finally admit the truth.

“No, I’m not!”
He was damn good at suspecting her to be a girl. That was sure.

“Oh yes you are.” He shot back, this time he arched an eyebrow at her.

“I’m not a fucking girl!”

“Why don’t you pull your cock out and take a piss then?” He challenged her this time, flashing a grin more wicked than the last.

Arya was taken aback.

“I don’t need to take a piss.” Her tone was more subdued this time, finally admitting to her defeat.

Triumph morphed in his face.

“Then you’re definitely a girl. I’m not as stupid as the rest.” Came his all-knowing statement.

Arya ducked her head low. There was no way to argue with someone like him because he was very right about her in the first place.

A sigh of resignation left her lips.

“What gave me away?” She had to ask him.

Gendry gave her a once-over before pulling his face closer to her neck. She could feel his breath tickling her skin, her own heart thundering at their proximity. With a huge intake of air, as if sniffing her, she felt his lips on her ear.

“Your scent.” The way he said it felt like sin. And she liked his raspy voice. “You smell like a girl.”

It took all of her resolve to hold back the moan stuck in her throat at the feel of his warm breath that’s doing wonders to her body right now. It was as if her prior problem was completely obliterated by the fact that he was so close to kissing her neck.

Taking a few shallow breaths, she finally spoke. “Really? Have you been with many girls then to know that I smell like one?”

He pulled away from her almost abruptly, but his gaze never left hers.

“I’m not daft. But to answer your question, yes. I’ve been with many girls to know that you smell like one.”

Bloody hell. It never occurred to her that the soaps and fragrance oils the maids made her use would give her away like this.

She ought to be careful next time. But then again, there might never be a next time because she’d be sent away to be wedded to some prince she barely knew. But perhaps if she ran away then she could definitely have a next time.

Running away sounded like a good plan. Then she could finally have her freedom to become whatever she wanted. She’d no longer be bound by the invisible chains of nobility.

She broke from her train of thoughts as she spoke to him again. “No one else can know. Not while I am wearing something like this. It’s safer to travel and it’s more comfortable in boy’s clothes.”

He nodded in agreement before he deigned to ask, “So, if you’re a girl, is Arry really your name? Or
do you have some girl’s name?"

Her eyes were now fixated on the hills beyond the lake.

“My name’s not Arry. It’s Arya…” She swallowed the invisible lump on her throat before finally
untwisting the messy bun on top of her head, setting loose waves upon waves of thick dark brown hair
that fell below her shoulders. “My name is Arya…of House Stark.”

She saw the shocked look in his face at her confession, and something else unreadable. It was as if
the blood from his face had drained, rendering him paper-white with surprise.

“House Stark…” He whispered in jagged breathing.

His eyes never left her grey ones as his gaze continued to penetrate her. He was unexpectedly
stunned after she untied her hair despite already knowing that she was indeed a girl. It was a reaction
she never got from anyone else.

“You’re Lord Eddard Stark’s daughter?”

She swallowed. “Yes.”

“So, you’re a hightborn lady of Winterfell.”

“Don’t call me that!” She spat with righteous indignation.

“You’re a lord’s daughter. Ergo, that makes you a lady.” Came his matter-of-fact, no-nonsense
statement.

“Whatever you say. I don’t give a fuck about being a lady. I was never a proper one to begin with.”

His eyes continued to bore into her as if caught in a trance. “Not a proper lady, I suppose…”

He trailed off, “But an interesting one.”

Arya snorted at his outright flattery. She was not one to feel all giddy for receiving compliments from
someone, much less from a man like Gendry.

“Don’t patronize me.”

“I wasn’t patronizing, my lady, I was stating a mere fact.”

“I said don’t call me ‘my lady.’ I’m sick and tired of it.” She hissed.

“It’s your birthright.” He countered.

“See, that’s the problem.”

“What problem?”

“That birthright thing. That’s the problem. You’re born into nobility with all the riches and lands you
own, but then you don’t really get to choose for yourself because you are going to be stuck for
life with some person assigned to you by contract, thus limiting you to your duties instead of
actualizing your full potential as a person. It’s a metaphor for a prison. You’re bound by invisible
chains just because of some tradition followed by your ancestors and the future generation to come.”

She was surprised by her elaboration, but at least she was able to explain her real thoughts without
being judged by their myopic views.
Words failed to come out of Gendry’s mouth for a few seconds as he tried to internalize what she just said. Arya hoped she made sense, or else her sentiments about nobility would be for naught.

Before he could provide her with a response, the heavy rains suddenly began pouring all over the vast expanse of the lake. They were both drenched within seconds of the outpour.

She felt her body shivering uncontrollably as the cold finally seeped through her clothes.

“Fuck!” She cursed. Before she could make a move, she felt a large warm hand tugging at her.

“We need to get under the trees before this rain gets any worse. Come on!” Gendry said as he started to walk toward the trees while holding her hand.

They stopped under one of the larger trees along the border of the forest, both of them already soaked as if they just took a plunge in the lake.

Arya bit her lip to keep it from shaking, hugging herself from the biting cold.

Suddenly, she felt something warm engulfing her back only to realize that Gendry had placed his warm cloak around her.

She looked up to him, confused.

“You need it more than I do.” He told her good-naturedly.

“What about you?”

Gendry just shook his head. “I want to savor the cold while it lasts. You don’t get a weather like this in the sweltering heat of King’s Landing, I promise you.” He winked.

She didn’t want to argue anymore because it took too much effort to speak so she just shrugged and uttered an incoherent “Fine.”

A moment of silence passed before it was broken by Gendry speaking.

“You’re right, you know.” He said, looking at her intently. “About the invisible chains of nobility and tradition. You’ve never been more accurate.”

“It sucks that I’m sort of stuck into this kind of life, really. I envy you, though. Because you get to actualize your full potential as an apprentice without the dictates of family tradition and everything.” She told him desolately.

“I’m not far from what you’re actually experiencing, though. More or less we share the same dispositions about tradition and all…”

Arya look at him confusedly, “Whatever do you mean?”

Gendry took a sharp intake of air and released it with a long sigh.

“It’s exactly like you said. Keeping the family tradition…” He trailed off. He waited for her to turn her eyes back to him before he finally said, “Becoming a ruler when it’s time…”

Confusion was still painted on Arya’s face.

“A master armorer, you mean?”
There was nothing but the truth in his azure eyes. She could see his throat bobbing before he finally retorted, “No, I am to become a ruler one day.”

“A ruler of what?” She still didn’t get it.

It’s as if he was speaking in riddles this time. And she never had the patience for deciphering riddles.

Before either of them could say another word, she heard the sound of horses coming their way. It must be the Winterfell guards looking for her after she practically ran away from the castle earlier.

Arya immediately shot to her feet, turning to Gendry with haste. “I have to go. I’ll see you in Winterfell when you get there, okay? I’ll look for you when the Southron party arrives, I promise.”

Before she could mount her mare, she was suddenly pulled back to his space, his hand tight but gentle on hers. “I’ll see you in Winterfell, Arya Stark, and please don’t push me away…” His words sounded contrite, as if he’d wronged her.

“Why would I push you away, Gendry? Anyway, I really have to go. We’ll have all the time to talk when you get to Winterfell, alright? And thank you for this cloak. I’ll return it to you after I wash it.” She finally smiled at him before she reluctantly pulled away from his firm hold.

Fueled by adrenaline from keeping herself away from whoever was chasing her, Arya was finally back in Winterfell before any of her father’s guards could catch up with her, her clothes still damp from the heavy rain. It wasn’t until she arrived at the gates that she realized she was already burning with fever despite wearing Gendry’s cloak. She felt so cold but she was burning deep inside. That was the best description she could garner considering her sudden state of illness.

When she hopped off her horse, she almost fell face-down if not for the reins she was still holding. Weakness suddenly replaced all the adrenaline she was feeling.

Fuck. She never should have let herself get soaked from the heavy rain.

“She’s here! Arya’s back!” A familiar male voice called out.

The rest of her family came out to meet her.

“Arya, where in Seven Hells have you been?!” Her mother cried out worriedly, bringing Arya to her and hugging her tight.

Arya only fell silent and numb.

Her mother noticed the blood oozing from the cloth on her left hand.

“And what happened to your hand?!” She exclaimed.

Her lord father approached with a very stern face. He even looked angry.

“Never ever run away like that, young lady! You could have been hurt or worst, taken away by Northern rebels!!!” Her father growled at her, raising his voice.

Instead of giving a biting retort, she only fell silent, her eyes drooping from weariness. She suddenly felt her head spinning that she couldn’t even bring herself to talk.

What the fuck is happening to me?
She wanted to lie down and rest, and sleep for eternity. She felt so disoriented that she was no longer listening to the sermon of her lady mother.

“Arya, why are you wearing a Baratheon cloak?” The voice sounded like Bran’s or Rickon’s. She really couldn’t tell now.

But then, one word stuck in her thoughts.

*Baratheon?*

Her insides desperately wanted to know the answer why.

*Why am I wearing a Baratheon cloak? This cloak came from Gendry, the smith’s apprentice.*

Arya only looked at all of them without uttering another word.

*Baratheon.*

Her mind whispered.

*Baratheon.*

Why was she hearing voices inside her head now? She took a second to study her left hand which was full of blood.

Then her world went dark.
Chapter Notes

*revised chapter as of 24 May 2019

*Currently revising everything in this work.

You may follow me in Tumblr, although it is not really ASOIAF and GOT related. It's explicit, though, so be warned.

Find me on Tumblr: TheHumanEntrailsAndTheMind

CRASH INTO ME

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Chapter 4: Colliding

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Gendry

- 

More than two months of not having a cunt or two to fuck—that was how long Gendry Baratheon had been celibate. It had more to do with his personal and uncompulsory vow to stay away from other women, now that he was already betrothed, and another to do with travelling the road North from King’s Landing for almost a month and refusing to fuck willing women during his travels, out of fear of being tricked into planting bastards into their wombs, which would only complicate his future alliance with the North.

It left him with only his hand to help achieve that needed release every day, and it’s not like he was even enjoying fucking himself with his bare hands. No, he fucking needed that mind-blowing visual stimulation from someone who was actually beautiful and intriguing at the same time.

Unfortunately, Gendry found that women who intrigued him were pretty much already scarce nowadays, if not extinct. Nothing or no one seemed to strike his fancy anymore by challenging him into a verbal sparring or two. All the rest of the ladies back at court were just either conniving bitches who wanted to be a princess in order to have something to boost their social status, or dumb simpering fools who could no longer keep up with meaningful, substantial conversations with him.

He was no longer interested in women who were just beautiful (and fuckable) superficially, he wanted something more to challenge him every time, and he wished to the gods above that they would grant him that one request—for this betrothed to be someone he could actually learn to love because of her profound personality.

Sighing out of frustration as he laid on the featherbed inside the bedchambers he was staying at the
inn, he finally rose and sat on his bed, his cock still unsatisfied from his morning wank.

Gods he hated his carnal appetites. Sometimes, he only had his father to blame for passing on that trait to him.

It was a good thing that they stopped at Winter Town to replenish because it would allow him some freedom to explore the lands beyond. He needed all the distraction he could afford, so he decided to escape the confines of his chambers so that he could ride to a place where he could be left to his thoughts.

As he finally traversed thorough the vast Northern lands just outside of Winter Town, he came across the most picturesque view his eyes had seen by far—the lake. It wasn’t that large compared to all the other lakes he had seen in the South, but it was still breath-taking.

He could live here forever if time permitted. He’d live inside a cozy cottage in the woods with only himself, his beloved forge, and his livestock to think about. He’d gladly escape the future duties he had to the Iron Throne because he’d always wanted the simple life. Maybe this was attributed to the fact that he came from humble beginnings in Flea Bottom. Or to the notion that peace was more of a luxury for a hightborn like him than a natural human right because of all the threats surrounding him and his father.

It was half an hour of wandering into the woods in his peaceful solitude when he heard the sound of a horse coming to the direction of the lake.

He immediately hid behind one of the trees that outlined the forest, leaving his destrier tied to a small tree near the lake.

A scrawny figure then materialized out of the brightness and approached his destrier curiously. Gendry squinted his eyes for a clearer look and realized that it was a young lad coming his way to touch his horse.

“Who goes there?” Came his deep and loud voice.

The lad was slightly taken aback causing him to move a step away as he hit his back on the tree. The small sword held by the lad surprised him.

“Where are you?” Came his voice. It sounded shaky. “Show yourself to me!” He demanded.

Something sounded off. Because he didn’t really sound like a lad to him.

After his careful assessment and finally deeming him to be harmless, Gendry finally revealed himself. The lad’s eyes bulged in utter surprise, perhaps at how large he seemed compared to the lad’s scrawny built. He also noted a tinge of red blooming across the lad’s cheeks, as if flustered or intimidated by him.

Gendry sauntered closer, his eyes continuing to observe him, especially his clothes. He was wearing an over-sized tunic underneath a boiled leather jerkin and breeches. Moreover, he noticed how refined his features were. That pale, pinkish and flawless skin was definitely unusual for a lad. He looked too clean for a boy his age.

What’s more unusual were the growing curves he could make out from underneath his clothes.

They started engaging in a careful conversation around the huge oak tree, noticing yet again how his voice still hadn’t broken out like the rest of the boys his age. He also looked too short for a boy of
seven-and-ten.

All of a sudden, soft breeze came to pass through them that unraveled something very striking from the lad he was talking to—his scent. Gendry’s nostrils flared as his scent engulfed him and he found himself entranced.

The scent was so… heavenly. Inviting. Extraordinary.

It was too delectable to belong to a lad’s. He was sure of it. No boy would ever wear a scent like that. He just knew. And that’s when it finally hit him—the person standing right before him was no mere lad, but a girl disguised as a boy.

Those curves hiding beneath her over-sized boy clothes were also too undeniable.

He suddenly wondered how she would look like when her hair was down and what her hair would feel like if he ran his fingers all over it. And then there were those grey eyes, such enticing and mysterious pair of eyes he had ever seen. He liked her eyes because they were not looking at him as if he was their personal conquest. She was looking at him because she was merely curious.

To top it all off, her scent gave away everything she’d been trying to conceal from him. She smelled of wild flowers and something uniquely her own. He couldn’t help but get drawn to it like a loon, and he couldn’t seem to get enough. He was helplessly attracted to her right that instant.

He was bewitched. And for some reason, he couldn’t explain why. She didn’t even look like all those other pampered ladies at court, but she already had him under her spell.

Who is she? And why is she posing as a stable boy from Winterfell?

Winterfell.

That’s where they were headed in a few days’ time but for some reason he forgot the purpose why his father and the rest of the Baratheon guards were heading for Winterfell because all he could focus on right that moment was her presence.

As they continued talking by the lake, it was there that he discovered that her name was Arry. Even her name sounded alluring. Everything about her just seemed so… interesting. For a moment he forgot who he was supposed to be. He forgot that he was the crown prince of Westeros, he forgot that he was the heir to the Iron Throne.

For a moment, he forgot that he was betrothed.

With her, he was just himself.

He was just Gendry.

How he wished he could stay that way for the rest of his life—as free as her.

The reality of his betrothal suddenly occupied his thoughts when they both fell silent. It tasted like ash in his mouth when he attempted to open up about it. He just couldn’t bring himself to confess to Arry that he was already promised to someone else, and he felt a pang in his heart.

Given the symptoms of what he’d suddenly been feeling, Gendry wondered if Northern women had that certain effect on Baratheon men because looking at this Northern woman sitting beside him today, he was surely smitten. Perhaps in the same way his father did with some deceased Northern highborn he was supposed to marry.
And when he watched her ride her horse as if she’d been doing it her entire life, he couldn’t help but wonder if she rode men like how she gracefully did her horse.

_Fuck._

Gendry’s cock made a sudden twitch at the thought of being ridden by a wild, carefree girl like her. He was supposed to have already kept his urges at bay by coming to the lake, but getting to know her only awakened all his desires so that when he was back inside his tent that night, he milked himself to completion just by thinking about Arry and fucking her seven ways to Sunday.

Gods, he was such a pig for having those thoughts about her, but to hell with it. He never pretended to be a saint, anyway.

*****

Gendry found it hard for sleep to come the night following his accidental discovery of who Arry really was. He tossed and turned on his sheets uncomfortably as his mind drifted to the minutes of their conversations. His conclusion about her being a girl at their first encounter was already a given, but who she actually was completely took the breath from his lungs.

Fate had a cruel way of mocking him, it seemed.

“My name is Arya… of House Stark.” Her words ringed inside his thoughts for the umpteenth time.

He was utterly, and completely fucked.

Arya Stark was his betrothed and he’d wanted her even before he knew who she was. The way her wavy dark brown hair hung loose below her shoulders only to frame the soft features of her face and the scent of her hair diffusing into his nostrils only strengthened his resolve of wanting her in all ways. And her mind, gods, her intellectual mind only brought his admiration for her to a whole new different level. She’d just brought herself a notch higher up his metaphorical pedestal of strong, amazing women.

He wanted to know more of her. Fuck, he would’ve wanted to marry her right away. But then again, he was aware that doing so would only make her stay farther away from him. It was already a given fact that Arya Stark never had any inclination to become a wife. It was evident enough in the way they discussed the invisible chains of nobility. And that’s where the problem was. Because it would indeed be a challenge to win her completely.

He wasn’t even certain if he’d live up to his twenty-third name-day because he was so sure already that Arya Stark would gut him the moment she’d know who he really was.

She would kill him in his sleep, that’s for sure.

She’s not some stupid, spineless fool who’d easily forgive him for concealing his identity from her. No, it was a known fact that she would fight him to the Seven Hells just to slap in his face the fact that he’d done her wrong.

Their betrothal was going to be so much fun. Not.

At least the only consolation he could see in this arrangement was holding their marriage off until
Arya would flower, which apparently she hadn’t yet. He might not be a saint, but he also wasn’t a monster. He wouldn’t wish upon her to suffer being forced to marry him just to strengthen some political alliances between their houses, so despite how much Gendry wanted to fuck Arya Stark, he also wanted to protect her from being hurt.

He slept that night with the anticipation of seeing her again tomorrow at Winterfell, albeit the inevitable revelation of who he really was.
Arya was not sure how many times she’d been getting in and out of sleep. The only thing she could recall was Maester Luwin putting a damp cloth on her forehead every now and then. She suspected her body having succumbed to high fever after being soaked in the rain for a long time because she had been having the wildest dreams in her sleep, from having nightmares of some brutish prince forcing her to marry and bed him, to riding horses and staring up at intense blue eyes that felt like sin. Her body would feel so hot every time she woke to consciousness, she could have sworn her clothes were drenched in sweat.

A day had passed when her convalescent stage broke out.

She was awoken by the sound of wheels and horses in their courtyard, apart from voices of their household screaming something like making haste to get ready to meet their guests.

From the color of the skies outside her window, it must still be early in the morning. She tried to stir in order to get out from her bed but the abrupt movement only made her injured hand hurt like the Seven Hells. Looking at it, she noticed a new set of clean bandages wrapped securely around her palm.

A series of colorful expletives escaped her lips, albeit in a whisper.

It was when she went out of bedchambers that she noticed the sudden silence in the castle, all those voices from earlier suddenly became non-existent.

Her mind was still a bit disoriented, not having any idea as to what day it was, so she still could not
put together what it was that made the castle seem like a ghost town. She had to lean her dominant bruised hand on the warm stone walls to steady her gait as her legs were still weak from being indisposed and bedridden.

No one actually came to greet her, much less reprimand her for getting out of her chambers in an indecent state. She walked along the halls of the lonely castle in an ensemble of only her thin white nightclothes, barefoot and her hair unbound.

No one was around at all. It was as if the entire castle was deserted.

For a moment, she dreaded the thought. But as her mind came to realize of its impossibility, she just dismissed it as something that would have to do with what was happening outside in the courtyard. So on she went to find out what was really going on.

As expected, everyone was lined up, without a word or whisper from their lips as their eyes were all trained to the spectacle in front of them.

Her family was standing in front of what appeared to be a carriage and a group of horses with guards from a different house. It had to be from a different house, considering the yellow and black colors that decorated the flags they were carrying and she was still too disoriented to ponder which house it belonged to.

When she stopped just right in front of the carriage to inspect the open door, she heard gasps behind her. It was Sansa’s. Obviously. Because no one else gasped exaggeratingly like her sister.

She turned around to look back at her family, their faces holding different blatant expressions of being shocked to being mortified. She could count several disapproving looks as well.

Fuck. What had she done this time to earn them those faces?

A movement cause her eyes to turn to her right and saw a fat figure heading toward her direction. Wearing a crown.

A crown.

The reality of her situation finally dawned on her.

King Robert Baratheon.

In the name of all that was holy…

“Fuck!” She cursed again, this time in a soft whisper.

Her eyes widened at the realization.

They were arriving today?

It was too late for her to get back to her chambers and change into decent clothing now because she was already standing right in front of them.

Her eyes searched her mother and father, pleading in silent assistance as to how she could redeem herself in this embarrassing situation. They didn’t give her anything, though. She was on her own this time.

At least she’d washed her face and cleaned her teeth before heading out of her rooms, there’s that.
Swallowing the fat lump on her throat, she finally kneeled and spoke, schooling her face to look remorseful, “I beg your forgiveness, Your Grace. I didn’t know you were arriving today. I just woke up from a long sleep after having succumbed to fever a few days ago.”

She hoped to the gods that her curtsy was enough. It was all the social graces she could muster from years of attending lady lessons with their septa. She hoped she didn’t disappoint.

She expected the king to shout at her for her outright obliviousness and stupidity and order his guards to send her to the dungeons, but she didn’t expect the nonchalant reaction on his face toward her great blunder. She then felt the tug of her chin and his fingers brought her face to look at him, rising up to her feet in the process.

"So it's true, Ned." The King said, eyeing her as if she was someone so familiar, studying her endearingly. "She indeed resembles Lyanna, she's even more beautiful than her."

Arya blushed at the King's unexpected remark. She looked back at the King's blue eyes. There was a certain gleam in his blue eyes that seemed oddly familiar to her. She could have sworn she’d seen the same cerulean shade of those eyes in someone else.

"She's even as wild and as stubborn as my late sister, Your Grace." Her father added. "You would need to excuse her behavior. She just woke up after combatting her high fever following her adventures under the rain."

The King 's loud and hearty laugh echoed around the courtyard.

"There's nothing to forgive, child. You have pleased me as much." The King told her, smiling at her and giving her a kiss on the forehead which made Arya flush in embarrassment.

The king continued to greet the rest of her family, leaving Arya more befuddled at the king’s unexpected treatment of her.

As soon as Arya settled herself next to her brothers, she noticed a very familiar and brooding figure standing near the Kingsguards and a group of Baratheon men. He wore a very stolid look on his face, pretty much complimenting his massive frame. Then she felt familiar eyes gazing at her, only she could not yet put together who it was as he was standing a bit far from her range of clear vision.

But then, she noticed his lips curling knowingly at the sight of her. It was that damned signature smirk that gave him away. And there’s everything else familiar about him that was slowly unfurling right before her very eyes—his thick raven hair, his hulking form… and those blue eyes.

She was broken from her silent scrutiny as the King spoke to her again, "Lady Arya, meet my son, your betrothed, Gendry Baratheon, first of his name, heir to the Iron Throne and the Seven Kingdoms." The King introduced.

Of course there was the matter of her betrothed.

Wait, did he just say Gendry Baratheon?

Fucking great.

That bloody bastard! He’s been playing me for a fool all along! Fucking smith’s apprentice, my arse!

Everything that happened in the past few days suddenly surged in her stream of consciousness like a damn flood.
And the fact that Gendry played her for a fool only fueled the rage inside her.

She balled her hands into tight fists despite the pain from her injury, her blood boiling in irritation at the thought of being played at. She made sure to shoot her murderous glare at him, relaying to him how pissed she was for being tricked. But his sinister smile only grew wider at her realization, reveling at the sight of what she must have looked like, standing there and looking like a bloody idiot for falling into his tricks.

Wait till I get my hands on you, Prince Gendry Baratheon! She seethed in her thoughts.

The King’s son finally sauntered to their direction in all its brooding glory. He looked much more different now that he was wearing proper royal clothes in the colors of house Baratheon.

He looked so regal.

Intimidating.

As he was already standing before her, it was there that she noted that he actually shaved his stubble, and his rich black hair was brushed up to emphasize his highly attractive features. Arya felt her breath hitch. That familiar yet unnamable feeling was back to haunt her at the sight of him threatening to weaken all her resolve.

She looked up so she could hold his smoldering gaze and tried her best not to falter.

She was taken aback when he reached for her right hand and kissed the back of her palm gingerly. A shock of electricity broke through the rest of her body the moment his skin touched hers, most especially his lips.

Her insides squirmed in lecherous jubilation.

Well, shit. Damn my traitorous body.

They stared at each other for longer than what was necessary. And she couldn’t help but notice how his large warm hand was still holding hers as if he was not yet ready to let go of it.

"It is an honor to finally meet you, Lady Arya." He greeted after finally letting go of her hand, that knowing smirk only growing wider.

Arya felt her jaw clench in anger at his tone. It was as if they didn’t share something back in the lake with the way he was addressing her. But then again, they had to keep up with their facades, lest everyone here in the courtyard would know that they’d already been acquainted.

She felt her eye twitch as she feigned a sweet, empty voice, "It is a pleasure to meet you too, Your Grace."

Her sharp grey eyes bore into his as if making a solemn promise to kill him later.

She brazenly took back his hand and gave him a handshake, squeezing his hand in a firm grip until he could feel the pain. But he only looked at her without even the slightest wince at her gesture. He was obviously stronger and immune to her strength. But at least he was able to get the idea that she wasn’t really pleased to see him at all.

It was as if his ice blue eyes were seeing the inner workings of her mind with the way he was looking at her. She felt naked to the bone.
A few more heartbeats later, she finally released his hand and broke away from his gaze.

"Take me to your crypts, I want to pay my respects." Arya heard the King tell her father after all the introductions were made.

Before the King and her father made their way to the crypts, her father turned to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Please escort the prince to his chambers, if you would be so kind, sweetling." Her father ordered her, giving her that knowing smile.

Arya raised an eyebrow at her father in question.

"How should I know where his grace's chambers are, Father?" She asked rather indignantly.

Her father chortled. "It's easy, love. It's next to yours. Go on then. His grace must be tired from his travels and might need some rest." She could have sworn she saw her father wink.

Arya couldn't help but roll her eyes on instinct, blowing out an irritated sigh.

"Let me lead you to your cozy and warm chambers, Your Grace, so that you may be allowed to rest from your long travels. If you would follow me." Arya seethed through gritted teeth, mocking a bow before she started walking back inside.

Arya noticed her brothers smirking furtively as she walked past them, her younger brothers included. She rolled her eyes again and gave Jon and Robb a subtle nudge on their ribs. They only ended up laughing more, careful enough to keep it to themselves.

"Thank you, my lady." Came the stupid statement of the stupid prince as he followed her inside the castle.

"Shut up, Your Grace." She didn’t bother waiting for him as she continued to walk to the direction of their chambers. Gendry was walking behind her.

She heard him laughing mockingly at her outburst. His mocking earned him another disapproving look from her. “What’s so funny?”

He finally caught up with her. “Nothing.” Was all he said.

Arya didn’t say another word as she found that goading him into a meaningless conversation would only annoy her more.

She was once again using her hand to lean on the stone walls to keep her balance as she felt her body weaken due to the cold. It was there that she remembered she was not actually wearing any shoes at all. Pain seared through her fresh wounds at the prolonged pressure she exerted from leaning on the wall that she finally flinched in pain.

"Are you alright, my lady? Does your hand still hurt that much?" The prince asked her. "And your feet must be cold." He noted matter-of-factly, looking down at her bare feet worriedly.

Arya snorted at his obvious observations.

"You can drop your pretenses now, Your Grace. We're alone right this instant just so you know. There's no need to pretend you care a sliver about my bloody hand or my cold feet." She told him stoically.

"I was not feigning concern, my lady. Seeing the condition of your hand, I know it must still badly
“None of your bloody business.”

“It is my business!”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my betrothed, and first and foremost, my friend!” Gendry answered.

Arya was afraid that it was genuine concern she was seeing on his honest face, but she dismissed it altogether in favor of her defiance to their betrothal.

“You really bought that bullshit? Well, let me make things clear to you, Your Grace. Just because we’re betrothed doesn’t mean that you’re already allowed to lay claim to me and make me your business. I never mentioned accepting this farce, nor will I ever allow it!” She spat, her words like venom, before she turned away from him and resumed walking.

A few seconds after, she was already right back at his face. “And don’t for one second think that I forgot how you had me played like a fool pretending to be some smith’s apprentice back in the lake, so you can shove up our bloody friendship up your arse!”

It was Gendry’s turn to glare at her. ”Tell me, how would you exactly feel if I told you at that moment that I was the prince? Because knowing now how impulsive you could be, I was pretty much sure you’d execute me right then and there to spare yourself the trouble of enacting this marriage alliance.”

Arya was speechless because he was actually right.

His gaze softened before he continued, "And don’t discount my concern for you, my lady. I rarely express my worries to anybody else."

She closed her eyes as if to calm herself before she released a breath and opened them again, “I said don’t patronize me, Your Grace. Just… shut up and let’s get this over with, alright? The sooner this is over, the better.”

“Gendry is actually fine, Lady Arya. You don’t have to address me with my title all the time if you’re not really comfortable with it. I, for one, despise titles and formalities.”

Arya scoffed. “Fine! Then you can also stop calling me a lady!”

“As you wish, my lady.” He winked before his impish grin was back on his stupid face, emphasizing the gorgeous dimple on his left cheek.

It took all of Arya’s self-control not to punch him in the face with her other uninjured hand. Instead, she resorted to ignoring him as she continued walking.

It didn’t take long before he started opening his big mouth again.

“I think your direwolf actually likes me, Arya.” He noted, scratching the back of her wolf’s ear without even fearing for his life as he walked side by side with her wolf. It’s like they’ve been friends in forever and Arya was just a spectator.

It didn’t immediately occur to Arya that Nymeria was following them suit. And just as Gendry said,
her wolf seemed to actually like him because Nymeria was unusually unaffected by his presence. This fact greatly annoyed her because of all the times she’d wished Nymeria to act feral on her behalf, her wolf actually chose this time to act like a swooning fool at the sight of the prince.

Arya glared at her wolf at best and hissed, “Traitor!”

It earned another cackle from Gendry.

“Someone’s jealous.”

“Am not!”

“Well, if you actually stop being so grumpy then your wolf would actually prefer your presence more than mine.”

“Nymeria is already well aware of all my moods, thank you very much. Now, you can go back to shutting up now.” She countered.

“Nymeria…” Gendry trailed off. “That’s a lovely name.” Nymeria acted as if she liked hearing her name coming out of Gendry’s lips because she started licking the hand that’s caressing her. It didn’t go unnoticed by Arya.

“Careful, now. I could actually have her rip you to pieces after I warg myself into her body if you don’t shut the bloody hell up.” Her lips lifted into an evil smile.

“Is that a threat? And can you even warg into an animal’s body now?” The disbelief was evident in his face, so she had to switch topics before he could sense that she was just bluffing about the fact about warging.

“Why? Are you going to have your guards tie me to a pole and give me a good lashing for my treasonous mouth? Because I think that would be better than having to marry you.”

He stood taller now that he closed the distance between them. “Oh, but the only one who’s going to do the tying would be me… and I promise you it will be pleasurable rather than painful, you’d be screaming my name faster than you could say ‘Nymeria.’ If you catch my drift.” He winked at her again, which only aggravated her more.

But, by the gods! Her body only gave a different reaction to his raspy, salacious suggestion. For some reason, there was something so delicious about hearing those dirty words.

Another damn traitor added to her list!

Nymeria and her treasonous body could go to hell.

“You’re so infuriating!” Was all she said before she stormed away again with him following behind her.

“Why do you make it seem like it’s all my fault that you’re so miserable right now? I didn’t make this betrothal, our fathers did. I also had no choice in this.” He tried to ask her, his suggestive mood gone and making way for his serious face.

“Well at least try to act the part where you’re actually opposed to this betrothal so that our fathers could see that we don’t actually like what they are planning for us!”

“You think I haven’t tried that back in King’s Landing?” He shot back. “This contract is binding and
absolute. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Well, unlike you, I don’t lose hope. Because I’ll do everything in my power to stop this stupid political alliance!”

Gendry huffed, “Good luck with that, then.”

They both fell silent for the rest of their walk, both their moods turning sour until they finally reached the hallway where each of their bedchambers were located.

"This is where you will be staying, Your Grace." Arya told him impersonally before opening the door for him. "I'm just in the next room if you need any of my assistance, Your Grace."

She curtsied in fake deference, her face devoid of any other emotion.

"There is no need to pretend that you show deferential respect for me, my lady." His glacial words stung for some reason.

"Let's just pretend we have the desired effect, shall we, Your Grace?" She told him sarcastically.

"Thank you, anyway, for your unadulterated kindness. Exchanging brutal words with you has indeed been fun. Looking forward to our verbal sparring in the next few days." He met her sarcasm with his own. Bowing his head in an equally mocking fashion, he added, "My lady."

He closed the door right in front of her face before she could even utter another word.

The nerve!

She would have bolted right inside his bedchambers and taught him a lesson if she wasn’t so bloody sick right now.

Instead, she headed to her own rooms to resume her much needed recuperation.

Gendry

That evening, the Stark household threw a grand welcoming feast for the royal family. They feasted on roasted pork and beef, and an abundant ration of poached potatoes and salads, all grown from the glass gardens of Winterfell. The feast was also overflowing with wine, as evidenced by the full cups of everyone who would like to indulge.

Gendry found himself impressed with their wide array of courses that he ate to his fill as if it was the last meal of his life, giving in to the comforts of his current seat at the dais right beside his father, along with the Starks and his uncle, Renly.

He’d long given up his search for his betrothed altogether in favor of Winterfell’s tastiest courses as it was already evident that she was never going to show up. Per the reports of the maids assigned to attend to her needs, she’d been inside her bedchambers since that morning after having another bout of her fever.

A wave of concern loomed deep inside his gut, but he had to force it down to the depths and entrust
her recovery to the maester. He also didn’t want to make it seem like he was already obsessed with her, not when she just showed him outright signs of her disapproval toward their impending matrimony only this morning. It wouldn’t seem right to be already pining for her when she hated him with a passion.

But, by the gods, she was already beginning to become a constant in his thoughts. Haunting him with her alluring mystery.

Instead of wallowing in his useless unrequited longing, he allowed himself to get more acquainted with the other Starks including Jon and their Greyjoy ward, Theon. They didn’t seem so bad after all now that he was already engaged in meaningful conversations with them. Gendry realized that they were a better company compared to the other pompous lords and ladies back at the Red Keep.

It was already well in the middle of the night when he excused himself from the Great Hall in favor of heeding to the call of his body for rest.

He’d passed by a fair number of other ladies in the halls throwing themselves at his feet through their subtle indecent proposals, a couple even inviting him to bed them at the same time. It sounded quite appealing for his cock since he’d been known to fuck two women at once back in King’s Landing.

For some reason, the idea was so tempting that it could also serve as retribution against his betrothed for practically treating him like shit during their arrival, but then again, he didn’t want to cause a scandal while they were here. If anything, he was supposed to woo her, not try to rile her more by fucking other women. Besides, he wasn’t a complete arsehole. He still had respect for this alliance even if everything wasn’t formally written yet.

His feet led him to the forge instead of heading straight to his chambers to rid himself of the very open temptation. The forge always had that effect of clearing his mind every time something conflicted him. And that night, it never failed him.

It was still warm inside. The embers just recently fading out, the warmth emanating all over the smithy and giving a subtle glow. As no one was inside, he savored the feeling of running his hands over the familiar tools he was already used to.

Peace finally found his thoughts as he remembered what it felt like to belong.

Unfortunately, his silent reverie was cut short when he felt someone stir behind him, those years of intensive training for combat and battle finally paying off. He kept his guard up but he didn’t face the person disrupting his peace.

“What are you doing?” Came the familiar yet indignant voice of no one else but the current favorite of his thoughts.

With the threat gone, he allowed a few more seconds to continue trailing his hands along the hammers on the wall before finally facing her. “Just familiarizing Winterfell’s forge, is all.” Was his matter-of-fact retort.

There was a flash of irritation on her face, yet Gendry still found it endearing altogether. “Why? Did you plan on pretending to be a smith’s apprentice here in Winterfell, too, and fool the smallfolk into believing you’re really one of them? You’re obviously no blacksmith, Prince Gendry Baratheon.”

There was pure disdain with the way Arya Stark said his name.

“Why do I feel like I have to bathe whenever you address me with my name, My Lady?” He told her, “And for the record, I was a smith’s apprentice back in the Streets of Steel in King’s Landing,
where the previous Hand of the King found me many years ago. Ergo, I was one of the smallfolk. I still would have been had my father not legitimized me and made me his heir. So, you see, I wasn’t really lying to anyone, especially to you. Being a blacksmith is my first trade.” He explained, his eyes raking her form hungrily.

She was wearing her usual white nightclothes underneath her grey cloak. It still didn’t stop his cock from stirring inside his breeches. Her scent when she slowly closed the distance between them only reinforced his growing need to fuck her, betrothed or no.

“It still won’t change the fact that you tried to hide who you really are from me, despite you knowing who I was.”

A sigh of resignation passed his lips, “I’m sorry, alright?”

“No, you’re not.”

“Let me make it up to you, then. Let’s just start over because I don’t want to ruin what we had in that lake.” He offered good-naturedly. God, he sounded so fucking desperate.

Arya contemplated for a moment, nibbling a side of her lip in the process. He wished he was the one biting that lip instead.

Fuck, he cursed internally.

“Let’s settle this over a duel. Tomorrow morning. Before sunrise.” Arya suggested with an air of arrogance. “And while we’re at it, let’s put a wager.”

Gendry couldn’t hide the incredulity written all over his features and snorted at her proposal. He raked over her frail attributes again. He had to make sure that what he was seeing was real. Because at that moment, she still looked sick to him.

Arya crossed her arms on her chest. “You scared, Baratheon?” She challenged.

Gendry burst into gales of mocking laughter. “It’s not that I’m scared. It’s just that, how can you fight me tomorrow if you hardly look healed right now? You’re still weak from your illness, Arya.”

“I’ll be fine tomorrow, I swear.” Came her dismissive retort. But then she made the mistake of turning away from him in favor of heading back to the door. The sudden movement caused her to lose her balance.

Gendry anticipated the movement and he was immediately on his feet to catch her.

“No, see, this is what I meant. You’re still sick. Come back with your wager when you’ve fully recovered, and I’ll agree to the duel.” He said, his voice now gentle as he carefully placed one hand under her knees and the other under her arms, lifting her up and carrying her as if she barely weighed a thing.

Arya was startled by his gesture that she had no choice but to put her arms around his neck. Leaning her head on his chest in the process as if holding on to dear life.

“Fuck, Gendry, at least tell me you’re going to do that. You had me caught unawares.”

“Sorry…” He apologized as he started heading back outside and into the castle toward her chambers.

Arya pulled away slightly to look up at him, the fire in her eyes from earlier slowly dying down as
her body was slowly giving in to her weakness. “The view from up here’s really different…” She noted innocently, her gaze lingering in his eyes before she averted to their surroundings. It was as if she was seeing the world in a whole new different perspective from this height.

It earned a smile from him. “I’m not really that tall, Arya. You’re exaggerating.”

“Yes, you are. You’re the tallest person I know.”

“Or you’re just one, short little person.” He winked, his smile growing wider.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not my fault I was born shorter than my siblings.”

“Whatever you say…”

“The bet is still on, by the way. When I’m healed, we’ll fight.” She said, switching back to their topic prior to the interruption.

“What do you want if you win?” He asked out of sheer curiosity.

There was that wicked smirk again. “If I win, you’ll help me talk to our fathers about breaking off this engagement. And you’re going to use all your princely powers in making sure that our betrothal will not push through. As a bonus, I’ll help you find another suitable bride to marry.”

He nodded in agreement, albeit begrudgingly. He didn’t like her wager but it’s not like he had a say in her choice, anyway. Guess he’d just have to beat her when the time came for them to fight.

“How about you? What will you get out of this if you win?” It was her turn to ask him, watching him with large, round eyes. Those grey orbs were distracting him at best.

Sinful lust glistened in his eyes and he could have sworn he felt her heartbeat racing as her chest came in contact with his. “You.” Was all he said, as if in a trance.

“Bullshit.”

“I’m not bullshitting you. When I win, I’ll have you under my will. You’ll do anything as I please. Anything. I. Want.” He whispered, his lips only an inch from her ear.

“If you win.” She corrected. “And what kind of power play is that? That sounds too absolute. Aren’t there any restrictions as to what you want me to do for you?”

“We’ll discuss the terms when I win, Arya.” Was all he told her.

“If, Gendry. If you win.”

They reached Arya’s bedchambers with a silence wrapped in obvious tension.

Gendry carefully laid Arya on her featherbed, tucking her blanket over her chest after removing her boots, then he adjusted the burning flames in her fireplace. He sat on her bed as soon as the room was warmer.

“You didn’t have to do this, you know.” She muttered with half-closed eyes, her voice almost inaudible.

“I wanted to.” He confessed, more to himself than her.

Arya’s lips curled to a weak lop-sided grin. “Whatever you say, Gendry. Now, get out of here and
leave me in peace. I still have to recuperate for our future duel.” She managed to tell him before closing her eyes.

“As you wish, my lady.” He reluctantly stood.

He carefully waked back into the hall before anybody else caught him getting out of her bedchambers.

He then sought the maester of the castle with haste to ensure that his betrothed was attended to accordingly.
Convalescing

Chapter Notes

*revised chapter as of 24 May 2019

*Currently revising everything in this work.

You may follow me in Tumblr, although it is not really ASOIAF and GOT related. It's explicit, though, so be warned.

Find me on Tumblr: TheHumanEntrainlsAndTheMind

CRASH INTO ME

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Chapter 6: Convalescing

Gendry

Arya’s illness caused her to be confined to her chambers for another more week since the arrival of the Southerners in the North. Her absence allowed Gendry the opportunity to be immersed with the Northern culture, which he found more forgiving than what he’d been accustomed to in the South.

He made sure to observe the practices of the lord of Winterfell in terms of holding court and attending to his subjects as their liege lord. Every now and then, Gendry would also lead several council meetings with the king, Renly, Lord Stark and Robb to tailor him for his future duties to the kingdom. It was a tedious job, but he had no choice.

He found that he needed all these kinds of activities to keep his thoughts away from Arya while she was recuperating. He’d done a poor job of it, though, especially at night when only a single wall separated him from her. Nevertheless, he’d been doing his best to keep his impulses (and his cock) at bay.

Apart from his compulsory duties as the crown prince, Gendry also made sure to spend his time getting to know more of Arya’s siblings, especially Robb and Jon, and even Theon. He attended classes with them at the maester’s solar, sparred and practiced swords with them while he taught her younger siblings some swordfighting skills he learned from his master-of-arms back in King’s Landing.

As for Sansa, he’d succeeded in earning her good graces by making sure to include her in their conversations about the South, most especially about what he knew of Highgarden and her
betrothed. The strategy didn’t fail for he had Sansa opening up to him as if they’d been friends for a long time.

It was good to have a platonic friend of the opposite sex, he realized, because it gave him more understanding about the nature of women and how to treat them right. Unfortunately, he never had female platonic friends anymore back in the capital because they’d always end up in his bed and after a night or two of carnal delights and after which demand more than what he could give, namely a ring on their finger and a child in their womb. They always seemed to have ulterior motives apart from the supposed normal friendship they were advertising.

In an overall sense, having been afforded this chance to travel up North felt like coming home.

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Another three more days passed without seeing Arya within the castle walls. Until one morning, as Gendry was attending history lessons along with the Starks inside the maester’s cozy solar, the door suddenly bolted open which caused Sansa to jump in her seat.

They were all startled to see Arya standing at the door, her face flushed perhaps from the exertion of climbing the stairs to get there.

She received a subtle reprimand from Maester Luwin regarding how to knock properly before barging in, but it was forgotten altogether when Arya informed him that she was there to finally attend and catch up with the lessons she had missed during her illness.

Judging from the way she looked, Gendry knew that her fever was completely gone. She was wearing her usual tunic and breeches and her hair was kept in a messy bun, just like how he saw her the first time at the lake.

“It’s good to see you today, Arya. Please come inside, you haven’t missed much.” Maester Luwin said, finally welcoming her into his solar.

Arya regarded her maester tentatively before her eyes roamed around the room. Gendry noted her mood turning sour the moment her eyes landed on his. For some reason, he took satisfaction in riling her up that day because at least he still had a certain effect on her.

In a heartbeat, she flashed him a feral scowl. He couldn’t help but shoot back a devilish but charming smile at her, much to her irritation.

God, he missed how adorable she was.

“You may take your seat beside his grace, Arya.” Instructed her maester upon noticing that Gendry wasn’t sitting beside anyone else.

Being the tallest in the class, he had to be seated at the back part of the room. Arya rolled her eyes in annoyance but sat beside him, anyway.

The maester continued discussing the history of Westeros with everyone listening attentively save for the two of them.

“Good morning, my lady. Feeling better now?” Gendry whispered very close to her ear.
He took some time to inhale her scent while he spoke to her, smelling deliciously divine that he
wanted to lick every part of her until she’d cream herself to pleasure at the flick of his skillful tongue.

God, how his cock ached at the dirty thought.

She gave him a curt yet sarcastic smile in acknowledgement. “Never better, Your Grace.”

“That’s good then. I’ve been meaning to tell you that I’ve been practicing with your brothers. Their
sword fighting skills are impressive, even exceeding mine, to be honest.” He told her in a hushed
tone so as not to let the others hear their conversation.

“If that’s the case, then you’re ready for our duel. Tomorrow.” Came her smug response.

“Oh, but tomorrow’s hardly fair, though. You’ve just been indisposed for a few days. Allow yourself
a day or two to practice first to ensure that our duel runs fair and square. I don’t want you saying
you’ve lost because you haven’t had some practice.” He retorted casually.

Arya narrowed her eyes, earning him that reproachful glare.

“Don’t be such a cunt, Gendry. I’ve been practicing my whole life. I don’t need a day or two. I just
need to get this over with.” Came her arrogant retort.

He snorted dismissively.

“How can I be a cunt if I haven’t got any, Arya? Want to see what I’ve got?” He equaled her tone
but making sure to keep it low or else the maester would definitely hear them bickering.

To do this, he had to incline himself closer to her so that his lips were now almost touching her ear.
He swore that he could sense Arya shuddering at his closeness.

Good.

He’d been so caught up with her unbidden reaction that he didn’t notice her kicking his shin for good
measure right after she finally regained composure. The painful reality shot to his leg the moment he
realized what just happened.

“Fuck!” He cursed through gritted teeth.

“Shut up.” She hissed angrily.

“That bloody hurt!” He groaned in pain as he touched the part where she kicked him.

Arya rolled her eyes.

“See? That just proves how much of a soft cunt you are. And how ready I am to fight with you
tomorrow.” Triumph was etched on her features.

“Oh, you bloody know I’m not some cunt. I’d be glad to show you what I really got later. I’m very
certain that you’ll love it.” He told her dangerously as he was looking intently into her eyes, the
innuendo in his words as clear as day.

“Oh, and I’m pretty much certain that I’m not interested!” Her voice was evidenced by indignation,
but her body could not hide the flush spreading on her cheeks. That much was obvious.

Grinning, he retorted, “Not interested? You might change your mind once you see how loaded I
am.” He smugly whispered, winking at her. Oh, how he loved teasing her like this.
She obviously understood his innuendo as evidenced by her sudden breathlessness.

Smart girl.

“You’re still a fucking cunt, Gendry.” She deadpanned, albeit almost speechlessly.

“Arya, Your Grace, do you want to share what you’ve been discussing to the rest of the class?”

Maester Luwin called out when he noticed their short commotion at the back.

One by one, the rest of Arya’s siblings including Theon began turning around to look at them. Sansa was hiding her girlish squeals under her smile while her older brothers were smirking at them knowingly. Theon wasn’t even discreet in flashing his signature impish grin.

“My apologies, Maester Luwin, Arya was just telling me earlier how much she wanted to see what I have got—” He was cut off when Arya nudged on his ribs painfully, robbing the air out of him.

God was he even attracted to her brutality. She was definitely something.

“I was just telling his grace how good he is with his sword, it’s making me swoon at his feet like a proper little lady, Maester Luwin.” Arya interrupted him, sarcasm dripping every word, the innuendo clear enough.

“Lady Arya was just telling me how excited she is to see my big sword, Maester Luwin. I told her that she could play with it if she wanted to. She’d definitely enjoy it because it’s so big she couldn’t even hold it with one hand alone.” He equaled her tone and sarcasm as he played along.

The rest of her siblings were now silently laughing in their seats.

They were all silenced when the maester cleared his throat.

“It is not proper to be violently hurting others, my lady, especially if it’s the prince and your betrothed. You can talk about swords later after this class.” Maester Luwin chastised.

Whether the maester read into their insinuation or not was already beyond him. Luwin’s face remained impassive, however, as he resumed his discussion as if his class wasn’t just interrupted.

Gendry was silently laughing in his seat but he was laughing so hard that he could feel his eyes tearing up. God, he hadn’t laughed like this in a long time, he realized.

Arya was also holding back her laughter as she looked at him from the corner of her eyes. He noticed her rolling her eyes playfully before flashing him her middle finger while hiding it beside her temple so that only Gendry could see the vulgar gesture.

Another hour and a half passed before their morning lessons finally ended with the maester giving them a checkup assessment on what they learned that day. They were each given a piece of parchment and quills. Since Gendry was seated beside Arya, they had to share their ink pots.

As he began to write on his parchment, he suddenly felt Arya on his right, nudging his elbow with hers as if she was asking him to give more space to write.

He gave her a confused look until he finally realized why. “I never knew that you write with your left hand, my lady.” He whispered, smirking.

“I’m so pleased to know that your eyes are still working properly, Your Grace. An outstanding observation, really.” Was her sardonic retort as she continued writing on her parchment without even
looking at him.

Her handwriting was barely legible, the worst he’d seen even, but it was still adorable, nonetheless.

Arya’s unusual dexterity was rather astounding that her rarity even afforded her another notch higher up in Gendry’s pedestal of admiration. Indeed, she was not like everyone else.

He was transfixed by the movement of her hand as he continued to observe her, a stupid smile plastered on his face.

“What?” She snapped as she caught him unawares.

“Nothing. Just carry on.”

“Mind your own paper, please.”

He could no longer hide the way he was looking at her. Was she aware that there was already something stirring between them?

Gendry badly wanted her to feel that something, hoping that she could reciprocate his outright flirtations.

“Seven Hells, what is it?” She asked again.

Losing all resolve this time, he closed the distance by leaning in to her ear once more and whispering, “It’s just that, you’re becoming very interesting to me now, Arya Stark. You see, I just can’t seem to keep my mind off you, I don’t even have a bloody reason why. You’re driving me mad and you don’t want me going insane. Do you want to know why?”

The bobbing of her throat was audible enough for him to hear. “Why is that?” Her voice seemed choked, if anything, she was obviously affected by his words.

“Because I tend to do things when I’m insane.”

She still refused to move nor look at him, obviously focusing on regulating her heavy breathing. “What kind of things?”

A secret, wicked smile spread on his lips. “Dirty, delicious things, my lady. It’s going to be so sinfully filthy, you won’t be able to resist it.”

She was caught off-guard by his words that he took advantage of her speechless state to brush his lips softly at the junction between her ear and sensitive neck, allowing his tongue a small lick just so that he could have a taste her goodness, if only for a sliver, before inhaling her scent insatiably.

God, he was so fucked, he could no longer help himself. He had to get away from her before he could fuck her senseless on the desk.

Arya remained frozen in her seat as she stared at him with indecision in her eyes, thoroughly flushed and utterly robbed off her breath. She hadn’t even noticed her long fingers clawing at the wood on the surface of their desk, the quill on her left hand broken into two as his lecherous words wormed its way into her system.

Regretfully pulling his gaze away from her, he finally stood up and asked to be excused, informing the maester that he’d just deliver his assessment after attending to his bladder needs, all while his turgid cock was straining inside his breeches.
He almost ran to his bedchambers if not for the people inside the castle.

As he reached his rooms, he locked his door before grabbing his stiff cock out of his breeches and fucking himself with his sorry hand while fantasizing about actualizing all those filthy things he’d do to her. A moan escaped his lips as he came so hard to thoughts of Arya, his entire large hand was covered with his seed while the rest came dripping down the floor.

Fuck. All this come could have looked so beautiful creaming out of her glistening cunt after fucking her to her own climax. And perhaps he would lick her to another orgasm until she was again dripping wet and ready to take him once more.

Oh dear god, he was going to the Seven Hells for what he’d just done.

Arya

Their attraction for each other was undeniable and mutual. That much was clear.

He wanted her, and much to her sheer surprise, she wanted him more, and fuck her to the Seven Hells for finally admitting what had been her denials the first time she’d lain her eyes on him.

Betrothed or not, she wanted him so bad. Prince or not, she was hopelessly pining for him. And she hated it at the same time.

And his words… god, those filthy, sinful words were doing something to her body. As if her body was seeking a release that was still so foreign to her, she had yet to discover how get it out of her system.

But one thing’s for sure, Gendry Baratheon was one piece of shit for making her feel this way, and she swore to the non-existent gods that he’d pay for it. He’d pay for making her want him despite her opposition to this stupid alliance.

She’d punish him by seducing him in her own little ways, making him want her even more and then leaving him with blue balls instead.

Let’s see how being cockteased would make him feel.

Arya wasn’t really privy to carnal thoughts because she’s proud to admit that she’d had her fair share in the art of seduction, albeit subtle. Being a wide reader herself, secretly perusing over erotic books back then had been a welcome diversion for her when she was bored of attending lessons with her septa. Oftentimes, she’d hide in the library as she’d get lost in ideas about sex and carnal desires. In fact, she’d learned more from those books than the poor excuse they called sex education. The censorship was too exaggerated, one would think coitus was only limited to the purpose of procreation rather than acknowledging pleasure as a basic need among humans.

The norm dictated that a lady did not have the right to desire nor feel such pleasure from sex. She only ever had to spread her legs for her husband and bear their babes for nine months as her duty to society. There ought to be no pleasure in reproduction because a woman’s place should be in the shadow of her husband as a submissive wife and dutiful mother, and nothing more.
Fucking pathetic.

Apparently, Arya wanted the raw and uncensored ways of learning about sex. If she was to be traded off to some lord (or to her horror now, some prince) like some cattle, then she was going to do it right for her sake. At least she wouldn’t be wasting her precious life not having to know what it felt like to take pleasure in sex.

And right now, she had a mission to do. This was no longer going to be instilling theoretical knowledge, this was the entire bloody application of what she had learned from those books.

She only had to apply it to herself in order to know what it felt like. And what better moment than this, now that she found someone who’s attracted to her as much as she was attracted to him.

This should be a fun game to play.

Fuck propriety. Her family brought this upon themselves for hiding this betrothal to her until the last minute. Now, she was going to have her fun while waiting to fuck up this farce of an alliance once and for all.

*****

Two more days passed after Arya had another encounter with the prince. Following what had transpired between them inside the maester’s solar, she found it necessary to avoid him at all costs, lest she lose all her control and jump on him the first chance she got. That, or ride him like she was riding a horse, only this time, she’d be grinding on his lap as she straddled him while trying to figure out how to find her release.

Shit.

See, it was these kinds of dirty, forbidden thoughts that made her get up from bed earlier than the rest of the castle because she was finding it harder to control herself, much less her impulses. And the prince’s quarters were not far from hers. She might as well just give in to her temptations and bolt inside his room to have a sample of what he tasted like.

Sweat trickled down at the juncture between her breasts as she tried to sweep those thoughts away, sword in hand as she positioned herself in her familiar fighting stance.

It was in this very position that Gendry found her in the yard all by herself. It was still dark, just a few hours shy of the first rays of the sun.

“Why are you up so early, my lady?” His deep yet sultry voice broke the silence as he slowly sauntered to her direction.

Arya stood straight as she faced him impassively. She couldn’t afford to lose her resolve again in front of him. “I slept early last night, Your Grace. I can’t sleep any more than I had to. I’ve had enough of resting while I was convalescing.”

They were back to being formal again, and she thought it was a good start.

“So now you’re here, practicing…” He observed all while his intense eyes were devouring her.
She was well aware of his burning gaze sweeping up her clothes, from the breeches she was wearing to the loose white shift that had a few buttons opened at the top. Surely he didn’t miss the way her décolletage was slightly exposed. By the glint of his eyes, it was obvious he enjoyed the view.

She had this all planned out in the event that he’d catch her practicing about in the yard such as now. Clearly, she didn’t disappoint. A wicked smile slowly wound its way to her lips.

“Yes, Your Grace. Would you like for us to have our duel now? Especially that it’s just the two of us with the rest of Winterfell still sleeping.” She asked in a rather innocent manner.

But it would do him well to remember that nothing was ever innocent with Arya Stark. Even this interaction was all calculated.

“That would be a good idea, my lady. I’ve been dreaming of this day to come, to see you defeated with my sword. And then I’d be happy to cash in that wager of ours.”

“Oh, I’m quivering with anticipation, Your Grace.” Her sarcasm was imminent so might as well use it to her advantage.

She didn’t waste time grabbing two wooden swords from the weapons table (she had to choose wooden swords over the real ones because she didn’t want to get in trouble with hurting the prince with an actual sword and be accused of treason, not when they still had a wager to settle), and practically throwing one at him unawares, only to have him catch it with his agile hand.

Fuck.

He’d told her days ago that her brothers were much better than him. But judging from the way he caught the sword, it was obvious that he was just too humble to admit his ability.

Well, there was only one way to find out, wasn’t it?

“Let’s have our duel in the godswood, Your Grace, so that the gods may bestow upon us their blessings.” Her mocking tone was unnoticed for he only countered her tempestuous smirk with his own wicked grin.

“As you wish, my lady. Lead the way.” Came his response, mocking a bow as she passed by him and started heading toward the godswood.

They walked in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, and before they knew it, they were already there.

They didn’t waste time with any more pleasantries. The moment Arya stopped and turned around to face him, she was already at him with her own sword.

But Gendry seemed to read into her moves because he was immediately able to parry when she tried to bring her sword down upon him.

They looked at each other with determination as they had their swords inches before their faces, trying to hold down each other with their strength.

“I dare say you’re quite strong, Lady Stark.” Gendry commented through gritted teeth.

It earned a triumphant grin from her. “ Patronizing me won’t bring you victory, Your Grace, so I
suggest you shut up and keep up with this fight.”

Before Gendry could say his retort, she was already kicking his leg, causing him to lose balance and fall on his back. She heard him grunt in pain.

Good.

She started to attack him again before he could get back on his feet, but before she could hit him with her sword, she was thrown back when he channeled all his strength to his sword to push her away. He was relentless in charging at her in seconds, but she was able to parry his attack with her sword instinctively, the weapon only a few inches before her face. If it was a real steel sword with a much heavier weight, she’d have her face cut in half by now.

He was stronger than her, obviously, but she was quicker. So she used that to her utmost advantage every chance she got.

Arya mustered all of her strength to push him away before she scurried to her feet and positioned herself again to her fighting stance.

They had been going at it for what felt like an eternity now, both of them sweating and catching their breaths, refusing to yield for the sake of the wager they’d put in to this duel.

Arya refused to accept defeat, and apparently, so did Gendry.

What did he want with her, anyway, that he was so determined to win against her?

Maybe he marveled at the satisfaction of having her to his beck and call. She’d be his slave, and he was more than willing to slap that fact to her face.

_Fucking Gendry_, she cursed internally.

Only the sounds of their wooden swords clanging could be heard in the godswood, accompanied by each of their heavy breathing.

“Fuck, Stark. You’re stronger than I expected. Actually, stronger for a girl your height and built. You never really did fit the mold of the usual ladies I see in court.” Gendry noted in between breaths, sweat dripping down his roguishly handsome face.

She didn’t miss the fact that he hadn’t shaved yet. It only made him look so delectable. She wanted to devour him. Or better yet, she wasn’t really quite sure now if she wanted to fuck him or kill him for that matter. Nevertheless, she had to focus because he was gaining on her again.

Shit.

The stupid idiot never seemed to want to give up.

“Of course, I am strong, Baratheon. You shouldn’t mistake me for one of those simpering fools prancing about in castles, waiting to win the attention of some equally idiotic lord. Or _prince._” The last word was uttered with repulsive venom.

“But you are wrong. You’d draw the attention of every male in the land for being so different from the rest. Even if you are unaware of it yourself.” He replied as they went on with their fighting. Something about those words seemed so honest, judging from the look on his face.

But she dismissed the thought as a false compliment. He would never think of her that way. Perhaps
to him, she was just another conquest, a challenge for his male pride to win over a difficult lady just so that he could put another notch on his bedpost.

"Are you so stupid as to think small talking me while fighting you would divert my attention, Baratheon? You think I’d fall for that strategy?" At that, she added another kick on his side for good measure, making him grunt in pain again. His knees gave out as he knelt on the ground, sword still on hand.

"Fuck." He cursed at the pain, holding his side with his empty hand.

An arrogant chortle escaped her lips.

"What a fucking cunt." She remarked, stretching herself at a distance despite her already aching muscles just to taunt him.

She never had the mouth of a saint, anyway, so why should she keep up her pretenses in front of this prince? “You’re such a fucking little girl, Baratheon. My little female cousin has more spunk than your sorry arse.” She mocked.

Gendry glowered at her murderously, finally riled up by her baseless goading. He was still on his knees as he tried to regain his strength, panting as if he’d just ran for a thousand miles.

“Stand up, we’re not done yet.” Came her authoritative tone. She was commanding him as if he wasn’t the prince of the entire realm.

He remained silent as he slowly rose to his feet again. There was something so dangerous about him this time that Arya could not place. She could feel his growing rage like steam billowing in the air. She felt naked once more under the scrutiny of his murderous eyes. He looked like he wanted to strangle her with his bare hands. Or perhaps devour her raw with his ravenous mouth and teeth. But for some reason, she was drawn to the kind of danger he possessed. It was a certain kind of heated want and arousal forming at the pit of her stomach and between her legs. She suddenly wanted him to quench those unbidden desires.

A vacuous silence passed between them, allowing the chill of the morning air to cool their rising tempers.

Arya was about to position herself once more but before she knew it, he was on the move again. This time, he moved like the wind, catching her unawares. The hand holding his wooden sword was so quick that she didn’t anticipate his moves, and the next thing that registered in her mind was that of her aching body lying on the ground. She laid on her back with him on top of her.

He just disarmed her and she didn’t even know it.

Her breath fell short as she felt the hilt of his sword on her neck, with Gendry’s face already inches from hers.

The fucker was even smiling in wicked triumph.


She continued to look up into those eyes, speechless and breathless.

She’d never thought he’d be that quick.

Fuck.
Then reality dawned on her.

She lost their bet.

She fucking lost their fight.

And Gendry was still on top of her, adamant to stay in this position as his eyes continued to bore into her, slowly penetrating into her soul and taking all her resolve. The weight of his body didn’t seem to affect her. In fact, he felt so warm, she wanted to stay underneath him forever. He was as warm as the forge.

The duel seemed forgotten in time as they were both lost in each other. Something was brewing deep inside them, she could just feel it. The tension was that thick, too strong that she could taste it in her tongue.

She unconsciously licked her lips as her eyes traveled down to his own parted lips. She could feel his warm breath on hers, making her throat go dry and her heart hammer faster than she’d like to admit.

God, why did he have to be so fucking attractive?

She was that close to attacking those lips. And for the first time in her life, she wanted to claim her first kiss from his sinful, beautiful lips.

But then she noticed his bewitched eyes returning to its normal glimmer as he blinked back to reality, and before she knew it, he was already pulling himself away from her, his weight feeling like a total loss now that it was far from her aching body.

For some reason, she felt the pang of his rejection hitting her. It made her feel uncomfortable. Maybe because she thought he wasn’t really interested in her in that way.

“We should head back. It’s almost dawn and the rest of Winterfell is about to wake up.” Was all he said, his tone as cold as the winter snow. He held out his hand for her to take.

Despite how inviting his offer was, she didn’t take it and instead stood up on her own.

“Fine. You fought fair enough.” She told him dismissing his latter statement, although with acid in her tone.

Their fair fight notwithstanding, she was still a sore loser. She always hated losing. That much was a secret she didn’t want everyone else to know. Besides, she rarely ever lost to her brothers.

More importantly, she could still taste the growing bitter feeling of his sudden rejection in her gut.

She turned her back away from him and gathered their wooden swords before heading back to the practice yard.

It was only until they were back in the empty halls of the castle that Gendry broke the silence.

“If I won our fight, then why does it seem like you’re not fully accepting of my victory?”

Arya didn’t respond, and instead, wallowed in her own misery for being such a fucking sore loser.

“Arya, what’s wrong?” Gendry tried again.

She wasn’t really in the mood to talk right now. She was no longer even sure if it’s because of his outright rejection for what could have possibly happened earlier while he was on top of her, or
because she was defeated by him. But one thing was certain, she was humiliated at best.

Fuck. There’s nothing worse than her ego being trampled upon by the shame of defeat and rejection.

“Arya?” Came Gendry’s voice again.

She finally stopped walking in order to face him.

“I’m fine.” Was all she said before looking away.

“You don’t look fine to me. Tell me what’s wrong.” He demanded.

“I said I was fine!” She bared her teeth at him.

“Why do you look so angry? You lost. I won. We fought fair and square.” He stated matter-of-factly.

She didn’t say a word, but the look on her face might as well be her dead give away.

“Wait. Don’t tell me you’re being a sore loser.” He noted, as if he just got the answers to the universe. There was a devilish glint in his eyes.

She huffed in plain annoyance.

“By the gods, Arya Stark is a sore loser.” He began to tease.

Fucking Gendry and his big fucking mouth.

“Shut up, Gendry.” Was all she said.

“Oh come on, my lady! That’s hardly fair that you’re sulking for losing over a proper fight.”

“Oh, don’t be such a stupid cunt, Your Grace.” She seethed as she continued along the lonely halls of the castle.

It only earned a hearty laugh from him.

_He’s never going to stop shoving it in my face that I’m being such a sore loser right now, is he?_ she thought.

“We both know I don’t have a cunt, Arya. So you can stop calling me that.” He warned, albeit playfully as he walked behind her.

“But you’re still being a stupid twat, Gendry.”

“What did you say?”

She stopped walking altogether to face him, holding her chin up defiantly as she looked into his eyes without falter.

“Don’t. Be. Such. A. Stupid. Cunt. Your. Grace.” She told him, punctuating every word as she pointed a finger to his chest. “You’re more stupid than all the cunts combined in the whole of Westeros.” She added with a satisfied grin on her face.

At this, Gendry pushed her with his brutish strength, pinning her to the wall. She didn’t even notice that he already had her wrists held tightly above her head using only one big hand.

“You know you shouldn’t insult people who are a lot bigger than you.” His seething voice sent
shivers up her spine, even more so when he drew closer to her face.

She practically squirmed under the heat of his molten gaze.

“Then I don’t get to insult anyone!” She spat angrily, writhing under his strong hold. “Let me go, Gendry!”

But tried as she might, her combined strength was helpless against his. Gendry only gave her a complacent look, even almost bored.

“I will if you stop calling me a cunt. You know better that I’m not. I can even gladly prove it to you. Right here, right now.”

“Yes, you are.” Came her stubborn insistence.

At her retort, he only held her wrists tighter, his other hand violently grasping her jaw so that she couldn’t pull away from his imposing gaze.

She felt so tiny in his hands. Nevertheless, she felt exhilarated by all of it. Even the way he was holding her jaw like he was about to punish her shot a jolt of pleasure between her legs.

*Please,* her traitorous mind suddenly pleaded.

“Let me go.” Her contradictory words seemed mechanical, rendering them useless under the heat of his body so close to hers.

His blue eyes were like pools of devastation, and right then and there, she knew she was done for. She’d do anything he wanted.

*Please.* Her body seemed to be screaming right now for more.

“Take it back.” He ordered, like the dominating prince that he was.

His natural dominance only made her blood boil hotter in pleasure.

“No!” Her innate stubbornness would be the death of her. But she found, she’d rather like to be stubborn right now, if only to find out what else he was capable of doing.

She felt the hand at her jaw slowly loosen as it carefully travelled at the back of her neck, his thumb now caressing smooth circles onto her skin.

Her eyes suddenly felt so heavy, she almost purred at his touch.

“Take it back, love.” He breathed into her ear, his voice a contradiction of gentle and predatory.

She could almost feel her legs giving away as he finally ran his nose and warm mouth along her neck, making her burn hotter. His lips making a trail of wildfire on its wake, finally closing her eyes at the forbidden yet wonderful sensation.

“Are you not going to take back what you said?” He asked as if for good measure.

Arya swallowed. Allowing herself to delve back into the reality before she answered bullheadedly, “No! You’re still a fucking cunt to me, Your—”

And his lips were on hers without preamble. Hard and unrelenting.
She couldn’t help but close her eyes as she felt the way his lips molded into hers, his tongue licking at her bottom lip, prodding for entrance, which she willingly obliged.

She’d never been kissed like this by a boy before. Never had she felt an intense burning passion to match the way his mouth was violating her inexperienced lips. But she loved all of it, anyway, she couldn’t seem to stop.

It was evidenced by the moans that came out of her as Gendry continued to kiss her to the Seven Hells.

Fuck. He was sin personified. If this was how good a kiss felt like, then she’d never want to get back to the surface. She wanted to drown with him.

She felt the hand at her nape tilting her neck up to allow more space for his mouth to violate her skin there once more, his tongue lapping at her pulse points while she continued to elicit all those moans she never thought she could make.

His other hand finally moved down to cup her arse and in one swift movement, she was lifted by his uncanny strength using just one arm. That was how strong he was.

Arya’s fingers didn’t waste time raking the thick mop of hair on his head the moment they were free from his grasp. Then her legs instinctively circled around his waist as he started grinding into her center, feeling the unmistakable evidence of his own arousal. And fuck her to the Seven Hells and back but Gendry Baratheon was so hard for her. And she reveled at the effect she had on him.

“Fuck…” He cursed before a moan escaped his lips, rivaling the sounds she was making, as he continued to explore her jaw, her neck and then back to her swollen lips.

She didn’t want him to stop. She wanted him to take her on that very wall, her maidenhead be damned. She just wanted to be fucked hard by the strapping Prince Gendry Baratheon.

“Please.” Those words escaped from her lips without her meaning to, and now his violent kisses turned into softer ones until he finally pulled away, leaning his forehead to hers.

He was trying to catch his breath as if they’d just sparred with swords outside the yard.

“Yes, you still think of me as some stupid cunt, my lady?” He taunted, his voice still raspy.

She only closed her eyes at the sound of his voice, their foreheads still touching. Their breathing slowly coming back to normal.

“Shut up, Gendry.” Was all she said, anger suddenly replacing her earlier desires.

She could not believe that she allowed herself to give in to the temptation of those sinful, delicious lips. And she hated herself for being so weak.

“You taste so good, Arya. God, the things I could do to those lips…” He muttered as if he was still entranced.

But Arya’s mood began to sour, enraged for allowing herself to get lost under his blazing touches.

Finally pulling away from him, she settled on her feet and kept herself at a considerable distance. “You’re not going to do anything with it, Gendry, because that’s going to be the last time you will be touching me.”
He broke into a haughty, incredulous laugh. “Stop denying yourself, Arya. I know you wanted it, too. And I got you where I want you.”

Arya bristled at his words. She couldn’t erase the wicked grin he was sporting, she badly wanted to punch his handsome face for it.

“Liar!” She spat before moving to walk away from him.

“Come on, admit it. You liked it. I can feel it in your lips.”

“Shut up!”

She’d never been redder in her life.

“Arya Stark is such a blushing maid.” Came his endless teasing.

“If you say one more word, one more word, Baratheon, then I’m not going to be responsible for what happens next.” She warned as she turned to look at him with deadly eyes.

But Gendry only seemed to be fueled by her fair warning. “What, are you going to kiss me again, Stark?” He goaded.

Finally losing all resolve, she looked at him one last time as she released a sigh of resignation. Then she closed the distance between them by pulling his shoulders toward her space, her face once again inches apart from him as her eyes sought out his beautiful cerulean ones.

Gendry smirked at her sudden action, “I knew you couldn’t resist me—”

Then her knee connected to his groin this time with such a force that made him kneel at her feet, grasping his aching bits with his hands. “Fucking shit!” Arya swore Gendry could’ve woken up the entire sleeping world at the roaring sound of his expletives.

It was her turn to laugh. “You should have seen your face, Baratheon. Oh, the sight of you on your knees right before me…”

She wasn’t expecting him to give her a full retort, not with the way he was cringing at the pain.

Served him right. It only made her smile wider.

“Nice sparring with you. It was indeed a fair fight.” Came her parting words.

She didn’t wait for him to regain his composure and left him in the halls to recover from the pain.

Gendry

He didn’t give a flying fuck how much his balls hurt right after his fiery betrothed kicked him with all of her stubborn strength. The only thing that mattered to him was how Arya Stark wanted him as badly as he wanted her. He could feel it in the way she responded to his kiss. And by far, it was the best kiss he ever had.
CRASH INTO ME

Chapter 7: Recollecting

Arya

Thoughts of Gendry Baratheon kissing her full on the lips surged like a tidal wave for yet the thousandth time ever since she came back to her chambers.

The bath she ordered her bedmaids to prepare wasn’t even helping. And now that her body was pruned after almost an hour of being submerged in the already cold water, she still could not stop thinking of him and his criminal kiss.

It seemed like she claimed her first kiss from him after all. Or better yet, he stole her first kiss from her. It didn’t even matter because she responded with eager consent to his violent kisses, anyway. She was in no position to complain.

Shit. She was utterly fucked. And going mental.

She wasn’t supposed to like that kiss, much less respond to how his skillful tongue danced with hers, but by the fucking gods, his mouth on her lips and neck was the single most glorious thing that’s ever happened to her life by far. It was as if something deep inside of her was awakened.

Only two days ago, she felt the touch of his lips on her skin for the first time back at Luwin’s solar when they had their classes. It was certainly a kiss, albeit simple, but nothing could compare to the way he devoured her lips earlier.

He was insatiable and she loved it. Because it meant that he was not really rejecting her like she thought. The way he kissed her only showed how desperate he was, and she reveled at the effect she
had on him.

She ended her bath with a final plunge as if to wash away all thoughts of him but as she emerged from the tub dripping with water, the memory of his kiss only flooded back at the very front of her thoughts.

It only made her more intoxicated to the point where she had to forgo thoroughly wiping her body in favor of throwing herself on her featherbed breathlessly, naked as her name day.

Her eyes were fixed on the ceiling of her chambers before finally closing them, their kiss still playing inside her mind.

She could still feel the phantom feeling of his hot lips on her skin, his stubble tickling her neck as he lapped her sensitive skin with his tongue. She suddenly wanted to know what it would feel like to have that tongue on other parts of her body.

As if by some invisible force, she touched her still sensitive lips with her fingertips before trailing them down to her pulsing neck, remembering the warm feeling of his lips, teeth and tongue, and before she knew it, her fingers were now touching each of her breasts, her nipples pert from the cold or from her sudden arousal.

A moan escaped her lips as she closed her eyes, imagining the movement to be Gendry’s tongue licking each of her nipples before sucking them.

It wasn’t enough, however, because a sudden feeling of heat began to pool in between her legs, begging to be touched. Or to be licked by Gendry’s tongue. So her fingers slowly found their way from her breasts, to her abdomen then finally down to where her need was calling her the most.

She was surprised to find herself dripping wet down there, and it was not even from her bath. It was something else born out of wanton need.

Her instinct dictated her to touch that tiny nub at the center of her sex, which caused her eyes to open at the unfamiliar sensation of pleasure. Another moan came out from her lips, but she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t stop touching herself now that she knew how good it felt. Her fingers traced the source of her wetness before spreading it all over her needy cunt. It was so wet, she felt the wetness dripping down on the sheets.

Fuck, she never thought it would feel this good.

And now she was wondering what it would feel like to have Gendry’s tongue on that spot, licking her and lapping her juices. She was not sure what came next but she couldn’t keep her fingers away. She needed something, some sort of release. And instinct dictated her to keep on going until she found that release.

Her fingers continued to circle around her small bundle of nerves, making her more breathless with need, her legs spreading wider on the bed.

“Fuck…” She cursed, swallowing her whimpers of pleasure.

_Gendry, please._ Her unbidden thoughts whispered for her.

“Gendry…” She finally called in her softest, breathless voice so that only the wind could hear her. The shooting rate of her heartbeat indicated that she was already on the brink of attaining that much needed release as her mind continued to imagine him fucking her with his tongue. “Gendry, please ___”
The sudden knock on the door brought her back to her senses.

“Shit.” She hissed, jumping out of the featherbed to pick up the towel she discarded on the side table before covering her indecency.

She felt her heightened arousal slowly obliterating with each step she took toward the door.

Why had she imagined Gendry doing all those things to her in the first place?

Fuck.

Before another set of colorful expletives paraded inside her thoughts, she heard the bedmaid finally announcing, “Lady Arya, you are needed in your father’s solar right now.”

Leaning her forehead on the door, she retorted in breathless haste, “Please tell them I’ll be there in a few minutes. I just have to finish dressing up. Thank you.” She refused to unlock the door and meet the bedmaid eye to eye in fear of being discovered for touching herself.

She knew it was something unspeakable, especially to a lady like herself.

But she couldn’t help it. It didn’t feel like a sin at all.

It felt so good even.

Pushing all those lecherous thoughts at the deepest recesses of her mind, she finally donned on the simple dress she chose to wear that day. She wasn’t really in the mood to explain herself if her mother or father would ask her why she was wearing boy clothes in the presence of the Royal family in their household.

As she entered her lord father’s solar, she was rather surprised to see a large gathering of people inside its familiar confines. Her parents were there, along with her oldest brother, Robb. King Robert and Lord Renly were also present, and of course, Gendry.

A flush crept through her cheeks when their eyes met.

He looked at her knowingly, those intense eyes dancing with mirth as he tried to hide a smirk.

It took all of her resolve not to roll her eyes.

For some reason, she already had an inclination as to what this meeting was all about. Dread replaced her feeling of exhilaration as she tried to slowly accept what was coming to her.

Sighing in resignation, she allowed her feet to lead her to her father’s desk where they were all waiting for her.

“What is it?” She had to find her voice for such menial question, if only to help her in acknowledging this reality unfolding right before her very eyes.

“We are all gathered here to formally put your betrothal with the prince into writing, sweetling.” Father announced. “The rest of us will bear witness to both of you signing a binding contract regarding your impending marriage.”

Each word only put invisible daggers to her heart, breaking it to a million tiny pieces.

But she knew too well that throwing a tantrum over it would not change anything. So instead of throwing a fit and crying like a little shit, she tipped her chin up like the lady she was and schooled
her features with indifference.

There was nothing she could do to change their minds for she was just a mere pawn in this political alliance. Blind obedience had always been the way of her world.

“Fine.” She did her best not to snarl at the word.

She remained silent as the terms of their betrothal were discussed. She even went as far as blocking out every conversation they were having, her eyes trained to the view outside the window as she zoned out, wondering what it would feel like to be free.

Perhaps she should already consider her prior plan of running away to the Free Cities, start a new life as no one and live a simple life away from nobility. But no matter how much appealing it sounded, she just couldn’t bring her family to shame. It wasn’t in her to be the cause of her family’s downfall.

While their small session was going on, she could feel the prince’s eyes on her. It had been that way from the moment she entered the solar. But this time, she refused to meet his gaze.

There was an irrational anger brewing inside her that was directed toward him for not even trying to stop their betrothal. She hated him for it, but she also hated herself more for being unreasonable. This wasn’t really Gendry’s fault either. He’s more of a pawn than a prince, just like she was.

Her thoughts were cut off when she heard her father calling her, “Arya?”

She snapped to attention, shifting her eyes back to the room.

“Yes?”

“We need you to sign these papers now, love.” Came her father’s request, carrying a careful tone about him. He was smart enough not to feed her internal rage by imposing his authority on her.

Wordlessly, Arya rose from her seat and sauntered toward the table. Gendry just finished signing the paper when she grabbed the quill from him without preamble.

She wrote her name in her usual awkward scrawl on the stupid parchment, the sound of the quill as she was writing was the only audible sound in the room as they observed her.

Once she was finally done, she took one look at each of the people present before she said, “Done. May I be excused?”

At her father’s approval, she made her curtsy and directed it to the king and the prince, “By your leave, Your Grace.”

Then she stormed out of the solar, brooding with controlled fury.

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“Where are you going?” Gendry’s voice broke the silence in the stables where Arya just finished putting the saddle on her horse.

“Nowhere that concerns you.” Came her icy response.
She felt his unwavering presence as he towered over her.

“I hate sounding so possessive about this, but you’re my concern now that everything’s official. Part of this betrothal is being sworn to protect you.”

His reminder only irked her more. Nevertheless, it was the truth. She was indeed his concern now.

But being the moody bitch that she was, she wanted to spite him more. “You should hear yourself talk, Baratheon. You sound like a blabbering, useless idiot!” She spat before turning her back to him and climbing up her horse.

“You shouldn’t even be riding out there by yourself, you know. There’s been reports of—” but he was cut off when her horse began to gallop toward his direction, Arya completely ignoring him.

“I can if I want to! Not even you can stop me! Now stop pesterling me and move away!” She spat.

She was almost at the rear gate when one of the Winterfell guards stopped her, “My lady, you cannot get out of Winterfell by yourself. Your father had specifically told us this time to no longer allow you outside the premises—“

“You will let me out or else I’m telling your wife-to-be that you’re sleeping with Ros from the brothels!” There was conviction in her tone.

It only left the guard speechless while she gave him a knowing smirk.

That was the beauty of being almost invisible inside the castle. While all the attention was given to her beautiful sister, Arya took that chance to get to know everybody’s secrets for circumstances like this.

He finally opened the gate for her, albeit reluctantly.

Before she could thank the guard, she heard Gendry behind her, “Don’t worry, I’ll ride with her.” His assurance seemed genuine so the guard also allowed him to pass without another word.

“How is it that you get your way around everyone? By blackmailing them?” He asked as he finally caught up with her, riding regally like the prince that he was.

She had to admit that he was a better rider than most of the men she knew. And he even looked more handsome riding his destrier. He looked like a general on a horse riding out to war. The image of him as a general was arousing in itself. She wondered what Gendry looked like in his military uniform. She was badly tempted to ask him but asking him would only feed his ego. But it still didn’t stop her from wanting to devour him.

Scolding herself, she cleared her thoughts and her throat then mustered all her strength for a response, “Desperate times, Your Grace.”

Gendry laughed. “Your circumstance is hardly a desperate time, my lady.”

She shook her head in resignation. She was tired of arguing with him today so she just went on with riding her horse away from him.

“Where are you off to, Arya?”

“Where do you think?” Then with a piercing glare, she added, “Should you even be allowed outside of Winterfell by yourself? Where are your bloody Kingsguards? I’ve never really seen any of them
tailing after you ever since you arrived in Winterfell. Aren’t you supposed to have one just like your father?” Came her observation.

Shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly, he replied, “I don’t really see any reason why I should need a Kingsguard when everybody knows that I can defend myself.”

Arya gave him one last condescending look and said with sarcasm, “You sure are one humble prince, Your Grace.”

“I’m only stating the truth, my lady.”

His statement shut her up. After all, the truth was evidenced by her loss to their sparring match just this morning.

They remained silent for the rest of the ride until they finally reached the lake. It dawned on Arya as she dismounted her horse that this place was where everything between them started. Gendry might have thought the same because there was a gentleness in the way he was looking at her.

They sat in silence near the rocks, each stuck in their own reverie for a few minutes until Gendry broke Arya’s deepening thoughts. “I have to be honest with you. I don’t care if you don’t believe me but I think this, right here… This is our own little place…”

Arya wanted to give him one of her choice barbed retorts, but she just couldn’t bring herself to argue with him for once. Not when her mood just shifted back to normal when they arrived. “I know. I feel that, too. This is where everything started.” She agreed, her eyes fixed on the mountains beyond the lake.

There’s just something about his words at that moment that gave a balmy relief to her moody episodes. Besides, it was a good day to be out and about. The wind wasn’t as chilly as she expected. “I don’t regret it, you know, meeting you. All things considered, you’re one of the few friends I have who is brutally honest and doesn’t treat me like I’m breakable just because I’m the prince.”

His statement brought a small secret smile to her lips. “I’m not one for sugar-coating bullshit so I tend to go for brutal honesty. But I thank you… for saying those things. If anything, it means a lot. I don’t really have a lot of friends, too, so meeting you and getting to know you is a great change, for once.”

“Who are your other friends, by the way?” He asked.

“Well, there’s Mycah, the butcher’s boy who I always beat whenever we practice swordfighting. Then there’s Ned Dayne of Starfall. I haven’t seen him in years but he’s a good friend. We used to also spar in the practice yard when they visited Winterfell years ago. And of course, there’s Jon. He’s my closest brother.” Her response evoked an unnamable expression on Gendry’s face. “How about you? Who are your friends back in King’s Landing?”

Her question seemed to bring him back to his senses when he replied, “My oldest friend is Hot Pie. We come all the way back to Flea Bottom. He used to work in a bakery and when I became the prince, I asked him to come with me. I would have made him my squire, but he didn’t want anything to do with becoming a knight. Said he wanted to be a baker, so he’s now the official baker in the castle. He really makes the most delicious cakes and pies, you know.” He said. It was evident in the way he was talking about this Hot Pie person (strange yet a fitting name for a baker, though) that he was so fond of him, and Arya was somehow glad that Gendry wasn’t so lonely back in King’s
Landing.

“I reckon you’d like him, too. He’s a good lad and I can’t wait to introduce you to him when you arrive at King’s Landing. I’m sure you’ll get along well. You’ll love his pastries and pies. Basically all the food that he cooks.” He added.

His mention of her arrival at King’s Landing seemed to have darkened her mood once more. She’s now starting to wonder why she’s being so moody these past few days. Sure, the stupid prince could be considered a trigger for her mood swings, but she had a feeling that her mood shifts seemed different this time.

Could this just be her teenage angst hormones playing their part?

But nevertheless, she replied albeit with fake enthusiasm. “I’m also positive that Hot Pie and I will become really good friends, especially that I do love to eat.”

Her response earned a laugh from Gendry. “Yeah, I’ve seen the way you eat. Not that it’s a bad thing. I do like girls with a hearty appetite.”

But she couldn’t bring herself to respond this time. The thought about eventually coming to King’s Landing only bothered her more.

Suddenly, she felt warm, gentle fingers on her chin as Gendry made her look at him. “What’s wrong, Arya?” Concern was written all over his face.

She did not meet his eyes. “Just the fact that I’m going to have to leave Winterfell when the time comes to marry you. And there’s no breaking this betrothal, isn’t it? Not when everything’s been signed and sealed.”

She felt his thumb caressing her chin so gently, she could feel goosebumps all over her body at the wonderful sensation.

“Look at me.” He ordered in nothing but his gentle voice. She slowly lifted her eyes at him, its blueness making her entranced.

She then felt the warmth on her chin travel to her jaw until his large hand engulfed one side of her face, his fingers now dancing at the back of her head, giving her that familiar warmth that only he could provide. She felt fuzzy and she never wanted him to let go.

“I know you are appalled by this whole idea of marriage, but if it makes you any better, so am I. Because I never really wanted to put you in this kind of position. But since the contract is done and final, all I could ever promise you is your freedom and happiness. Well, freedom in the sense that wouldn’t break off the agreement between our houses, but rather, freedom to be yourself while you’re betrothed to me.

“If you want to become a knight, then go ahead and be one. I will support you all the way. If you want to travel to Essos or somewhere west of Westeros, then I’ll be there with you to discover all those places. I wouldn’t keep you chained to your duties as a woman of this period. Because I know that’s not you.”

She was looking at him the whole time he said those words, and all she could see was his honesty. “Why are you being so kind to me, Gendry?” Was all she asked.

“I value freedom as much as you do. And to remove that kind of freedom from you is just plain wrong, Arya. I don’t want to extinguish that spark in you. You are so much more…’”
She wanted to wrap her arms around him in a tight embrace. He truly understood her in his own little ways more than anyone else and it made her heart flutter.

She flashed him her warmest smile to show him how grateful she was.

“You feeling better now?” He asked her, his own smile spreading like wildfire. She always loved the way his eyes disappeared whenever he smiled.

She nodded in response before he completely pulled away from her. “That’s good to know because I really thought you’d stab my eye with that quill back in your father’s solar earlier.”

She rolled her eyes playfully, “Don’t make me regret my decision of not stabbing you.”

A snort escaped his lips. “Please. You were seething with rage earlier that I really thought you’d throw a fit in front of everyone.”

Arya was actually on the verge of throwing one. She’d been so tempted to unleash her wrath in front of the people responsible for her ordeal, but she thought better of it.

“I’ve been known for my temperament. And I did have my fair share of blinding rage especially when I was younger. But I grew tired of my anger issues and learned to channel them.” Came her explanation.

Learning to control her anger was a hard process in the making. She had her relapses every now and then, especially when she first knew of her betrothal, but her reaction at that time was gentler compared to the things she’d done in the past out of anger.

Another few seconds of silence passed between them once more before Gendry broached another related topic. “At least help me understand more why you abhor so much the idea of marriage.”

In her calm resolve, she managed to start elaborating, “It’s not really the absolute idea of marriage so much as how women are being treated in our time that is abhorrent to me. Marriage can be a good thing if the woman wanted it for herself because she loves the person she is going to marry. But herein lies the problem when a woman is diminished as a commodity, a pawn to be traded like cattle in order to strengthen political alliances. What makes this world unfair is when she is forced against her will to fulfill a so-called duty under the medieval notion that a woman’s main role in society is only to become child-bearers and wives, subdued to be domesticated under the shadow of their husbands rather than stand by their sides as equals.

“Why can’t most men see that women are also their equals? Why does it seem like a taboo whenever a woman would so much as express her own desires to be herself without the approval of society? The way of our world is utter bullshit, you know.”

She could hear Gendry’s sigh after she said those words.

“I don’t actually see women in that sort of way.” He told her a matter-of-factly. She narrowed her eyes at him in confusion.

“I mean, I also consider women as my equal and not merely as the second sex. And I somehow understand what you mean. I am acquainted with several ladies at court to understand that they, too, have their own personal desires and goals apart from just being restricted to the role of homemakers and child-bearers.

“Take for example my good friend, Lady Brienne of Tarth, who is now Ser Brienne, by the way. She fought so hard for women to be knighted the same way as men by submitting an appeal to the
Arya’s eyes widened. “That is great to know, Gendry. I’ve always looked up to Brienne of Tarth as my role model. I admire her so much.”

“Me too. I also admire her bravery amidst men mocking her. She’s a good friend, Arya. And I’m pretty sure you both will become the closest of friends, too.”

Arya nodded in agreement.

“Then at least I’ll have something to look forward to when I get to King’s Landing.” She told him. At least she wouldn’t be that lonely when Gendry would be out to perform his duties at court.

“It’s also refreshing to know that a person with a position like you do not regard women as the weaker sex. You can set an example to the people, especially to the other men at court.” She added.

“I’ve seen how the women are treated while I was still living in Flea Bottom to understand the double standards of this world…” He trailed off.

For some reason, Arya was grateful that they shared the same sentiments about women, because she couldn’t imagine herself being stuck with a husband who regarded her as nothing more than a mindless puppet and a personal plaything.

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One week later:

Arya woke up drenched in sweat after having a nightmare filled with blood and gore. Her throat felt coarse from shouting in her sleep and her heart would not stop pounding like an angry hammer.

The growling thunders outside startled her while the cold winds from the heavy rain seeping through the small cracks of her closed windows gave her goosebumps.

As she propped herself on her knees, something wet trickled in between her thighs. She put two of her fingers in between them and was surprised to find it moist and a little bit sticky. There was also that familiar scent of iron. When she slightly spread her legs, she squinted her eyes and noticed a dark color staining her bedclothes and the lower back portion of her smallclothes and nightclothes. She didn’t like this feeling in between her thighs at all.

Her thoughts were broken when she heard someone knock on her door.

“Arya!” A familiar masculine voice called out.

Her door suddenly bolted open revealing a panicking Gendry in his tunic and breeches bringing a candle on one hand and his longsword on the other.

“Arya, are you alright?” He asked her worriedly as he hastily sauntered to her bed, releasing his sword in the process.
Arya was still holding up her hand on eye level as she studied the wet substance staining her fingers.

It dawned on her that the iron scent was the same scent as blood.

No…

She refused to acknowledge what her senses were telling her. Her eyes flickered at him with horror.

“Gendry…” She trailed off in a soft whisper.

She studied her fingers once again, this time with a better view as Gendry’s lighted candle illuminated her line of vision. She saw how red the tips of her two fingers were.

Gendry squinted, carefully studying her coated fingers before his eyes trailed toward her stained bedclothes, his burning candle already placed on her side table.

“Seven Hells, you’re bleeding! Where are you hurt? What happened?” While his concern was adorable, it wasn’t the right time to patronize him, considering the more pressing matter in her hands. Literally.

“No! No! No! This can’t be happening!” She whined once the reality of her situation finally dawned on her.

Without any preamble, she ran to her door, shut it tight and slid the bar down to lock it once and for all.

It was there that Gendry came to realize what was happening.

“It’s your moon-blood, you’re…” He trailed off, speechless.

“I’m flowering…” Arya finished for him.

They both knew what Arya’s flowering meant.

“We can’t be married yet, Gendry.” Arya told him with pleading eyes. “You have to promise me you won’t tell anyone about this.”

Since he was a foot taller than her, she had to incline her head up to look at him.

“Please, Gendry.” She implored, her eyes glazing in fear.

Gendry gazed down at her, somehow lost in his own thoughts before he finally cupped her face. He breathed out a heavy sigh he had been holding.

“I give you my word, Arya. On my honor as a Baratheon.” He swore.

His gentle caress on her face was promise enough.

“Thank you.” She whispered, finally pulling away before she could give in to the strong impulse of kissing him.

As a diversion to where her thoughts were leading her to, she walked back to her featherbed and started pulling out her bedclothes hastily.

“What are you doing?” Came Gendry’s curious question.
“I have to get rid of this. Help me out please.”

They were successful in pulling out the entire bedsheet together before Arya unremorsefully threw it in the fireplace to get rid of the evidence of her flowering.

She then opened a large wooden chest on the other side of her chambers and grabbed the first piece of clothing she could find. Turning her back away from Gendry, she started to undress herself.

“What are you doing?” Gendry asked, feeling the weight of his stare as he watched her strip off her garments.

Arya walked back toward the fire clad only in her smallclothes and tossed her white nightgown in the embers.

“I’m burning all the evidences and changing into clean clothes, obviously.” Came her now calm response.

After tossing her clothes in the fire, she took her time to wash her hands on the basin.

“Turn around. I’m going to go all naked now. If I see you peeking, I’m going to kill you.” She threatened.

Gendry lifted his hands as if in surrender.

“There’s no need to threaten me, my lady. I won’t be looking anyway.” He assured her, turning his back away from her as he faced the other side of her chambers.

“Very well then. Stay where you are and don’t turn around until I say so.”

She took her time to remove her smallclothes before she replaced them with cleaner nightclothes, ensuring to add some more extra layers of clean linen to absorb her moon blood. As soon as she was done, she finally walked back to where Gendry was standing and finally placed her hand on one of his shoulders.

“You can turn around now. I’m done.” She told him plainly.

As soon as Gendry turned around to look at her, he was out of words.

She was wearing a new set of nightclothes only this time it was thinner than the previous one. It looked sheer and luminescent. She was aware that the silhouette of her body and her breasts could be seen from the light of the fire inside her chambers and as much as she wanted to stay a bit more decent, she’d rather prefer being comfortable in lighter clothes when she slept.

She also did not bind her breasts, and she wasn’t surprised when Gendry’s eyes never left her chest.

“Eyes up here, Baratheon.” She berated with her usual indignant tone.

How can a massive person like him be smitten by someone as small as her?

It felt odd… yet at the back of her mind, she found it exhilarating to have Gendry look at her like that with those attractive eyes as if he was slowly stripping her off her nightclothes.

She noticed Gendry swallowing a lump on his throat as he came back to his senses.

“Right. I’m sorry. It’s just that I thought I saw something there and… never mind.” He trailed off, clearing his throat nervously.
Arya rolled her eyes exasperatedly before finally opening the wooden drawer from her bedside table, revealing a small sewing box.

In some way, she was thankful for deciding to keep that box despite her parallel hatred for stitches and needlework. Her instincts were on point when it dictated her to keep it for emergencies such as this.

Gendry sat beside her on the featherbed as she started gathering the pieces she needed to sew. She knew from observation that she would require more of her smallclothes to be sewn with thick pieces of clean cloths for the duration of her monthly blood.

She was no longer as ignorant as she used to be, especially when her mother and their septa was all about educating her in preparation for this moment to come.

Gendry’s candle and the light from the fire illuminated her chambers.

They lost the urge to get back to sleep when they started to engage in small, random conversations. The rain was still heavily pouring outside with occasional thunders.

“You’re well aware that they would eventually know about this, right?” Gendry said.

“I know. But at least they won’t know soon enough. I’ll try to hide it as much as I could manage.” She retorted as she continued to make crooked stitches. “I’m really bad at this.” She added, biting her lip in concentration.

“What? Hiding it from them or the sewing part?” Gendry asked curiously, raising an eyebrow.

“The sewing part. My septa says I have the hands of a blacksmith.” She retorted.

Gendry hooted.

“What? Those soft little things? That’s unlikely.” He told her, sounding incredulous as he looked at her hands and fingers.

“Shut up.” Arya told him.

“Give me your hands.” Gendry suddenly commanded with his princely authority.

Arya looked at him skeptically with her eyebrow raised.

“Why?” She stopped with her sewing altogether.

“Just give me your hands.” He told her once more.

Arya resigned and put down her needle and thread on the wooden sewing box. She held out her hands in the air and Gendry carefully took it in his.

He held out her left hand in his right hand and carefully trailed his left finger on the palm of her hand. Different kinds of alien emotions shot through her core the moment his skin was in contact with hers.

“This can’t be the hands of a blacksmith… they’re so soft.” He whispered as he continued to trace his finger along the lines of her palm.

“They’re not soft. I practice with my sword all the time.” She protested.
Gendry averted his gaze at her, giving her that familiar dangerous look.

“I know but they’re still soft.” He told her in a raspy voice.

Arya felt her breath hitch the moment Gendry engulfed her hand with his, entwining their fingers.

“If you could see, mine are callused from long years of pounding on steel.” He told her a matter-of-factly.

This time, it was Arya’s turn to allow the pulp of her fingers to travel along the lines of his callused palm after she pulled away. They were hard and sturdy and rough.

It was indeed the hand of a blacksmith.

And he was so warm.

She bit her lip as she allowed herself to trail her fingers on his again. She couldn’t seem to stop. She did not want to stop. Deep inside she felt a certain need to be under his touch all the time.

“How does it feel?” Gendry suddenly asked her in a low gruff voice as he continued to look at her dangerously.

Arya took a large amount of air and held her breath for a few good seconds before releasing it.

She hated the way he was making her breathless again.

“Rough…” She trailed off as she tried to wrack her brains further for any other words to describe it. “Strong… Big… Long… Hard…” She whispered breathlessly as she fell under a trance-like state the moment her eyes met his.

She saw Gendry’s lips curl into a wicked, lecherous smile.

“You seem to be talking about a totally different part of my body now, my lady.” He stated suggestively.

Arya flushed insanely at his innuendo and pulled away from his hand.

“I wasn’t!” She hissed through gritted teeth.

She hated how he could always read her mind. She remained quiet as she continued to work on her stitches with him watching her closely beside her on the featherbed.

Right after she finished stitching her bedclothes, she carefully put back the needle and the thread inside her wooden box and kept it safe inside her bedside drawer. Stretching her arms up, she yawned.

“How does it feel?” Gendry asked, regarding her carefully.

Before she could respond to him, she found herself almost jumping off from her bed as she was startled by the angry growling of thunder outside. She was caught off-guard.

The rains were still heavily pouring in the entire North.

As if by instinct, Arya resorted to hugging herself, bringing her sheets closer to her chest as she felt a sudden cold shiver all over her body. Perhaps the sound of thunders still unnerved her.
“Arya?” Gendry asked worriedly, slowly scooting closer to her, putting a hand on her back to soothe her. “Are you alright?”

Even Nymeria was awoken by the raging thunders. Her direwolf padded toward her bed and stayed with her on one side while Gendry was on the other side, holding that reassuring look on his face.

Arya gave him an unflinching look.

“I’m alright, Gendry. I just got startled, is all. It’s not like I’m still scared of some stupid thunder anyway.” She lied defensively.

But another thunder startled her again.

“Fuck.” She cursed.

Nymeria nuzzled her side. Her adorable wolf always did that to her whenever she felt scared.

“Why do they have to be so fucking loud?” She muttered annoyingly.

“I could stay and watch you sleep and leave before everyone is up.” Came his kind offer.

If anything, the look in his eyes was sincere.

Arya wanted to melt.

His offer did sound inviting because if truth be told, she never really wanted him to leave her side ever.

Why was she suddenly having all these kinds of feelings? Before even discovering the existence of Gendry Baratheon, the only feeling she knew was the feeling of all-consuming joy and freedom of finally being able to sneak out from her septa and her own mother. She was happy and content all by herself. But right now, it was all of those combined and something more.

But what kind of more was that?

Releasing a sigh, she shrugged her shoulders. Maybe it’s not that bad having him around after all. His radiance always made her warm.

“If you want to, Gendry.” She finally replied, feigning nonchalance, but deep inside, she was already burning with that indescribable undulating desire.

She noticed his smile growing.

“I want to, Arya.” She felt her pulse throbbing exultantly.

Arya finally seemed to relax on her featherbed. She rested her back on the headboard with her soft pillow cushioning it. Gendry did the same after he took off his boots while Nymeria was on her other side, already getting back to her glorious sleep.

Crossing her arms before her chest and staring blankly into oblivion, Arya suddenly spoke after a few minutes of silence.

“We are always caught under this circumstance, are we not?”

Gendry looked at her, confused.
“What circumstance is that, Arya?”

Another thunder boomed outside, but this time Arya no longer flinched.

“Of rains and profound conversations…” Came her plain retort.

They did have profound conversations in the past hour and she only ever had those conversations with him.

She heard Gendry chuckle.

“You’re right. In fact, Hot Pie aside, I don’t really get to talk like this to anyone in King’s Landing. I mean, Brienne and I do talk, but she’s still too formal toward me sometimes.” He told her truthfully.

Arya exactly felt the same way. With Gendry, she felt like herself, just Arya without any reservations.

She remained speechless at his revelation, but her lips betrayed a small smile.

Gendry beamed back.

Switching the subject in an instant before this led to anything she didn’t want to regret the next day, she put her palm on her face and spoke. “Shit, I can’t believe this is happening to me right now. This was the only consolation I had in this betrothal. The fact that I don’t get to marry you right away because I haven’t flowered yet… and here I am bleeding like a fucking waterfall.” She whined.

Drawing himself closer to her, he whispered, “Then I guess, you’re just going to have to stick with me the entire time you’re bleeding. Because we both know how much you need to keep watch for any possible evident blood stains on your clothes.” Came his suggestion, flashing his stupid smug smirk.

Arya’s mouth fell.

“For the entire duration of my moon blood?” She had to clarify.

Gendry nodded, “Yes, my lady.” He replied, stressing out her title.

Arya blinked back twice.

“So we’re going to act like a real couple and stay with each other’s side like all the time? With all the hand holding and touching each other bullshit?” She tried to ask again.

He nodded.

“Yes, if you like to put it that way. We can act like real couples who are finally accepting this betrothal, holding hands and being more affectionate with each other. Gods, I can’t even begin to imagine the joyous looks in our fathers’ faces when they see us.” Gendry began to tease her ridiculously, grinning impishly.

Arya rolled her eyes exasperatingly.

“I will never ever allow you to treat me like some stupid helpless lady, holding my hand and parading around Winterfell, displaying your affection all because we had to hide this stupid secret!” She spat through gritted teeth.

Gendry pulled his head back to laugh at her statement.
Arya snarled in her place, obviously annoyed.

*Stupid, clever bastard.*
“Where have you been all my life, Arya Stark?” He whispered breathlessly as if he was absolutely bewitched by an unknown magical being casting a spell on him. But Arya never believed in the existence of magic in this world.

Arya

“Arya rolled her eyes at him, “I will never ever allow you to treat me like some stupid helpless lady, holding my hand and parading around Winterfell, displaying your affection towards me all because we had to hide this stupid secret!” She spat through gritted teeth.

“I can’t believe I allowed you to treat me like some stupid helpless lady, holding my hand and parading around Winterfell to display your affection all because of this stupid secret!!!” Arya hissed at him in annoyance as they were walking along the grounds of Winterfell after breaking their fast.

She had practically eaten her words the night they were having their deep conversations inside her chambers. Gendry only burst out into soft gales of boyish laughter.

In the duration of her first moon blood, Arya had to pretend as if she was already fond of her stupid bullheaded betrothed by constantly remaining at his side so that they could help each other in watching out for any possible signs of her flowering, especially in checking for any stains in her clothes. Arya even had to wear dark-colored dresses for extra precaution. It was the most excruciating five days in her entire life having to wear stupid dresses instead of her favorite boy’s clothes but it was the only way to keep her secret.

Their inseparable moments together can even be mistaken already for real actual fondness by her family, most especially the King, and Arya couldn’t do anything more to deny their conclusions lest she wants everyone else to know her secret. At least the King was more than pleased to finally see them together.

If they only knew.

Fondness is not in Arya Stark’s vocabulary. It can never happen.

Arya Stark does not do fondness.
Her brothers were even very eager to tease her about the prince finally melting the ice-cold heart of the ‘Wild Northern Girl.’ As if she would really give in to accepting their betrothal. It has basically ruined her life.

The stupid bull on the other hand was more than amused to be her accomplice in this mummer’s farce. He even has taken their pretentious acting to the next level when he would offer to hold her hand or tug it under his arm every time they would do their routinary walk along the grounds of Winterfell. It annoyed Arya to the bones that she was already very tempted to wipe that smug grin off his face every time he would hold her.

On the second day of her moon blood, Arya and Gendry were walking along Winterfell’s courtyard, basking under the light of the early morning sun. Had it been a normal day for her, they would have been practicing together in the yard already.

But since her flowering has decided to meddle with her daily affairs in life, she had no choice but to settle for having her left hand being tugged under Gendry’s arm like she was some stupid proper little highborn lady. To annoy her further, he had to hold her hand firmly with his other hand just to keep her closer by his side. It just so happened that the King and her father were having an outdoor breakfast in the yard that morning.

Out of obeisance, they had to stop by and greet the King and her father.

“Good morning, Your grace, Father.” Arya greeted them, giving a curt smile.

She released a subtle, exasperated sigh. Gendry did the same in greeting them.

“Here’s my favorite couple in the whole Seven Kingdoms!” The King greeted them endearingly, smiling widely in his seat.

Arya only gave him an unreadable scowl while Gendry stood in place as he tightened his grip on her hand. The King turned to her father happily and gave a playful slap on his back.

“See what I mean, Ned? I was never wrong in matching our children. They are perfect! A month after our stay here in Winterfell and here they are, already inseparable.” The King said to Arya’s father at once.

Ned smiled at the King warmly then at Arya. It was evident enough that her father was very happy too.

“I couldn’t agree more, Your grace.” He simply stated.

“Perhaps we should just marry them tomorrow in the godswood because their union is already inevitable.” The King japed before laughing heartily.

“No!” Arya exclaimed, almost shouting at them.

Her face was of pure horror, her upper extremities slowly beginning to tremble in fear and anger that Gendry had to hold her tighter to control her impulse of lunging at the King and sticking the small dagger strapped to her thigh under her skirts into that fat belly of his.

Both the King and her father only looked at her disgruntled state. Both had shocked looks on their faces at Arya’s sudden defensive reaction.

Noticing Gendry’s soothing and calming gesture, she cleared her throat and threw an apology.
“What I mean is, it could wait…” She simply stated, half-whispering. “I’m not ready yet because I have not flowered yet. You said I was to marry when I flowered.” She added just to clarify things out and to make the King and her father remember what was stated in their agreement.

Gendry was regarding her carefully.

He turned to look at his father.

“Lady Arya is right, Father. There is no need to rush. She’s not ready yet.” He told them in her defense as he continued to hold her hand in place on his arm, trying to comfort her and appease the growing tension from Arya’s body.

“By your leave, Lord Stark, Father. I promised to take Lady Arya in the godswood today for our daily prayer.” Gendry told them.

At his words, Arya’s about-to-be-sour mood lightened up. She tried to control herself from laughing at what he just said.


When was the last time she has even prayed? She couldn’t remember the last time she did.

As soon as they were already away from the earshot of their fathers and the people in the courtyard, Arya finally burst into uncontrollable gales of laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Gendry asked her.

Arya had to release herself from his hold just so that she could hold her stomach while she was laughing. She couldn’t stop herself from laughing. She was only able to finally calm herself when they were already at the entrance to the godswood.

“Daily prayer? Really? Is that the best excuse you can come up with?” She asked him mockingly.

“What’s wrong with that?” Gendry wondered in confusion, scrunching his face.

They were now walking inside the godswood towards the hot spring and the heart tree. Arya only snorted and shook her head, looking at him in a funny way and trying to stifle her laugh.

Gendry raised an eyebrow.

“Why? Didn’t your septa or your maester teach you how to pray to your Old Gods?” Came his sarcastic question.

When they finally reached the center of the godswood where the heart tree stood, Arya carefully paced towards the biggest root, remembering to be very careful of her movements to avoid staining her dress with her own moon blood and gingerly took a seat.

“I actually don’t believe in the existence of any god or gods, no more than I believe that lowborns and highborns are two different social classes.” She simply stated in a hushed voice, careful not to let anyone else hear her.

Gendry’s expression was unexplainable.

“You’re japing, right? If someone else hears you, you could already be accused of heresy and treason.” Gendry whispered cautiously as he sat on the large root next to her.
“I firmly believe in the ideology that man has the faculty of freedom, reason and intellect to decide whether to choose a religion or not. And as for me, I choose not to have one. I don’t believe in any of them. Their existence is not proven since there is no conclusive science to prove that the gods ever existed. Besides, why should I follow blindly something that is just written but not proven?” She told him nonchalantly, shrugging her shoulders.

“And how did you come to such deduction that their existence is not proven?” Gendry challenged, furrowing down his eyebrows attentively at her.

“From the books in our library.” Arya replied.

She regarded him for a moment and when he urged her to speak, she continued, “Banned books from the castle’s library, rather. I suddenly came across those books many years ago when I happened to be hiding in our library from our septa.” Gendry’s eyed widened in shock.

“There is a purpose why those books were prohibited, you know.” He told her a matter-of-factly.

“That is why I found the need to know the reason why they were banned. You’d be surprised to know that they have been banned probably by the previous Targaryen rulers because their positions were threatened in many ways.” Arya explained.

“How so?” Gendry asked her curiously, very attentive enough to listen to her explanation.

Since this was a topic Arya had been wanting to discuss so much but could not really find someone who could listen to her, she found this opportunity to tell all of her thoughts to Gendry. After all, he was the only friend she’s got right now.

Arya began her bout of intellectual explanation to Gendry by cautiously speaking in a hushed whisper.

“At first, I really didn’t see any reason why those books would be banned and they have been banned a long time ago during the reign of the Targaryen kings. Then I came to realize that they have prohibited further readings of those books because it might cause a revolution among the masses—from the smallfolk if they start reading it.

“The Targaryen rulers were actually afraid of the smallfolk being enlightened of their natural rights as human beings that just like the highborns, in this world, the rights of men should exist equally. Seeing the way that the whole of Westeros is being ruled by kings and monarchs, this leaves no equal chance for lowborns to rise up to the society, and instead they remain in the bottom rung of the social ladder. Those books were banned to prevent the education of the smallfolk into awareness that men should have equal rights, and instead, feed their minds with scriptures in the light of the Seven Gods for them to have a sort of uniformed belief and mentality to conform while they serve those in the upper classes, the highborns, lords and kings alike.”

“So I surmise that this would also be the reason why you refuse to be distinguished as a highborn and be married off to another highborn because of the things that have enlightened you when you’ve read them?” Gendry asked.

His was full of awe and admiration at what she just told him.

If he is to become a ruler someday, then he should know all of this and find a means to stop the medieval laws still governing Westeros.

She nodded her head at him thoughtfully, still holding his gaze and finding any hints of judgment from his face but there was none.
“Yes, part of it. And a bigger part of it would be the fact that I just don’t want to marry at all.” She plainly retorted. “Anyway, it was from constantly reading those books that I found myself enlightened about how the natural order of the world should go; by simply using your common sense and intellect to simplify your life with lesser consideration for the constraints of the social status and hierarchy and without merely conforming to the dictates of the so-called societal norms.

“I learned from those books that man does not simply follow or adhere to the rules just because it is what’s being implemented by the law, but instead, I realized that the human intellect is far more important in governing one’s own rationality and consciousness in leading one’s life. In which one does not simply follow blindly and do things just because it is what’s being taught in the sacred scriptures or it’s what’s being implemented by the law of the land. Because you see, that’s where man’s flaws come in. They simply follow blindly without reason, without using their common sense. It’s the mentality of the herd, the crowd that is taking away man’s essence of being an actual functioning human being.” She further explained.

Gendry has been seriously listening to her talking about her thoughts of the world, obviously caught in her verbal frenzy. This time, his face was now very close to hers. He blinked back twice before he suddenly cupped the sides of her face with his large, warm blacksmith hands.

When he began stroking her cheek with his thumb, she felt the electricity jolting all over her body, making her blush profusely at his gesture. But of course she didn’t let him see that she was liking what he was doing.

He seemed lost in her eyes, suddenly falling under a trance-like state.

“Where have you been all my life, Arya Stark?” He whispered breathlessly as if he was absolutely bewitched by an unknown magical being casting a spell on him.

But Arya never believed in the existence of magic in this world.

“Men must have thrown themselves at your feet… just to win you over…” He spoke once more as he continued to stare blankly into her face, lost in thought.

The enigma of his words seemed incomprehensible to her.

She slightly furrowed her eyebrows as she continued to hold his gaze.

“I’ve never had any man trying to win me over, Gendry. And I’ve been in Winterfell my whole life. Where else would I be?” She replied innocently, her eyes widening.

Her heart would not stop beating fast either.

Gendry was finally brought back to the present when she urged what’s left of her strength to move away from him, or else her traitor of a body would draw closer and claim his lips to hers.

He shook his head as he tried to pull away from her, straightening himself.

“Right. Sorry, I just…” He trailed off, clearing his throat.

He was obviously out of words.

“Well, to be honest, you actually have a point when you explained to me your rantings about the world we live in. This has never been a fair and just world.” He stated seriously.

Arya bit her lip and thought for a moment.
“You can do something about it when you will become king in the future though. You will have the power to change the way of our world.” Arya encouraged him.

He gave her an earnest smile.

“Both of us will have the power to change the world.” He stressed out.

Then as he inched his way back to her ear, he whispered, “You will be my Queen, remember? We’re both in this together, you and me.” Gendry pulled away from her and looked at her with the most sincere eyes. “I do believe that together, we can become great rulers. Well, at least before we set a decree of unmaking you the queen, just like you requested. That could follow if you so badly wanted it…” He added.

You and me.

Gendry and I will do this together.

It didn’t really sound pretentious at all.

It sounded very natural.

A sudden gush of hope flooded her senses. A hope for the world despite the darkness filling it.

“Yes, you and me. Together…” She repeated those words in a hushed whisper as she stared blankly at his expectant face.

“And you’re actually right about earlier. No man should be forced into faith. Like you, I also believe that man has the freedom and the intellect to choose for himself a belief to live by. I have held on to those ideals even before I came to live in the Red Keep, back when I was still forging steel in Flea Bottom.” He explained to her.

He regarded her with a worried look.

“But for now, you need to be discreet about your own ideologies or else you’ll be accused of heresy and treason and end up walking naked along the streets of King’s Landing as punishment for your heretic tendencies, as they call it. We still have a lot of enemies trying to usurp the throne.” He warned as he continued to look at her.

Arya breathed out a sigh.

“I know. I’ve been more than careful my whole life, Gendry.” Arya shot back. “I haven’t even told this to anyone else.” She assured him.

“Not even Jon?”

“Not even Jon.”

Gendry felt relieved at her statement, then he shook his head in utter disbelief.

“You know what? Among all the other highborn girls I’ve known and met, you’re the only one with this kind of radical thinking. You’re a rare kind.” He remarked, his lips forming into a wide smile.

Arya only looked at him and blinked twice.

Of all the things he has told her, this was the only one that has registered inside her mind.
He knows other girls? Or rather, he has other girls?

She suddenly felt a pang in the depths of her heart. It was utterly bothersome and she didn’t like it. She tried to conceal her reaction by keeping a stern face.

“You must know a lot of girls then.” Came her snide remark, raising an eyebrow at him.

She had no idea why it suddenly annoyed her greatly but she didn’t like the idea of Gendry being with other girls.

Gendry grinned knowingly at her remark.

“I live in the Red Keep, therefore I am obliged to attend court everyday as much as possible. There are a lot of highborns I meet in court, and that includes highborn ladies from small and great houses.” He stated logically.

He narrowed his eyes on her.

“Why? Am I under the impression that you’re suddenly jealous of me being with other girls?” He told her with that stupid smirk on his face.

Arya blushed at his statement.

Of course she doesn’t get jealous! The nerve!

She rolled her eyes at him.

Stop assuming too much, Your grace. I was merely stating an observation.” She told him defensively, sounding irritated.

She heard Gendry chuckle.

“You’re just too obvious, my lady. Anyway, just so you know, and if it makes you better, I truly admire your brazen honesty in everything, even your skepticism. And that is way much better than seeing other girls in the Red Keep going to the sept, pretending to be praying but right after they pray, they end up gossiping. The same goes for other self-righteous highborns living there.” He told her seriously.

“Filthy hypocrites and narrow-minded bigots.” Arya muttered. “And self-righteous little shits.”

“Aye.” He acquiesced. “You’re not like most girls, Arya Stark. Very interesting.” He added, touching his growing stubble on his chin.

Arya tried to stifle the smile forming on her lips.

“It’s because most girls are stupid, Gendry Baratheon.” She replied.

Silence fell upon them once more.

For a few more seconds, they listened to the breeze sweeping through the godswood. It was so peaceful that they allowed themselves to enjoy the silence. Arya could feel the cool Northern wind on her skin and it made her feel so relaxed. She then slowly leaned her back on the tree as she sat comfortably on its large root and finally after a few moments, her eyes shut closed.
She only realized now that she was actually feeling very sleepy. Perhaps this was due to her moon blood cramping her entire pelvic region. Her whole body felt so tired that in a few heartbeats, she drifted into a peaceful nap.

Arya was awoken to a sudden shift on her left side. When she slowly fluttered her drowsy eyes open, she noticed that Gendry was already pulling her closer to him. She felt one of his arms wrapping around her shoulders as he pulled her to his chest and his other arm wrapped around her waist, also covering her arm. She tried to squirm and move but she was too sleepy to argue with him.

“Just go back to sleep now, Arya.” She heard him gently whisper with his hypnotic voice.

Arya did as he bid and closed her eyes to welcome back her soulful slumber. It felt unusually right to be wrapped around his warmth.

It was really surprising.

He was indeed like a furnace and she doesn’t want him to ever let go.

She felt his chin resting on top of her head.

Finally, she gave in to nuzzling on his chest, allowing herself to bask in his wondrous scent and making herself more comfortable. He always smelled so good and entrancing.

“Sleep.” He whispered as his fingers carefully traced the side of her exposed arm, making her drift back to a glorious sleep.

When Arya opened her eyes again, she realized that she was still wrapped around Gendry’s arms. Before she decided to free herself from his tight hold, she suddenly felt the need to listen to the steady breathing on his chest where her head lay. He must have also fallen asleep.

She willed her mind to move away from him as far away as possible but her body was very stubborn. It has become a damn traitor the moment she came to know Gendry Baratheon.

It seemed to have a mind of its own.

As she finally resigned to leaning her head on his chest, she felt the play of his heart beating which all the more opened up her eyes to the realization of how real this moment was. She never had anyone else, much less another man do something like this. She was never used to this kind of affection yet she found it very comforting and relaxing.

She honestly didn’t want to let go.

She realized that she could get used to this kind of warmth. A content smile formed on her lips.

She made a large intake of air as she tried to savor his scent then she finally breathed out a content sigh.

What in Seven Hells was really happening to her? She hated the fact that she was slowly loving this kind of feeling.

Damn her.

She had to stop this before it gets too late. She’s not supposed to be like this. This isn’t her.

She bitterly closed her eyes as she sucked in some air and finally told herself to let go from his hold.
When she finally mustered the strength to pull herself away from him, Gendry also opened his eyes from his nap.

“Hey… are you feeling better now?” He asked sleepily, stifling a yawn as he sincerely looked at her, his arms still partially wrapped around her.

“I never said I wasn’t feeling well.” She told him sharply as she kept her guard up.

“You suddenly fell asleep. I noticed you wincing in pain. Is it because of the cramps from your moon blood?” He asked her.

“Maybe. They said this is what usually happens.” She replied.

“Yes, that usually happens. Do you want me to help you get back to your chambers so that you can take a rest?” He asked her again with concern.

Arya shook her head. “

“No…stay with me here please.” Came her sudden unbidden plea.

Clearing her throat, she tried to explain.

“I mean, I’ll be fine. I don’t want them to see me like this. If we could just stay here for a little longer…” She explained.

Smiling back at her good-naturedly, Gendry pulled her back to him, his huge arms engulfing her small frame tighter.

“Alright…” He told her in a soft whisper.

She could feel him inhaling her scent.

“If my lady wishes…I would gladly stay with you here…” Came his breathless retort.

With a small smile forming on her lips, she closed her eyes and found herself drifting back into a dreamless sleep in the arms of her strong blacksmith friend.

And her whole world felt so right.

Chapter End Notes

What was your favorite part so far? Thoughts?
Awakening

Chapter Summary

"Lost for you, I'm so lost for you... Oh, and you come crash... into me now... and I come into you..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 9: Awakening

Arya

Days after her moon-blood, Arya had been having frequent visits to the castle’s library to do further readings and research on the normal changes she would be expecting in her body after flowering. Apart from those, she has also taken her time finding other perfect means to conceal her secret without anyone else within the castle detecting.

She found that educating herself was the best way for her to understand those inevitable changes and what perfect way to feed her ignorance by reading all these interesting books stacked before her on the table, and it was not even like reading something banned this time. After all, asking her septa about these changes was already out of the picture so she had to settle for self-awareness and education through more books.

She dedicated a few hours every day in the library to read and was more than thankful to find it always empty especially since the King and his royal party were still in Winterfell. This left most of the people in the castle busier with additional tasks. The King’s visit also gave Arya the liberty to reduce her lady lessons to only a couple of days per week as she would always find walking with Gendry in the godswood or staying with him in the forge a very reasonable excuse.

In her immersion into the profoundest books about reproduction and womanhood in general, she discovered the marvel that is the woman’s body in many different ways. As she leafed through pages and pages of thick books about the anatomy of a woman’s reproductive parts and their specific functions, it was then that she had truly appreciated what it was like to be a woman in this society.

All the learnings she had acquired from reading those books only supported her strong belief of women being equals of men rather than being considered the second sex because of the power that their own woman parts could do in the process of reproduction. But along with her growing awareness of humanity came her growing desire to all the more stop her impending marriage.

Aside from discovering the wonders of the female anatomy, she faired in educating herself about what would usually happen when a man and a woman would lay together. She had gotten herself used to calling it ‘The Art of Fucking.’ Although she has never seen a man and a woman in the act of coitus, being the visual learner that she was, Arya could picture out how it would look like through...
her imagination using the images drawn in the books.

Perhaps it would be as good as how Theon would describe it every time she would hear him and Robb discuss the minute details about copulation, with Theon being the more experienced one considering his flair for the finest whores in the North.

Suddenly, a sense of healthy curiosity sprung in the depths of her fairly inquisitive mind.

*Is fucking really that good?*

After coursing through the vivid descriptions of her own anatomy, she did interesting readings about pregnancy in regards to how and when a woman gets pregnant and what basically happens during a woman’s gestation for nine months. It seemed impossible how a human so small could get bigger inside the womb with the mother nourishing the babe through a single cord connecting them. Arya found herself astounded.

Was that really how her Lady Mother brought them all into this world? By carrying them inside her uterus for nine whole months with the possibility of risking her own life for them? How selfless an act could that be?

Touching the part where Arya’s womb was located below her belly with her slightly fidgeting hand, she closed her eyes temporarily and tried to imagine herself carrying Gendry’s babe inside her body in which if all else fails, would actually happen in the near future.

Would Gendry be even happy that she was to carry his babe –the future heir to the Seven Kingdoms considering her utter hatred for their betrothal and impending marriage?

Would it really hurt the first time he would take her maidenhead and fuck her as he wants?

Arya’s mind paused for a moment as her hand stopped in the middle of her womb. Her eyes fluttered open as rage and fury engulfed her entirely.

She suddenly thought of King Robert Baratheon and his many, many whores. Gendry was still King Robert’s son and perhaps he may take after his father. Then again, maybe Gendry was different than his father.

*But what if Gendry actually turns out to be just like King Robert after all?*

Her sudden fury was now clouding her rational mind. Taking in a rich intake of air, she left her thoughts to ponder.

Would she even fully agree to all of this bullshit in the first place?

Would she give up her dreams of traveling the rest of the world only to settle down and have some prince fuck her with his babes?

That was what she was to all of them, was she not? Just a mere domestic animal to be traded off to breed babes to strengthen political alliances and lengthen powerful bloodlines.

She was a mere tool, a mere vessel.

*And I strongly refuse to become that kind of breeding machine for some powerful house.*

*I was meant to do something more.*

She stared blankly into oblivion as those dark thoughts slowly devoured her. The sudden rapid
hammering of her heart was audible to her as her mind was slowly poisoned with the worst-case scenarios she could possibly encounter with being arranged to marry someone out of her will.

Right in the middle of her silent reverie, she heard a knock on the huge, wooden door. It opened slowly and found herself utterly surprised to see Gendry.

“How did you know I was here?” Arya asked him, raising an eyebrow. “I thought you were out with the hunting party.”

“Nymeria is actually right outside this room, sleeping. That’s when I figured out that you’re here. And I didn’t feel like hunting with my father and your father and the rest of the male species today.” Came his stolid, close to sarcastic retort before he gingerly walked towards her table clad in his normal tunic and breeches.

He didn’t really look regal at all this time. He wasn’t even bringing his sword.

He just seemed very casual and truth be told, she liked him better in casual clothes instead of looking so princely.

When he was already a few meters closer to her, she immediately closed the thick book she has been reading.

“How about you. What are you doing here? Running away from your septa again?” It was his turn to ask her, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

Arya shot daggers with her glare.

“Just reading. And I wasn’t running from Septa Mordane. No…” She replied, now scrunching up her face at him.

With an eyebrow raised with indignation, she added, “Because I never did attend stupid lady lessons and needlework in the first place.” Her statement was obviously defensive but she delivered those words with the satisfaction of being able to sneak away undetected.

Gendry snorted at her in disbelief. He grabbed a wooden chair and took a seat beside her unceremoniously, slouching his broad, muscled back on the chair. It made the chair look very small compared to his towering height and muscular built.

Gendry looked sawfully tired and disconsolate despite the attractiveness of his scruffy raven hair and stubble growing on his jaw and chin that emphasized his facial features. At the back of her mind, she decided that she liked looking at Gendry rugged like that.

Leaning himself on the table lazily, with his large arms propped on the surface, he carefully read the title of the books she had stacked on the table. Then in a heartbeat, he burst into soft gales of mocking laughter.

“And here I thought you were reading your banned books again. Are you out of books to read already? And why these? Are you really that terrified of what might happen to you after your first moon blood?” He asked her curiously and at the same time teasing her.

His sullen mood suddenly lightened up. Arya elbowed his ribs brutally, making him yelp in pain.

“Ow!” He cried out, touching the painful part of his chest.

“Shut up! Are you ever so loud? Someone might hear us.” She hissed angrily.
Gendry drew his face in close proximity to hers.

“We’re alone. No one will hear us.” The way he whispered suggestively denoted a different innuendo.

Arya could definitely tell because there was something in the way he looked at her. But before she could fire back at his retort, he managed to speak again.

“Why are you so worried about your secret? You know I have sworn not to tell anyone.”

Releasing a heavy breath, she resigned.

“Fine! Anyway, to answer your prior question, I was just trying to educate myself, that’s all. I don’t want to go running to my septa asking her about all these things because the last time I did, she made sure to chastise me well. That old crone of a woman always says that I ask a lot of irrelevant, unfiltered questions, which I believe are actually beneficial to the whole of humanity.”

Gendry raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

“Educate yourself about what?” He asked, giving her a very curious look.

Arya looked at him and then to the books before her. She wallowed the invisible bitter lump on her throat.

“Just everything I need to know about womanhood… and sex –from the changes that’s going to happen to transform a girl to a woman, pregnancy… fucking… broken maidenheads... fucking… more fucking.” She trailed off, trying to sound casual even if she could feel the beginning of a blush.

Gendry could not help but laugh mischievously at her retort. Arya gave him a hard punch on his shoulder.

“Fucking bastard. Your mocking will get you nowhere.” She hissed albeit playfully.

Gendry pretended to be hurt by her sudden blows before he gave her a warm smile.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh at you that way. I meant no offense.” He apologized, raising his hands in mock surrender. “Educating yourself is really impressive, Arya, and I know that you are worried about this impending marriage. Although, if I were in your place, I wouldn’t worry too much at all. Remember what I told you? A King bows down to his Queen. So does a husband to his wife. So whatever you want, I’ll give it to you. Even if this would mean keeping yourself intact even after we are married.” He told her with sincerity in his eyes.

Arya looked at him in shock.

“Really? Anything? Even that?” She asked with disbelief.


Arya furrowed her brows further.

“And isn’t consummation the goal of a successful marriage?”

“According to the laws, yes. But I think that the notion of a successful marriage is subjective. Hypothetically, it depends upon the husband and wife. And I honestly don’t want to force you into doing something you never want to do, especially in terms of giving yourself to me during the bedding ceremony.” He explained.
There was a hint of a mischievous smirk on his face.

“Besides, where’s the fun in that? I mean, I don’t want to be the only one to enjoy the bedding ceremony. I want you to enjoy that, too.” He added, giving her a wink.

Arya was deemed speechless.

It took a few more seconds before she cleared her throat.

“Yes, maybe I could enjoy that, too. Could be fun, you know.” She said with mock acquiescence.

Gendry chuckled at her response but if he had any more comments about what she just said, he only kept it to himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

She was lost in thought for a few more seconds, biting her lip habitually. It was Gendry who broke her silent reverie.

“Really, Arya, you don’t have to stress yourself too much, okay? I won’t claim you unless you want to or unless you are ready, even if this means the non-consummation of our marriage.” There was assurance in his tone.

At least.

“I know. Thank you for that, Gendry.” Was all she settled for as a response.

Although she was content with gauging a reaction from him in regards to that matter, there was still some other things she needed to know… just another side of Gendry Baratheon that she wanted to unfold. So, out of nowhere, an idea flashed in her mind. This particular idea was an amalgamation of all the self-education from the books she read –of all things sexual, of men’s needs and sexual experiences.

It was time to test the waters.

After all, she was always good with that –mind games, inquisitions and social experiments.

“But you know, you can always hire someone else if you can’t fight the urge to fuck. I’ve read that men have more appetites than women even if I think that is just plain sexist.” She told him, adding a shrug. “You know, the double standards this society has constructed.”

Knowing this subject to be a part of the normal human process, she didn’t mind ever bringing it up. After all, there was really nothing refined about her words, nor her way of thinking. She has always been blunt and straightforward and she could use this to ask Gendry some questions out of plain curiosity.

Gendry looked at her, appalled.

“I’m not like my father, Arya. I don’t prescribe to fucking whores and I don’t hire nor pay someone else to fuck me.”

Arya cannot help but flush furtively despite her brazenness.

“I’m sorry. I meant…” She trailed off. “I mean, you can fuck other women, not necessarily whores, if you want to. That’s still part of your needs anyway. It’s a part of a human being’s needs in general.” She added.

However, in reality, the mere mention of Gendry with other girls would always unnerve her.
Gendry shook his head and looked at her seriously.

“Do you really think I would stoop down to that level of fucking other women when I am already married?” Gendry growled indignantly.

She was slowly hitting his nerve but she only shrugged with casual nonchalance.

She was definitely testing the waters now.

“I was only trying to help because you said you won’t claim me unless I’m ready to be fucked, but I will never ever consider myself ready because I never want to get married. And I don’t want to have any children…” She added, using some ridiculous logic her mind could fire. “And I thought…” Her words trailed off as her steely grey eyes carefully regarded him, observing his behavior.

She chewed at her bottom lip and bat her eyes to feign innocence.

“Thought what?” He asked, brooding over a sense of authority in his aura.

“I thought that you wanted to fuck women like most men, seeing that you’re a grown man now. And since I know I cannot give myself to you even if we get married, I thought you would want to fuck someone else to satisfy that need instead.” Came her statement as she continued to stare back into those beautiful blue eyes.

“Like I said, I’m not like my father who fucks anyone with a cunt, much less pay just to get a good fuck. And I respect the ethical dimensions of marriage.” His voice came out very sexy but raspy and serious –totally a different kind of Gendry. And she could see a dangerous glint in those eyes as he drew closer to her like a predator does to its prey. “I get to fuck without paying a single penny for it. You see, I like my women very wet and willing –I only fuck willing candidates and nothing more. Because when I fuck, I fuck hard and I want them to enjoy every single bit of me fucking them. And I don’t want them to think that they are just doing their job when they fuck me.”

Just his mere words sent shivers down her spine. Her core clenched at the sound of his voice. Those were only words but it’s like experiencing the first few flavors of how Gendry Baratheon fucks.

And he fucks hard.

Pure alpha-male.

Arya’s throat bobbed in a subtle way. Look at what she got herself into. Her mere curiosity of his sexual appetites awakened all her prurient desires for him. Turning into a newly-bloomed woman really does wonders as it also awakened her own sexual curiosity.

“Well… That’s good to know, you know… because you get to satisfy yourself and then them… or her…” Now she cannot even speak straight. What was supposed to be a healthy curiosity suddenly backfired.

Gendry narrowed his eyes on her suspiciously.

“What are you getting at, Stark?”

Shit. I’m busted.

She swallowed.

He drew closer and closer to her face.
“Did you get the answers you want?”

Silence.

“You think I don’t know what you’re trying to do here?”

*How can he possibly read my mind?*

After another second of silence, his lips formed a triumphant smirk. She suddenly wanted to punch that stupid smirk out of that face. But she had to keep her cool and act as if she was not guilty of trying to analyze him with her bat-shit crazy mind games.

She equaled his dangerous stare.

“Whatever do you mean, Baratheon?” She said with all the confidence she mustered. “I was just plainly curious. I want to feed my curiosity about fucking. I want to know the experiences you’ve had as well. Because you know, experience is the best teacher after all.”

“Well, fire away then. Ask me anything you want to know about my ‘fucking’ experiences.” He challenged her, never backing away from their close distance.

“When was your first time and to whom did you do it with?” She finally asked.

*Here we go.*

“A day before my fifteenth name day, with a highborn lady from Dorne.”

Arya continued to hold his gaze unflinchingly.

“Tell me more.” Was all she said.

“She came to visit King’s Landing with her family. She was sexy, enticing and independent. She was four years older than me, and she was definitely a lot more *experienced*, if you know what I mean. She saw the way I looked at her, because I truly admired her… and then before my name day, it happened. We fucked for the first time. From then on, we fucked and fucked until she went back to Dorne. With her vast experience, she taught me how to please a woman in many ways and fuck them hard.”

“Were there many others after her?”

“Yes. Many more after her.” His voice sounded intimidating but she tried her hardest not to get intimidated.

“When was the last time you fucked someone?”

“Days before my father told me the news of my betrothal to you, which was around two to three months ago.”

She gave an instinctive snort of disbelief at his response but deep inside, it fired a direct arrow at her heart, knowing too well that it has just been a few months since he was with another woman. No matter how confusing her feelings got her, she didn’t let him see how his reply affected her.

“Why stop when you know that you enjoy fucking so much?”

She was challenging him, pushing him to where his limits were.
“Because I am already intended to someone. Plain and simple.”

Arya raised an incredulous eyebrow.

“You don’t believe me, Stark?” He shot back with his knowing smirk.

Arya only shook her head with confidence.

“You think it was easy for me to stop feeding my carnal appetites? It was like going from this sizzling hot threesome with two willing women to zero. No fucking at all. But I know I had to. I ought to. Because I am not like my father."

She could detect honesty in his tone. But her skeptical mind got the best of her.

“Threesomes… you did that too?”

“Yes.”

Arya was now involuntarily rubbing her thighs because of her sudden overflow of lustful desires. Her pulsing center of need felt very wet and unluckily for her, she was yet to read how to remedy this need without having to submit herself to unwilling coitus. Not that she was totally unwilling. She was definitely trying the option to fuck but not yet now. Maybe if she could goad Gendry in the future without having to marry him or something.

But she needed to know more.

She needed to feel what it was like to be aroused sexually by Gendry Baratheon.

“There weren’t any full illustrations of that in books, so I can’t quite picture out how a threesome is done.” She stated, biting her lower lip.

This time, her eyebrows were hunched together because she really has no idea.

“Imagine this then.” He whispered, dipping his head lower so that it was now inches away from her ear. “Me lying on my back on the featherbed. One woman straddling on top of my cock, while she fucks it, while another one sits on my face while I lick her hot, wet cunt to climax. Or me fucking one woman while she licks the other woman’s cunt. There are many other ways and positions but that’s how you basically do a threesome, Stark. See the picture now?”

He moved away from her ear only to give her a piercing, lustful stare. Like her, he was refusing to give in to their unspoken mind game. He clearly does not want to lose.

Shit.

She was feeling wetter than she has ever been. Her breath has been labored the moment he told her the debauched details of his epic threesomes with willing women. She wanted to feel skeptical about it but her common sense told her that he was telling the truth.

“Did I answer all your questions, Arya?” He asked, emphasizing the way he said her name in a dark and sexy tone he had never used before.

Her skepticism got the better of her. She was using it as her defense mechanism.

“Yes, you did, Gendry.” She replied with an equally sultry voice to say his name. “But you see, a person can merely give answers, but not necessarily hold a certain truth to them, don’t you think?”
She doesn’t want to lose either.

But she noticed that Gendry’s sinister smirk only grew wider.

It spelled triumph on his end.

Seven Hells.

She just came to realize now that she was only feeding his ego with what she said.

“You’re calling me a liar now? Did you forget how I pinned you to the wall and kissed you senseless to the point of almost fucking you? Or do you want me to show you more of what I can possibly do to you right now, on that table where the only sound you’ll be shouting will be my name?”

Arya couldn’t help but release a silent gasp of pleasure from her lips.

He was literally fucking her with his words.

She just looked straight into his eyes, feigning indifference. She doesn’t know how long she could hold it before she starts to lunge at him and kiss him like a hungry animal.

Because that’s what she has been wanting to do ever since they started their verbal fucking.

Arya suddenly heard Gendry tsking while shaking his head.

“You seem to be doubting my abilities, Stark. I can definitely understand though. Because you’re a virgin. But then again, when I deflower virgins, I make sure that they will never ever forget their first time. Ever. And since you are betrothed to me, then, there’s no telling. The choice to be deflowered by me is completely yours, my lady.”

Gendry studied her reaction before he drew away from her face. He sat back comfortably in his chair with a very smug disposition and waited for her response because she was utterly speechless.

When she finally got something to shoot back at him, it was her turn to scoot closer to his seat.

“We may be betrothed but there’s still no telling if we actually get married, Baratheon. Don’t be too confident. Since I don’t intend to get married, then I guess there’s no deflowering that’s going to happen. Besides, I’ve been trying to find all the ways possible to stop this impending marriage. If I have to find a more suitable bride for you even to the ends of the world, then I will. Just so that this political alliance can end.”

Arya knew her words would likely sting Gendry one way or another. But she knew she had to save her face from defeat.

Because she was a proud person.

And she wanted to know how far Gendry Baratheon would go for her.

Gendry’s mocking snort can be heard all over the room.

“Well good luck in finding another suitable bride for me then. You might find yourself very surprised that you’re just wasting your time.” Came his matter-of-fact response with an underlying innuendo in his tone.

Arya raised an eyebrow with indignation.
“What’s that supposed to mean? Why would I be wasting my time?” He shook his head and crossed his arms before his chest.

“You’ll soon figure it out, Stark.” He said mysteriously.

“Stop giving me riddles that I hate solving, Baratheon.” She warned. “Tell. Me. Now.”

“You won’t understand right now… but you will, soon.” Came his response.

Arya finally huffed a defeated sigh.

“Have it your way then, Your Grace.”

“I will definitely be having it my way, my lady.”

They fell silent after their short banter. It was as if they have been doing physical exertion because they both looked very tired. Since their silence was growing more awkward each second, Arya had to intervene right away.

“Anyway, what really brought you here aside from mocking the shit out of me, Gendry?” She asked him, turning to face him seriously.

Gendry equaled her expression.

“I’m going back to King’s Landing next week. I thought you should know.” He told her, staring blankly at the pile of books on the table.

The dark, sultry, alpha-male Gendry was gone.

He certainly didn’t look very happy with this sudden news. Neither did Arya.

Just when they were about to get closer with each other…

She felt an unexpected pang of sadness the moment he told her he was going back to the capital. She tried to keep that feeling inside but the expression on her face betrayed her and eventually showed her apparent sadness over that matter. Her eyes were downcast as she tried to compose herself and contemplate on what was bound to happen.

She remained silent for a few good seconds until she lifted her eyes and closed them as she made a huge intake of air. When she released it into a deep sigh, she changed the expression on her face to make it seem like she was unaffected at the thought of him finally going back to King’s Landing.

She never thought that this day would come. What surprised her even more was the fact that she actually dreaded the day he would be leaving.

Arya flashed him a frigid smile and fixed her steely grey eyes on him.

“Well, that’s good. At least we won’t have to pretend anymore that we are enjoying our betrothal when in fact we both know too well that this is all just a bloody farce.” She told him bitterly and at the same time regretting she had ever said those words to him when all he did was be kind to her.

Gendry held her gaze stolidly, even surpassing the coldness from her eyes.

“Yes, I guess you are right.” There was the same bitterness in his tone. “This. Us. It’s all a bloody
mummer’s farce, isn’t it?”

The library was filled with deafening silence again.

A few heartbeats later, Arya motioned to stand up from her chair by pushing it backwards with her feet, losing all the will carry on with reading her books.

“Where are you going?” Gendry asked her.

Arya stopped in her tracks as she arched an eyebrow at him.

“Are you finished with your books? I was only going to stay here to give you the news and I’ll be off again. You can go back to your readings now.” He said in an icy tone before finally standing up from his seat.

The moment he stood up, she wanted to do the same, but she found herself glued to her seat for no apparent reason at all. Arya desperately wanted to grab his hand, take back what she said and make him stay but she found the words stuck in her throat.

He was already pacing towards the door when she finally said, “Wait!”

She closed her eyes for a second and chastised herself.

Shit, Arya. Get a hold of yourself.

Once her eyes opened, she bit her lip to keep herself from saying anything more. Gendry turned to look at her, arching his brow.

“Yes, what is it, my lady?” The formality in his tone seemed like he was talking to a stranger.

She found her brain empty for words so she resorted to shaking her head.

“By your leave, my lady, I should get going now. I still need to tend to some unfinished steel back at the forge.” He told her.

Arya gave him a final nod.

And Gendry Baratheon was gone from her sight.

*****

Arya has been having trouble sleeping at night after Gendry told her he will be coming back to King’s Landing the following week. It has also been four days since their conversation in the library and four days since she started avoiding him, choosing to stay inside her bedchambers or sneaking out into the First Keep by herself.

It was a good thing that she hasn’t seen him during those days. She heard he has been busy with council meetings here and there, in and outside of Winterfell. At least there was an apparent excuse for them not to be seen together because she hated having to explain to everyone why they stopped talking with each other. Maybe it was better that way so that they won’t have to endure dramatic goodbyes before he left for King’s Landing.
He hasn’t given any effort of trying to talk to her after she started avoiding him. But it wasn’t like she was hoping that he would still talk to her after what she said in the library.

Maybe it was for the better that he will be going back to King’s Landing and get this over with. She was right all along; this was all a bloody farce to feed the satisfaction of their families. He didn’t also deny it either. So perhaps they were both right. Besides, Gendry could go back all his girls. He could pretty much ring all the stupid girls’ bells back there without her even caring. He is after all, very efficiently experienced.

Her thoughts suddenly drifted to the moment Gendry told her the history of his colorful fucking frenzy. Good for him then even if the thought made her blood boil because all she could think of was how he managed to do it with them. She suddenly wanted to know what it would feel like if he does it with her… anywhere… in all means possible.

*Seven bloody Hells.*

Why was she even thinking of Gendry fucking her like an animal?

A blush betrayed on her cheeks as she pictured out a mental image of him naked with her spread on the table. In the library.

Screaming out his name.

*Gods.*

Arya shut her eyes closed in the hope of finding sleep and more importantly, shunning those sudden unbidden lecherous thoughts away. But she knew too well that it was impossible as she could no longer find the comforts of slumber inside her chambers so she rose up to a sitting position and propped her arms on her knees.

Raking her already mussed up hair, she tried to steady the fast beating of her heart.

This was all Gendry fucking Baratheon’s fault for having this kind of effect on her. She doesn’t do this kind of shit, suddenly imagining him without a shirt, pinning her back to the wall just like the first time he did when he gave her her first kiss, only this time he wasn’t only kissing her.

Arya groaned in frustration at the dark lustful thoughts lingering inside her head.

Pulling her sheets away from herself and standing up from her bed, she stormed to her wooden chest, grabbed a blue satin robe and hastily put it on. She was used to wearing nightclothes without wearing smallclothes underneath it so the cold draft of the breaking dawn did not bother her. She didn’t also trouble herself with fixing her long, wavy hair in a bun.

She walked back to her featherbed and strapped a black lace on her right thigh before she inserted her small silver dagger on it. This was a habit she used to do when she would sneak out in early dawn for a walk in the godswood.

After everything was set, she wore her brown boots and carefully walked towards her door. Nymeria must have sensed her movements when she tried to unlock her door because her direwolf was now padding along behind her as she went out of her bedchambers.

She badly wanted to take a walk outside to get rid of all those unbidden thoughts of Gendry. She stopped intentionally by the kitchens so that she can grab some bread to eat along the way. Her stomach has not stopped from growling angrily from neglecting to eat a proper meal last night.
When she was out of the castle, she carefully walked along the castle walls to conceal herself from any guard on lookout while clutching to her loaf of bread wrapped with a clean piece of starch cloth.

As she continued to walk along the castle grounds, she heard the familiar sound of ringing steel somewhere in the direction of the forge. She turned her head towards the smithy and saw that the fires were lit.

It seemed occupied.

But who could be hammering steel inside the forge at this time of the day? The sun hasn’t even risen up yet and usually their blacksmith, Mikken would come to the forge by sunrise.

Instead of heading straight for the godwoods, Arya’s curiosity got the better of her as her feet led her directly to the forge. Nymeria was gingerly following her suit. As she stood at the doorstep of the open forge, she could not believe what her eyes were seeing.

Inside the forge was Gendry hammering some steel, completely half-naked, sleek and covered in sweat, wearing only his breeches and boots, with his back facing her.

She could practically see the play of his muscles on his broad shoulders and back; and the way each crevice and bulk was perfectly moving with his well-toned body.

Her breath hitched at the sight of the surprising marvel that is Gendry’s perfect, naked back.

Along with the hammering of the steel was her heart pounding to no end to the point that it was about to explode on her chest. She unconsciously bit the lower part of her lip.

She could not stop looking at him.

The effect of Gendry Baratheon was slowly consuming her –the hammering of her heart and that uncontrollable urge to lunge into him and run her hands all over that breathtaking, delectable body of his.

Arya suddenly regretted passing by the forge to feed her curiosity. He was the main reason why she was trying to get into the godswood to clear her mind and here he was distracting her again, luring her again into his flame.

With the up and down movements of his right arm while pounding the steel with his hammer, she suddenly imagined how those strong arms would grip her closer to him and how his strength could rip out what’s left of her sheer clothing in an instant the same way that his arms would support her while he was pinning her into the very wall right beside her and ram himself inside her senselessly.

Fuck.

Yes, fuck. Because she was admittedly imagining being fucked senseless by Gendry and she suddenly couldn’t wait for the moment when he would come to claim her prized maidenhead and rip her out of her innocence and corrupt her mind with filthy words and fuck her like it was the end of the world.

Fuck. Just fuck.

Arya’s breath hitched all the more as she felt the familiar slicking wetness trickle in the center of her thighs just at the thought of Gendry making her moan and scream. She knew she was aroused because she was already trying to pull her thighs together for that unknown need for release but she has no idea how she could do it by herself because all she could think of was Gendry working his
way on her and making her achieve her release with his lips, teeth, hands and tongue… and something else harder.

And the fact that he was very experienced on this aspect made her all the more aroused.

She gripped on the doorjamb of the smithy to control herself. Her nails were now scratching, digging in to the wooden jamb just so that she could still have a grip of reality instead of losing herself in the process of fantasizing him fucking her.

This wasn’t her at all.

The fact that she hated their betrothal and the idea of marriage wasn’t even helping. No, in fact, just the sight and the scent of him near her awakened all her prurient fantasies. Would this be the perfect time to believe in those nonexistent gods? Because surely she would need a lot of divine intervention right now from controlling her impulses of devouring him like a hungry animal.

She noticed that he stopped hammering when he put his hammer down and carefully picked up the small steel he was holding in his hand. He moved to the bucket on the table beside him and soaked the steel into the water, the metal sizzling at the contact.

Arya swallowed the lump on her throat as she continued to observe him furtively. There was definitely something about the way his bare back glowed along the embers inside the forge that made her lured into his spell and she wondered if this was the effect he has on all those girls back in King’s Landing –where he will be coming back in a few days’ time.

The thought agitated her, because there was definitely no turning back after being lured to his flame —

“Anything I can help you with, my lady?” Came Gendry’s deep and raspy voice.

Arya almost jumped in fright the moment he spoke which meant that he knew all along that she was watching him the whole time. Before she could even respond, he turned his back away from her so that he was now facing her with that usual stolid look on his dirty, filthy, handsome, attractive face.

Seven hells.

She threw a whole bunch of internal expletives when she met his eyes, his face and the rest of his bare chest, all on clear view. She swore she could stay this way for eternity and drink in to the sight of him. Never has she seen in her entire life how slick sweat could cling to a body like a second skin. And it looked so beautiful on Gendry. The muscles on his back were spectacular but the ones on his front was even more dashing, it was almost blinding.

He looked so fit, so toned, so… everything. And there was definitely something about the soot stains marking some parts of his perfect body, even on his face that turned her on all the more. She wanted to run her fingers along the crevices of his chest and wipe them away with her fingers… and perhaps with her tongue…

And then there were those perfect blue eyes gazing at her, staring at her, piercing her. She has never seen such perfect contrast of the black from his hair and the blue from those eyes. And those eyes were only for her. She could tell that he was also drinking in the sight of her.

Arya remained speechless, her tongue obviously caught in her stupid throat.

“You know you could go on staring until the sun is up, I really wouldn’t mind.” He suddenly said, breaking her state of trance.
She blinked back twice to bring her back to here and now and glared at him, her cheeks turning a deeper shade of red.

“I wasn’t staring!” She spat indignantly, always the best at her denials.

Gendry smirked dangerously as his attractive blue eyes continued to linger on her steely grey ones.

“I could practically hear you breathing earlier that’s why I knew you’ve been watching me. Can’t you be more discreet?” He continued to tease her with that stupid grin on his face.

“Just shut up, okay?” Arya rolled her eyes before she started walking inside the forge, stomping her feet angrily.

She settled to sit on top of the wooden table so that she could give a few feet distance away from him to save that sliver of morality left in her. Pulling herself away from his gaze, she tried to find another distraction so that she won’t be lured back into his spell.

She finally resorted to opening the starch cloth on her lap to reveal the food she has stolen from their kitchens. Perhaps it was best to feed her hunger with real actual food. Breaking the loaf in two, she started getting a small piece from the other half and stuffed it inside her mouth. At least she could make chewing a good diversion rather than ogle at him the whole time with the threat of involuntarily drooling right before his very eyes.

She heard him give a furtive mocking laugh at her reaction as he slowly walked closer towards the table where she was sitting. Just when she thought that her heart was about to stabilize given her uncompromised position, she felt it racing back to overdrive as he drew closer and closer to her without taking his hungry eyes away from her grey ones.

Arya’s eyes widened as he inched his way to her like a wolf, all in his graceful glory, his body still slick with sweat and gleaming under the light of the fire. He leaned closer as each of his hands grasped the edge of the wooden. She felt stationary in between where his arms were rested. He kept that dangerous look on his face coupled with a knowing smirk on his lips as he continued to tease her with his stare.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” He told her. It wasn’t even a statement.

She made a subtle gulp.

“Care to tell me why?” He asked.

“I wasn’t avoiding you.” A lie.

“We both know that’s bullshit.” He stated, turning serious.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Was her only statement.

“Fine.” He hissed before huffing a sigh of relief. But his eyes still did not leave her. He was still looking at her intently. Studying her.

In the hope of stabilizing back the fast beating of her stupid heart, Arya’s eyes traveled away from his face only to be drawn to the body of muscles which was now at a closer proximity to her. She took a few seconds to study the rhythmic pulsations on his neck down to the frame of his broad shoulders and well-formed chest. She could not help but get lost in the way his sweat trickled along the fissures of his pecs down to his abdomen, then a little further down to his waist only for her eyes to be led to what was underneath his breeches.
She took a rich intake of air and she could feel his scent diffusing into her nostrils, engulfing her with the smell of soot, sweat and something more. It was that familiar, manly scent of his that made her insides go into rampage. Then she made a huge gulp before her eyes continued to stare at what was hidden behind those breeches and she could definitely tell that he was hard, very hard for her.

She could feel her throat go dry all of a sudden, all the hunger she was feeling before was gone. Her hand clutched at her bread a little too tightly as she fought her impulse of clawing her fingers at his damn appealing body or grasping at the hardness of his –

“Arya…” Gendry’s raspy voice woke her up from her stupor.

She brought her eyes back to his confident gaze and managed to utter a few words in response, “What is it?” She spat with a broken voice. She wasn’t sure if she was irritated because he was really stupid or because he has broken her trance-like state of getting lost into the sight of his body, seeing him half-naked for the first time. She heard Gendry chuckling.

“I’m quite hungry, you see. Can you give me some of that bread?” He asked her, this time grinning impishly and obviously caught between intimidating her and teasing the shit out of her.

Arya scowled at him murderously before she handed him the bread without further hesitation just to get it over with. But he didn’t seem to move a muscle as he was still slightly leaning closely to her.

“I’m filthy all over, including my hands.” He told her calmly, “Can you feed me with your hands instead?” Came his preposterous request, his lips now curling into a very sinister smirk.

She blushed for a few heartbeats until she finally did as he bid.

Pulling a small piece of bread, she raised her hand near his lips to start feeding him. Gendry slowly opened his mouth as he leaned down slightly to capture the small piece of bread from her fingers with his lips. His ice blue eyes were still intently looking at her, leering her. As he started chewing the bread he was eating, he gave her a delighted smile.

“Thanks.” He said to her good-naturedly.

Arya only rolled her eyes and made an exasperated sigh.

The silence was broken when he began to speak again.

“You look different.” He remarked after swallowing the bread he was chewing in his mouth, studying her face then the clothes she was wearing.

“I look like a mangy old widowed lady.” She spat sardonically.

Gendry only drew his face closer to her neck as he started sniffing at her.

“No, you don’t.” He protested before he carefully traced the tip of his nose along the smoothness of her neck which was furtively pulsating with desire for him.

She was stupid enough to be having this kind of stupid reaction again at his touch. He only continued sniffing at one side of her neck in which she made an instinctive tilt on the other side to give more room for him and his nose. She bit her lip at the minimal sensation of his stubble tickling her neck.

“You even have that same enticing scent on you.” He whispered suggestively which made her breath hitch all the more.
His voice only made her grow weaker to resist him.

“You look like the most tempestuous she-wolf in the North right now. All-consuming, all-powerful…” Gendry whispered.

Arya released the breath she has been holding, making a short whimper at the sound of his voice. Gendry came to face her once more, still holding that confident aura in his face.

Before she could give in to the play of his words and the way his eyes were stripping her naked, she tore another bigger piece of bread and held her fingers back up to the side of his lips.

“Eat.” She commanded him with a cold voice, feigning indifference.

The moment she moved her fingers closer to his lips was the same moment he opened his mouth to eat the bread she was offering. Her finger accidentally brushed the insides of his mouth in the process of feeding him. Right before Arya could pull away her finger from his mouth, he captured her hand with his bigger, stronger hand to steady her and with that, Gendry slowly started sucking her finger and flicking at the tip suggestively while looking at her the whole time.

Arya found herself speechless and frozen in her state but she also didn’t want to pull away from him. It felt so wet, so warm, so good that she could already feel the center of her thighs dripping with need. She bit her lip before releasing an involuntary moan at the sensation of his tongue flicking her fingertip.

“Gendry…” Came her soft whimper. Her control was slowly slipping away and that internal longing for him began to flood her rational thinking.

Chapter End Notes

Tell me how you want the next few chapters to go. Perhaps I could do some proofreading and add some more.

But I'm focusing on finishing We Share The Same Skies first.

Just tell me your thoughts. They are highly appreciated.

Grazie!
Chapter 10: Kindling

Gendry

- It now dawned on Gendry Baratheon how much he wanted to fuck Arya Stark in every means possible from the moment he laid eyes on her to the moment he saw her standing at the door to the smithy, her grey eyes drinking at the sight of him.

There.

He finally admitted to himself that this new kind of unexplainable substance called Arya was slowly driving him to addiction. And he cannot find it in himself to stop.

He wanted more.

He wanted more of her with every minute of his existence and with every breath he could take. Gods, she was infuriatingly irresistible and yet very impossible. But either way, he wanted to take her then and there.

The way her body formed underneath that thin nightgown of hers awakened all his prurient desires and fantasies, imagining her to be writhing and moaning underneath his skin as he was pounding inside of her tightness. The almost transparent fabric of her nightclothes gleamed with the silhouette of her most feminine form and he could tell that she was not wearing anything underneath. His breathing ceased that very instant and it was as if the world had stopped spinning.

Time stood still for both of them as they continued to study each other. His throat was suddenly parched so he found the need to swallow a thick lump before breathing out the air he has been holding. With the way she looked right now, all entrancing and almighty, Gendry wanted to fuck her inside the forge and make her scream in pleasure. He wanted to explore all kinds of intimacies with her right that moment and he wanted to taste every bit of her.

When she walked inside the forge to sit on the wooden table, he could no longer control his thoughts and even his feet began to trod towards her direction on their own accord. His imagination brought him to pushing her further into the table to spread her legs and take her. Just the sight of her in her barely-there dress and sultry unruly hair was enough to make him grow harder every second. His cock was already tenting in his breeches and he hoped to the Seven Gods that Arya hadn’t noticed the way his cock reacted to her enthralling presence.

But when he saw her bite her lip at the sight of him and perhaps maybe after noticing the growing hardness of his cock, Gendry could not help but tease her even more. His hopes of provoking her to act on her impulse of devouring him whole were at its highest. So he found himself eating the bread from her fingers one moment and the next minute he was already enjoying sucking her finger with need, sending a direct message to her that he wanted her so bad.

He heard her whimper at his actions and when he finally heard his name being uttered by her most heavenly mouth, he lost it. He pulled her hand away from his mouth and in the next moment,
all he could remember was Arya capturing his face with her soft little hands, shifting forward to grasp all of him to her. Her mouth was finally on his, devouring him hungrily with her eyes closed as she began to fervently take all of his lips. There was nothing gentle about being pulled down to meet her kiss from where he was standing tall before her. Their lips met with unrelenting force, each of them unyielding to the other, striving for dominance until he finally gave in when he heard her moaning under his lips. Her tongue was dancing triumphantly inside his mouth as he allowed her to drink her fill of him.

Gendry found himself grasping the back of her neck with one hand with all of his force, never wanting to pull away from their impassioned kiss while his other hand was slowly sliding up on one side of her thigh, hiking up the skirts of her nightclothes and feeling the softness of her porcelain skin. His touch made her spread her legs instinctively to make way for more of him and when his hand reached the plump of her butt, it was then that he confirmed that she was not really wearing any smallclothes underneath her nightgown. It was too glorious to stop so he continued to caress her carefully, soiling her skin with soot in the process. Arya didn't seem to mind getting herself grimy with the soot on his hands because she continued to kiss him relentlessly even at the feel of his hand on her thigh.

On the contrary, Arya’s hands desperately clutched his shoulder down to his sweaty chest. It was as if the way she was touching him indicated how much she loved having his filthy blacksmith hands smudging her clothes and her body. He could feel her fingers clawing at the muscles on his bare chest, obviously trying to savor every inch of him perhaps at the new discovery of this burst of emotions building from within.

He loved this wild side of Arya. All-consuming, fiery and brazen. It was amazing how much power she had over him to make him down on his knees for her, at her mercy and disposal. That was how powerful she was to him and he would be willing to do anything she would wish right now because Arya Stark has bewitched him entirely, both body and soul.

As she slightly pulled away from the intensity of their kiss for some air, he didn’t waste his time in taking pleasure at licking and sucking the pulse points on her sensitive neck, making her moan breathlessly again at the feel of his lips and growing stubble tickling her. He made sure to savor the scent from her neck and her hair diffusing in his nostrils as if he was slowly making an imprint of it in his mind for he knew that in a few days’ time, all of this will be but a sheer memory when he will be back in the stinking hellhole that is King’s Landing.

He took a moment to look at her and read the expression on her face and all he could see was her grey eyes darkening with pure lust for him. Her lips were beautifully swollen and parted and her cheeks were flushed with the most beautiful tinge of pink. Inching his way back closer to her for another dose of their intense kiss, he closed his eyes as he caught the warmth of her sweet breath. And just when his lips were finally about to get in contact with hers once again, he heard heavy footsteps coming their way to the forge which made them jump away from each other as fast as they could.

He made a mental curse as he reluctantly pulled away from his betrothed. Arya on the other hand stood up abruptly to fix herself before training her eyes back to where the sound was coming from.

“Your Grace.” One of the Kingsguards, Ser Arys Oakheart, greeted him in his usual calm and stolid demeanor. “The King and the rest of the hunting party has arrived and he demands a council meeting immediately at the Great Hall and your presence is needed.” Ser Arys informed him with haste.
Worry was evidently etched on the Kingsguard’s face and Gendry knew right that instant that something was wrong. He knew all his Kingsguards too well to miss anything from their facial expressions. Gendry need not ask what it was for Ser Arys immediately filled in the gaps.

“Northern rebels from the Dreadfort, Your Grace. The Bolton bastard has killed a dozen of your father’s men during a skirmish on the way back to Winterfell.” Came Ser Arys’ explanation.

He noticed how the Kingsguard was eyeing Arya with concern. Gendry’s eyes widened in shock and he could swear that he heard Arya make a silent gasp. He shared the same look as Ser Arys as he darted his eyes at his betrothed.

“Is my father and the Lord Hand alright, Ser Arys?” He felt the need to ask but still kept his gaze fixed at Arya, who was still in lost in thought as she was trying to figure out what was happening.

Gendry noticed Ser Arys nodding his head.

“They were not harmed, Your Grace.” The loyal Kingsguard replied.

“We need to get to the Great Hall as soon as possible. This is a very urgent matter.” He added.

“Northern rebels? The Boltons, you mean?” Arya suddenly interjected curiously, arching an eyebrow as she turned her gaze at him.

Gendry looked at Arya intently. She was looking at Ser Arys and then back at him, her eyes pleading for more explanation. Then as if by instinct, he cupped one side of her cheek, his hand reaching the back of her neck and looked at her intently.

“I’ll explain it to you later, Arya. For now, I need to get to my Father immediately. Go back to your chambers and keep yourself safe. I know you can well take care of yourself but I’ll have Ser Arys accompany you to your chambers. Winterfell may not yet be safe until we are sure that everything else is cleared. Just make sure that Nymeria is with you at all times.” He told her worriedly.

Arya held a sharp, unfaltering stare at him.

“I am not scared of them, Gendry. I can fight if needed.” She said to him.

He breathed out a heavy sigh of defeat.

“I know, Arya. But for now, we need to make sure—“

“I can walk back to my chambers by myself, and if it makes you better, I will have Nymeria by my side all the time.” She assured him.

Then she faced Ser Arys with a stern face but if anything, she was still holding that kind of respect she has for loyal soldiers and knights.

“You can accompany your prince back to the Great Hall, Ser. There is no need to take me to my chambers. I know Winterfell more than anyone else.” She told them with brooding authority, her chin held up like the lady she was born to be.

Before motioning to walk back to where he hung his shirt and before pulling away from Arya, Gendry slowly bent down towards her direction and planted a soft, chaste kiss on her forehead. She blinked back in surprise and he could see her cheeks turning crimson at his sudden action. She found herself speechless and shocked.
“I’ll see you later, Arya. I will tell you everything you need to know. For now I have to get to the council meeting.” He said to her. She only resorted to nodding her head in understanding before finally pulling away from his hold.

They went out of the forge together and parted ways before reaching the main Winterfell castle.

**Arya**

- As she got inside her bedchambers, she was surprised to find her tub filled with warm water prepared by her bedmaids when she had gone out. Without further preamble, she paced towards the tub and removed her robe at the same time. She stopped when she suddenly found her reflection in the looking glass.

She was stunned by what she saw.

One side of her nightclothes was stained with soot from where Gendry was touching her and upon closer inspection, the other side of her neck was also filthy with soot-stains. The cleaner side of her neck on the other hand has a small, red and swollen spot from where Gendry’s lips were ravaging her. She bit her lip at the sudden surge of the memories that happened in the forge earlier that morning where she completely lost her control after she pulled him for a kiss. Her heart skipped a beat.

Shaking away thoughts from their passionate and most torrid kiss, she carefully lifted her hands as she removed all the articles of clothing from her body, leaving her naked before her reflection. And there she saw more of the salacious yet beautiful filth brought forth by Gendry’s hand as he carefully grazed it along her thigh.

It sent a shot of need all throughout her body, particularly in the center of her thighs. She carefully placed her left hand on the water to wash off any dirt from her fingers and after swallowing the lump of her throat, she slowly and carefully trailed her finger from her belly down to the slit between her thighs and found herself very, very wet. It was so slick that she could feel her center dripping. Was this really the effect she would get every time Gendry does those things to her? It felt so… enthraling, bewitching and inviting.

She took a huge amount of air to steady her raging impulses before she circled her fingers along the spot where her need was the greatest. It felt so good that she felt herself eliciting a soft moan. She closed her eyes temporarily as she continued doing those strokes. There was definitely something building internally but she still could not put it together.

Before she could lose herself in the process, she opened her eyes to here and now and pulled her fingers away from her center of need.

Finally, she dipped herself in the inviting warmth of her tub.

It took more than half an hour for Arya to stay soaked in the water with her back relaxing on the other end of the tub. Her eyes remained closed, as if it could help wash away every thought of him out of her mind. She knew that she had been submerged in the water longer than what was
necessary but she didn’t really mind at all even if the temperature of the lukewarm water was now dropping. She had specifically ordered her bedmaids not to bother her while taking a bath and she was glad enough to find them obliging to her orders without question.

When her eyes fluttered open, all her musings came coursing through her mind but this time it drifted to the sudden news she heard from Ser Arys about the Northern rebels killing a dozen of the Baratheon guards. Although she has been aware of the existence of these rebels in the Northern part of Westeros, still she found herself a bit baffled as to their main purpose of attacking King Robert’s men.

According to what her father told them before, the stupid Bolton bastard has been trying to win over some minor conquests in the North by stealing Northern lands with force for the expansion of House Bolton. His conquests were always with a purpose, mostly inclined to taking hold of a large portion of the North. She has even heard the worst stories about what he does to the women he takes and Arya was well aware of how the Bolton bastard tortures them in the most unimaginable and excruciating means possible. Just the thought made her entire naked body shiver with goose prickles added to the dropping temperature of the water inside her tub.

She has seen the Bolton bastard a few times many long years ago when she was still younger and once when her growth spurt started. He was only a few years older than her and from the moment she saw him, Arya could sense that no good will ever come from him. He was evil personified.

She had made it a strenuous task to avoid him and his stares altogether even before, back when the Boltons used to visit Winterfell prior to the rebellion breaking out. It wasn’t like she feared him at all, but she was smart enough to keep herself away from his line of vision because it always seemed like he was undressing her with his eyes.

At some point Arya was glad that her father finally cut ties with House Bolton after they refused to stop their medieval ways of torturing men through flaying. Her Father never tolerated that kind of practice and deemed it cruel and inhumane but House Bolton was adamant with their stand of upholding what their house banner meant. After the relations of the Boltons and the Starks turned sour, that’s when the Freys and the Lannisters began supporting their rebellion. The Boltons always wanted to further their lands and they did it by force which of course angered her father, being the responsible and honorable Warden of the North that he is.

All the Northerners know that House Bolton has been elusive and dormant all these years. But what confused Arya the most was why the Bolton bastard was suddenly becoming very aggressive this time after years of silence. He has even gone so far as killing men who were basically Southerners. It was as if he was after something or perhaps someone of great importance.

Somewhere at the back of her mind, she couldn’t also put together the way Gendry and Ser Arys were looking at her as if she was a very fragile thing, a delicate flower, when she has made it her mission to establish herself as an independent, spirited Northern girl who doesn’t need protection from any man. But now, they all had concerns etched on their faces. If only they would tell her all about what’s been going on, or better yet, include her in the council meetings with the King. After all, she was still a daughter of Winterfell and it was her right to know all that has been going on in the castle. Then again, something was definitely off and she needed to find her answers quick.

And then there was Gendry inside her thoughts again.

At the forge. Early that morning.
Half-naked in all his glory.

And there she was suddenly empowered by a state of frenzy as she kissed him mercilessly as if she was very hungry for his lips. Covering her face with her palms in shame as her body was still soaked in the water, she heaved out a heavy sigh. Her body was indeed a damn traitor. That has been proven and tested at the forge that morning for she could no longer control herself from kissing him.

**Him.** Of all the boys there existed in the Seven Kingdoms.

But then again, he was the only boy she knew who existed aside from her brothers, and more importantly, he was her friend.

Her only friend right now. And she found it hard to believe why she was suddenly kissing him, or having those lecherous thoughts about him when she doesn’t even want to marry him. She never wanted to marry nor become a princess. But why was she acting like he was the only thing that mattered to her life that morning? That if she could not get hold of those lips, she would surely find herself completely enraged by the depravation of her lustful needs.

Before she could cave in to more of those self-loathing thoughts about her being unexpectedly very impulsive towards her betrothed, she saw a sudden movement of shadow just on the small space at the bottom of her door and before she knew it, there was a piece of paper being slipped inside her chambers.

Standing up on the tub without ardent grace, she carefully but swiftly paced towards her door to at least catch a glimpse of the person who had slipped the paper inside her room but right before she was about to open her huge wooden door, the shadow was gone. Still completely wet and utterly bare-naked as her name-day, she picked up the paper and studied it.

She furrowed her eyebrows as she inspected every inch of it and noted that it was a folded letter sealed with a red wax. Upon closer inspection, she noticed that the seal imprinted was that of a bull’s. Without any preamble, she opened the letter and began to read the writings.

**A,**

*Library. Midnight. We have private matters to discuss.*

**-G**

There was no doubt that the letter came from Gendry. For who else could have the seal of the bull but no other than The Bull himself? Perhaps this was his ‘secret’ seal if he wishes to send letters to someone in private in a rather informal way.

Or mayhaps this was the seal he uses for when he wants to send a secret letter to one of his girls back in King’s Landing. The thought suddenly unnerved her. No, she should not think that way. Why would she even care if her stupid betrothed has some other girls back in the capital? It’s not like it mattered to her at all for she has no intentions of actually ever marrying him in the future. If necessary, she will make sure to break their engagement the soonest possible time.
Focusing on the way the letter was written came as a temporary diversion to her sudden growing paranoia. It came as a shock to her that even his handwriting was very neat and simple, and pretty much very legible compared to hers which has always been a disaster considering her unusual dexterity. The manner in which the letter was written and delivered told her more about what Prince Gendry Baratheon was made of.

Simple. No nonsense. Straight to the point. Authoritative.

*Alluring*… *Attractive* and… *breathtaking*.

Her insides screamed as she felt the warm pooling of blood manifesting in her cheeks.

Rolling her eyes at her sheer Sansa-like behavior and holding up her breath only to release it, she folded back the paper and stuffed it inside her wooden bedside drawer just right next to her wooden sewing box. If he wants to speak with her in private by midnight, then so be it. But she will never ever bring up the subject about why she was suddenly kissing him at the forge. If that’s what he wanted to goad out of her, then he will need to try his hardest because Arya Stark will never ever yield nor give him the satisfaction of knowing her reasons. Because if truth be told, she also does not have the answers she needed herself.

She wiped her body dry from the remaining droplets of water dripping down her thighs and limbs and instead of wearing her casual tunic and breeches to head off outside to start a brand new day, she opted for a new set of nightclothes. After she was done putting on her clothes, she threw herself on her featherbed with her arms splayed across. Closing her eyes and adjusting her position to lie on her side, she breathed in the fresh morning air and muttered the words, “Goodnight, Nymeria” to her direwolf who was quietly lying on her spot on the other side of her chambers.

The rest of Winterfell was up and about that morning but as for Arya, it was time for her to drift off into her much-awaited slumber. In a few seconds, she finally fell asleep in the comforts of her sheets and in the fact of knowing that she was able to have enough of Gendry to fill her dreams with nothing but perfect undying bliss.
Arya stayed inside her chambers for the rest of the day even after waking up in the afternoon from a long, glorious sleep. Finding an excuse to skip the remaining hours of her stupid lady lessons with Septa Mordane and the rest of the ladies in Winterfell, she told her bedmaids that she was having a headache and that it would do well for her to stay inside her chambers and have her meals brought to her. Instead of joining the rest of her family in the Great Hall, she found that she didn’t want to talk with anyone that day particularly because she has been left out again with the actual news of what just transpired with the Bolton bastard and King Robert’s guards.

Her refusal to get out of the comforts of her chambers was more like pushing her hopes of ever knowing the truth behind the sudden attack to extinction. Truth be told, Arya was not really surprised to find herself being left out again on matters within Winterfell, including the part where she was kept in the dark for a very long time before being told of her betrothal to the King’s son. That was basically her life in a nutshell – as if they all did not trust her enough to make decisions for herself maybe because of how she would react to it in unusual violent means.

Propping her elbow on her featherbed and straining her neck forwards to look at the night sky, she knew that it was already almost close to midnight. And midnight meant going to the library to speak with Gendry.

Great.

After glaring at the thought of having a word with the prince of Westeros, her eyes traveled around her bedchambers and suddenly found it impressive considering the cozy glow of the fire being lit in her fireplace. Her room suddenly felt more interesting than anywhere else in Winterfell. At the recollection of the prior events that evening, she remembered waking up to her growling stomach and eating the dinner brought to her room before she drifted back to another hour or two of sleep. So here she was, very awake and alive in the middle of the night.

She rose to a sitting position on her featherbed and stretched out her arms while yawning. Nymeria might have sensed her stirring on the featherbed because her direwolf padded towards her direction and nuzzled at her bare legs. After giving her direwolf a gentle pat on the head, she finally stood up to put on a new set of clean robes. She noted while pacing towards her wooden chest that her floor was cleaned from her soiled clothing articles that morning. The bedmaids must have cleaned it while she was soundly sleeping.

Given the temperature drop that night, Arya let her long hair down again and donned on her grey cloak on top of her robe and nightclothes. Then she wore her trusted boots before finally opening her door slowly. Peeking her head out, she checked if there were any guards stationed outside the hall and found it surprisingly deserted. She silently walked on tiptoes towards the library.
while Nymeria was padding behind her, carefully avoiding any parts of the castle where guards were stationed. When she finally entered the library, Gendry was already there waiting for her, the glowing embers of the candles highlighted his beautiful facial features. Those candles might have been lighted up by him while he was waiting for her and basing on the heights of the candles all over the library, he has been inside for quite some time now.

He was slouched on a wooden chair with his arms folded across his chest. He was wearing his casual worn out off-white tunic, unbuttoned at the top to partially reveal his chest, and black breeches. His raven hair was handsomely disheveled just the way she wanted and his growing stubble was now pretty much evident on his jaw and chin. It was the ruggedly handsome Gendry she was seeing all over again rather than the formally neat and princely Gendry that most people see. Added to that, his muscled arms were pretty much put into emphasis when she noticed how the sleeves of his tunic were folded mid-length. She chewed her lip at the sight before her.

What made him different from the other days they were together was the very uptight and serious expression he was wearing right now. It was as if the whole world was his burden and not a hint of a smile could be seen on his face. Arya soon began to wonder if this was how Gendry would look like when he is working in the council meeting, all serious and authoritative.

There was something in the way he wore his stolid expression right now that suddenly made her unexpectedly exhilarated. Maybe it was because of the fact that he was the only one who could tame the wildness thriving deep inside her. Perhaps all she could do was readily admit to herself that it was always the effect that he has on her—to subdue the raging flames of her personality.

Aside from the humorless look on his face, he seemed very tired already. Perhaps this can be contributed to the constant council meetings with his father here and there, especially that he was tasked to provide most of his knowledge and wisdom to their strategic planning in terms of fortifying Winterfell from the rebels. As she thought of that, she also came across the memory of her father telling her and the rest of her siblings how good Gendry was in planning battle strategies. She had never thought that a simple blacksmith prince like him could become this powerful if he willed it. That was another thing that made her heart lurch for a second.

An open book was lying right before him on the table and he seemed to be absorbed with it before she entered the room. His piercing blue eyes were now fixed on her and she could barely even read what he was thinking right now. He was a totally different Gendry.

Locking the door behind her after Nymeria went inside, she carefully paced towards him, regarding him with caution as if he was about to explode any minute now. To put it all together, he seemed caught up with all of his responsibilities as the prince and heir to Westeros.

“Your Grace.” She greeted him with a neutral tone, giving him a very awkward curtsy and finding the need to call him with his title.

Wait, why does it feel like she was all of a sudden becoming very afraid of him? It was like she was being called by her Lord Father for some mischief she has done. But she could not really blame herself if he really looked so intimidating right now. And as for Arya, she felt very much subdued by the authority he possessed.

She swallowed the invisible lump on her throat as she grabbed a chair and sat beside him stiffly.

“My lady.” He greeted back with all the formality and seriousness in his tone.

He didn’t sound like the only friend she has. He didn’t sound like her best friend at all. As a temporary diversion to her growing fear and awkwardness, she darted her gaze towards the thick
book he was reading and was surprised that he was reading a book about the history of Westeros.

“What is it you want to talk about?” She asked him with obvious hesitation in her voice. But she had to be straight to the point so that she could get this over with as soon as possible.

Gendry shifted slightly in his seat as he turned to face her. His eyes seemed very cold and distant.

“Lord Stark had requested me to talk to you about what we have been planning for you in the next days to come….” He started, still holding a very serious tone. “Did you know why that Bolton bastard attacked my Father’s men?” He asked her.

Arya immediately shook her head in response, her eyes still downcast as she cannot afford to look at his intimidating eyes right now.

“He was basically giving my house a warning and they wanted me, my Father and the rest of the Baratheon party back in King’s Landing.” He replied.

Arya’s brows furrowed in confusion then she finally mustered the courage to look him in the eye. “Why?” Came her question.

“Because he wants to possess something very valuable here in Winterfell and he cannot get it if we interfere.” Gendry replied.

“What is it?” Arya queried, her curiosity growing deeper.

Gendry fixed his blue eyes on her for a few seconds before providing a response.

“You.” He said. Arya almost choked at his response.

“Excuse me?” She spat, sounding incredulous.

“I said, the Bolton bastard wanted you.” He replied, his impatience growing.

She shook her head. “W-what in Seven fucking Hells does it have to fucking do with me?”

“Apparently, the Bolton bastard has been eyeing on you as a prize ever since. Lord Stark told me that this bastard has long been trying to ask his father, Roose Bolton, to make an alliance with your father and have you arranged to be married to him, and to make peace with the rest of the North once and for all. This happened before my father and your father made the agreement to our betrothal. But then your Lord father refused to agree to the alliance because he knew about the rumors of the Bolton bastard being spread all across the North that he is a vile creature. And your father didn’t want you to end up with someone like him.” Gendry explained.

Arya sunk in her seat, trying to absorb everything that Gendry just said. She remained speechless and motionless as she stared blankly ahead; she was certain that Gendry was still looking at her. Right before all the words could even sink in to her brain, Gendry spoke once again.

“And due to the sudden turn of events, I have proposed a suggestion to your Lord Father and to the rest of the council to solve this once and for all. And they seem to all agree to the terms I have stated without any qualms nor hesitations…” He said with careful but serious words.

Arya turned her head to look at him. Her instincts suddenly told her that something was not right in all of what he’s about to say next. She took a deep swallow and braced herself for the pointless words she was about to utter, but she had to anyway.
“What brilliant suggestion would that be?” She asked, arching an eyebrow and trying to sound at least sarcastic to give off a little intimidating impression to hide her almost fidgeting state.

Gendry’s stolid and piercing eyes were still looking at her, unblinking and unflinching.

“I have suggested to let you travel back with us to King’s Landing where you will be staying with me in the Red Keep until our eventual marriage. Everything you need will be provided for. And I will ensure with all of my life to protect you at all costs from that Bolton bastard. Your Lord Father will also be travelling with us to continue with his duties as the new Hand of the King.” He stated with authority.

Despite the fact of having her Father travel with her, still it shattered Arya to a million pieces. She stilled for few heartbeats as her mind tried to process everything. It was too soon to leave the only home she has known her whole life. All because she was due to be married off to some stupid prince.

It will rip her from the life she had truly wanted, and it has nothing to do in any way with nobility. She wanted to be free without being bound to her duty as a lady of House Stark.

She clenched her hands into tight fists to hold the growing rage deep inside her as tears formed behind her eyes, threatening to fall any second now. This cannot be happening to her. She cannot be ordered around, not even if he was the prince of Westeros. Who does he think he is to let her do his bidding? No, this is all too impossible. He cannot just order her around and take her life away like this.

Winterfell was her home and he will not steal the last years of her life here only to follow him back to King’s Landing. The Bolton bastard be damned. She was strong enough to fight him off, even kill him if needed be. She has trained for battle all her life so why can’t they just trust her to protect herself from anyone trying to harm her? She doesn’t need the protection of some prince from that fucking Bolton bastard.

She was now breathing heavily as she tried to control her impulse of striking him.

Because doing so would be treason and treason was punishable by death. But on second thought, maybe it would be better to resort to treason. Then it would solve all her problems and she would be dead anytime soon.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Irrationality clouded her brain and thoughts about ending everything came across her mind. She took some time to compose herself. It won’t do anything good if she would act upon her impulse to kill herself, or better yet, kill the stupid prince with Needle right now.

Finally relaxing her clenched jaw, she looked at him murderously.

“So you think you are the only solution then? Is that it?” She sputtered angrily. “And you think you can just tell them what you think is best for me even without seeking first my consent and my approval? How dare you! Here I thought you were better and that you were my friend above anything else. But it turns out that you’re just like everyone else. Why can’t you just trust me to take care of myself? If the time comes for that fucking Bolton bastard to attack Winterfell, surely my father’s bannermen will never allow Winterfell to lose. We have one of the strongest forces in all of Westeros combined."

Gendry breathed out a sigh, obviously expecting her to react like this.
“Arya—“

“No! You can’t just pull me out like that from the only home I’ve known my whole life and force me to live in King’s Landing with you right away!!! You’re practically stripping me off everything I have left to hold on to! This is where I’ve always belonged, not in King’s Landing! I promised to find you a better woman to take as your wife, didn’t I? Why can’t you just give me some more time to stay here in my home and perhaps I could also find a more suitable bride for you? I thought we had agreed to that? Why do you have to ruin everything?!“ She rounded empathically, blurt out every emotion she was feeling.

Before she was about to say another word, Gendry punctuated her with his authoritative tone.

“Stop!” She could see in his face that he was on the brink of displaying his outward anger over the whole situation. “Can you not see that I am practically doing this for you, Arya? This is to protect you and your family from that fucker. I am leaving away over two hundred Baratheon guards and two hundred more Baratheon bannermen at the disposal of your family here in Winterfell to defend it from that bastard should there be any attacks. And my decision to let you come with me in the capital is for you to be safer under my protection. I can protect you, Arya… even if you keep on repeating to yourself that you are a lot stronger than you think you are, you still have to remember that Ramsay is practically stronger than you by anatomy.” Leaning a little closer to her, he tried to search for her eyes.

She bit her lip to keep her tears from falling. She won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing her in tears.

“Please don’t do this. I never wanted this life. I thought you were my friend. I treated you as my best friend, Gendry. Why are you trying to control my life? If you said you are leaving away a great number of your guards, then why do I have to leave for King’s Landing in an untimely way? I can’t just leave everything away here in one snap of the finger. It has to be gradual so that I may learn to let go of everything in time. Not like this. Why do you to do this to me?” Came her obvious rebuttal.

Noticing Gendry trying to control his temper in front of her, she continued to face him without falter. Gendry’s expression was as hard as rock.

Never has she seen him more serious in her life.


In the deepest recesses of her heart, she liked him being a bit possessive of her. But her will to stay a bit longer in her home would always supersede with whatever alien feelings she was keeping for him. Arya blinked back twice at his words, then she glared daggers at him.

“Take me away from you?!“ She snorted mockingly. “Do you even hear yourself talking?” She questioned him. Shaking her head, she looked at him with coldness in her eyes. “You sound as if you own me. Well, just to make things clear once and for all, you don’t own me, Baratheon!” She hissed, poking a finger at his chest.

In a split second, his serious face was gone and his lips almost broke out into a knowing smirk as his blue eyes started taunting her. He was practically snorting at her statement.

“You should be the one hearing yourself talk, Stark. As far as I recall, you’re the one who pulled me in for that kiss. You were the one being possessive. You didn’t seem to want to let go of me. Clearly, there was more than friendship in your mind when you kissed me like that.” He whispered
dangerously as his eyes continued to bore into hers. “So why are you hesitating to come with me?” He asked her. “I am trying to make your life easier, so stop your fucking denials and just go with me! You can practically do whatever you want there in King’s Landing for all I care just as long as you keep yourself safe! Can you not see that?” He offered, still holding his humorless eyes at her.

This time, Arya refused to lose in their verbal frenzy so she held his gaze without fear.

“Don’t sound so cheerful, Baratheon.” She shot back sardonically. “That kiss meant nothing at all. And besides… It. Was. All. A. Stupid. Mistake.” Her words came out venomously. “This. Us. It’s all a stupid mistake! I felt nothing! And I still feel nothing. So stop jumping around conclusions. It still won’t change anything! I still don’t want to marry you!” Gendry looked broken at her words. But if anything, he did well in trying to hide it.

“Oh, I am well aware that you never wanted to marry… in as much as I know that you want me so bad at the same time.” Came his serious statement.

Arya rolled her eyes in utter annoyance… maybe because of the fact that he was right all along. But until the Seven Hells freeze over, she will never ever resign herself to admit that to him. She wore her mask of indifference instead and tried to look intimidating at the very least.

“That’s a lie!” She hissed, gritting her teeth to show him how furious she was. “Those are all lies! I am not denying anything! I am merely stating a known fact! Why would I even want to marry you when I despise you so much!” All-consuming rage was finally eating her up.

At her sudden fit, it would seem like he has conceded as his expression gave away the slightest hint of defeat she has been expecting from him. For a split second he looked very disappointed amidst his stolid disposition, but then he huffed a sigh of annoyance and raised his hands then brought it down with a thud on his lap.

“You and your fucking denials again! What’s fucking holding you back?!” He raised his voice at her angrily. “You’re so infuriating, did you know that?” He pointed out, glaring at her.

Arya’s face gave away a triumphant remark as she smugly folded her arms before her chest.

“I tend to be good at being very infuriating.” Came her retort. “And I’ll do what I want and not even you can stop me! I don’t care if you’re some stupid prince to this stupid kingdom! I’m not going with you to King’s Landing! I’m staying here in Winterfell and I will do all the ways possible to break our stupid betrothal!” She replied with contempt etched all over her face.

Then she brought herself to stand up defiantly only to glare at him intimidatingly.

Gendry did the same and he was now looking down at her with his towering height. All the smugness in his face was immediately erased and was replaced with the look of that regal authority he was meant to hold.

“You seem to be forgetting yourself, Lady Arya. I am the crown prince of Westeros! And it would do you well to follow my bidding for your own sake! I am doing this for you and to keep the whole kingdom from getting into a pointless war all because of your stubbornness. You may not agree to all my decisions but you will abide by them no matter what it takes! No questions asked!” He roared indignantly as he gave her a lasting scowl. And for the first time in her life, Arya cowered at his words like a candle almost losing its light.

He could be worse than his King father if he was angry, that was for sure. More to that, it just proved right that instant the he was indeed more stubborn than her.
“You will pack your things the first thing in the morning. I will give you time to say your goodbyes to your mother, your brothers and your sister and in two days, we will leave for King’s Landing whether you like it or not. Is that understood?” Came his demand.

Arya chewed her lip to control herself, her eyes downcast, refusing to look at him, but she nodded anyway to appease his growing anger. Her heart hammered in sudden fear at the authority he was imposing. She used to be able mock authority in her face, but it was different for Gendry. She suddenly didn’t want to see him outraged by her stubborn behavior.

*Ours is the fury.* The words of House Baratheon suddenly interspersed in her system, spreading like wildfire to remind herself of her place.

Suddenly, she was broken from her internal reverie when she heard his booming voice once more.

“Look at me!” He ordered her, completely making her startled. She felt his fingers tug at her chin but she was surprised to find him very gentle when he did so. It was far from what she had expected.

The way he was looking at her was now different and all the anger was gone.

“I will still hold my word of keeping your secret about your flowering so that we won’t have to marry as soon as possible. All I ask right now is for you to come with me so that I can protect you from that Bolton bastard. If you still wish to find me another suitable wife, then by all means, do it. I just cannot guarantee you right now that I can agree to all your suggestions.” He told her in a calmer voice.

Arya furrowed her eyebrows in confusion.

“How? Surely there are many other girls far better than me who would kneel at your feet just to become your wife.” She asked him innocently.

Gendry seemed lost in her eyes because he remained still and quiet for a few seconds before responding, “Because I…” He suddenly cut off his words and shook his head, releasing her from his hold at the same time. “Nothing.”

She noticed him swallowing the thick lump on his throat before he pulled away from her completely.

“I’ve had a long day and I am very tired. I would need to retire to my chambers now. By your leave, my lady.” He told her, bowing slightly, suddenly switching the subject.

In some way, she wanted to goad him further to tell her his reasons but she knew better than provoke his anger once more. So instead, she left it off. She didn’t say another word and nodded her head instead. Gendry gave her one last longing look before turning his back away from her and walking towards the door.

As soon as the door was shut, she immediately pulled down the metal bar to lock it. Leaning her back to the door, she looked up and felt her tears welling up again. She could no longer hold it so she allowed her tears to freely fall down her face. Sliding herself down to the floor, she finally broke down into audible sobs and cried all her frustrations out.
Gendry

After the door to the library shut closed behind him, he leaned his back to it and closed his eyes. He heaved a deep sigh to release all the anger and tension building up in the last hour. As he partially slid on the door, he heard Arya’s unmistakable sobs on the other side. His jaw clenched upon hearing her cries. He ran his hands across his face then raked his unruly black hair frustratingly. After hearing what seemed like an endless weeping, he covered his ears with both hands. He couldn’t bear hearing her sobbing like that.

But it was plain useless. It broke his heart to a million pieces having to hear her cry so hard and he couldn’t even do something to comfort her since she was crying all because of him and his stubbornness.

He may have felt sorry for imposing authority on her by saying those hurtful words but he was fully aware of his reasons. He also expected this kind of reaction from her so he got himself prepared for the worst. This was the only way possible for him to keep her safe at all times because gods, he wanted to protect her with his life. That fucking Bolton bastard be damned but he was ready to die for her.

That was how much Arya Stark meant to Gendry Baratheon right now.

Although Arya may see this as being stripped off her rights to live in the only home she’s known her entire life, Gendry knew that this was the only way he could think of. He would have wanted to stay in Winterfell with her for as long as he wanted but unfortunately, he has important duties to attend to back in King’s Landing such as helping out his father rule an entire kingdom.

Pulling away his hands from his ears, he clenched his fists at the thought of that Bolton bastard trying to steal her away from him. He wanted to kill him for trying to threaten him and his house but he wanted to murder him all the more for even laying eyes on Arya. He doesn’t care if that fucking bastard saw her and knew her first from many years ago, and he doesn’t care if that bastard ever wages war against them. If all else fails and it comes to that, then he would be willing to fight a war over his betrothed because no one else meant more to him than her.

Perhaps it was very true what they say about Baratheon men being ensnared by the power of Stark women that they’d be ready to wage a war come what may just to fight for them. If history was to repeat itself by waging war all because of a Stark woman just like how his father did for Lyanna Stark, then so be it. Damn him to the Seven fucking Hells then because Gendry Baratheon will never ever give up in fighting for Arya Stark. He will fight with all his strength and fury until he wipes that smirk off that bastard’s face from the planet. He didn’t know how and when this happened but Gendry was completely taken by Arya that he would be willing to do anything for her.

He was after all his best friend, right?

Best friend your arse! Get your bastard acts straight, Waters! You know you see her as something more! His thoughts screamed.

Instead of lingering further into the depths of his feelings, he forced his mind to drift back into what they had discussed about at the council meeting that early morning. He was practically outraged upon knowing the exact reason why that Bolton bastard killed a dozen of their men. That fucking Bolton bastard definitely did not know him. It was a stupid to try and provoke him because Gendry doesn’t only get even with everything, he makes sure to give the most excruciating pain to those who would come across his way. And right now, he is already making that bastard on top of his list.
All the people present in the council meeting had agreed to his suggestion of taking Arya with him to King’s Landing until they marry, including Arya’s father and Robb. The only problem left for him was Arya herself, whom he knew would fight tooth and nail just to get things her way. He never wanted to force her into this kind of ordeal but it was the only way to ensure that she was safe because he will be protecting her himself. Only, Arya didn’t see his intentions that way and instead saw him as a thief who would rob her away of her freedom.

He opened his eyes after a few minutes. He could hear Arya’s sobbing slowly subside as her breathing evened out. Nymeria must have padded towards her direction because he could hear her speaking to her direwolf as if she was a real person.

“Everything will be alright, Nymeria. I will be. I’ll find a way...” Came her half-whisper but he heard it altogether.

He even heard Nymeria give her mistress a sympathetic whimper.

“You’re all I got now. We’re both in this together. You and me, Nymeria. Just you and me.” She whispered again.

Gendry more than wished that those words were directed towards him but it was all too impossible.

Hasn’t she just told him she despised him?

The thought shot a sudden pang in his heart. He realized that he could not bear seeing her become so sad like this.

Releasing a heavy breath, he willed himself to stand up to finally head back to his chambers. As soon as he got inside, he locked his door, removed his boot and tunic so that he was now half-naked and threw himself on the featherbed. He didn’t realize how dead tired he was until he finally felt the comforts of the bed.

It was so inviting and tempting.

When he closed his eyes once, he drifted into a long sleep.

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Chapter End Notes

Badly need your thoughts. Although this has been written many months before, I made some modifications to this entire part of the story. I need to know what you would like to happen next. I still have the original plot saved, but your thoughts would greatly help.

Thank you!
“You’re one stubborn little shit, are you?” He stated blatantly, looking at her dangerously as he inched his way closer to her proximity. Arya continued to stare back at him defiantly. “Yes, I am, Your Grace. That is why I am a very poor choice for a wife.” She replied bravely.

Chapter 12: Bargaining

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Arya

The rustling and bustling sound woke Arya from her sleep.

She kept her eyes squinted as she adjusted to the glaring light coming from the windows. When she finally opened her eyes, she realized that she was sprawled snugly under her sheets inside her bedchambers. She furrowed her brows in confusion.

That’s odd.

The last thing she remembered last night was falling asleep by herself inside the library. She was suddenly shaken from her somber state when she noticed her bedmaids gingerly scurrying across her chambers, carrying her clothes, pressing them and folding them neatly inside a bigger traveling chest. For a few short seconds, she tried to wrack her brains for any possible reasons why they were packing up her things.

Then flashbacks of last night’s bickering with Gendry materialized inside her brain.

She pushed back her blankets and rose up to a sitting position. Upon noticing that she was already up, her bedmaids made a hurried curtsy at her.

“My lady.” They all greeted, carefully regarding her.

They must have also felt her sullen mood because they were on their best behaviors that day.

“Why are you packing all my clothes? Who ordered you to do it?” She asked with an intimidating voice, raising an eyebrow at them.

Her bedmaids looked at her tentatively and lowered their eyes to the floor disconsolately.

“Prince Gendry told us to pack all of your things in your stead while you were sleeping, my lady. So that you may be able to rest, he told us.” One of her bedmaids replied.

Arya threw a mental curse inside her head but kept her expression stern as she continued to look at her bedmaids. It wasn’t really their fault because they were only following orders so she didn’t think
for a second to give them any form of reprimand. She released a sigh before finally standing up.

“Fine. Just continue what you are doing.” She told them in a calm voice.

As she walked towards her wooden chest, she grabbed the first set of tunic and breeches she could take and stripped herself from her nightclothes in front of her maids.

“Do you need us to help you dress, my lady?” One bedmaid offered kindly.

Arya gave her a forced half-smile and shook her head.

“No, thank you. I can manage.” Came her solemn response.

Her eyes still felt very heavy perhaps from too much crying last night. She was glad either way that none of her maids bothered to ask why her eyes were puffy.

“The prince cares a lot about you, my lady. We could definitely tell that he’s so fond of you. He knows that you prefer wearing those clothes so he told us to leave them there so that you can wear it for today.” The other bedmaid suddenly told her brazenly out of the awkward silence inside her bedchambers.

Arya stopped in her tracks after hearing those words and suddenly, her cheeks felt warm. She chewed her lip for a few seconds until she finally realized something,

“Wait, how did he know that I keep my preferred clothes here? And how did I get in my rooms in the first place?” Arya asked them curiously, narrowing her eyes at them.

Her three maids stifled a girlish giggle altogether before the other one replied, “We have been looking for you early this morning, my lady. And we were scared that you might have been abducted or you might have ran away. So we alerted everyone in the castle. Before the news could reach your Lord father and Lady mother, the prince found you first. He seemed to know where you have been staying and found you sleeping inside the library. He carried you all the way here and tucked you in your bed.”

Arya’s heart beat uncontrollably faster and she couldn’t tell if she was suddenly feeling guilty for snapping at him last night or if she should continue to become a pain in the ass to him. She had to remember that his plan of sending her to King’s Landing was practically robbing her off her last years of freedom before finally being tied down to stupid matrimony.

She looked away from her maids and turned her back to them. She closed her eyes and huffed a sigh.

“That’s enough. You can leave me be. I’ll take care of packing the rest of my things. Thank you for all your help.” She told them with a very cold voice, keeping her eyes shut to stop the impending tears from falling.

After her maids were gone, she tried to focus on a few deep breathing methods before she could finally get rid of thoughts about crying. This was not the time to cry.

After changing into her every day tunic and breeches, Arya studied her reflection in the looking glass. No matter how much she willed herself to keep a neutral face, her grief over this whole ordeal would still overpower her, blanketing her entire face with gloom and misery. She felt helpless and hopeless. More than that, she felt the beginnings of the invisible chain of nobility wrapping around her neck. Her highborn blood seemed like a curse to her, drowning her into oblivion and slowly stripping her off her natural freedom as a person. All because of the stupid laws governing man. The
ideals she has acquired from all those years of self-education and enlightenment were slowly
dissipating into thin air as if it never existed. Gone were her hopes of trying to change the way of the
world.

For who was she but a mere individualist amidst the mediocrity of the crowd—mere puppets to the
dictates of so-called society?

She was someone and no one at the same time.

The irony of it all lay in the common truth that she will be bound one day to become the Queen to
this entire kingdom, making her someone, but at the same time, once she becomes that kind of figure,
her own voice, ideologies and principles with soon fade away to be overthrown by the voice of the
one who has more authority—the King, the council and the people, all puppets to the binding,
absolute social contract being set by their ancestors, thus making her no one. The declaration of the
natural rights of man will all be but a sheer ideation.

If she were to become a slave to their own laws, then might as well start it today.

Losing all hope of ever following the will of her mind, she stripped off her clothes again and this
time changed into more proper, lady-like clothes. She decided to wear a dress. Sure it would delight
her lady mother and her sister, and the rest of those expecting her to become the lady that she was but
as for Arya, this was the beginning of her imprisonment to the life that she had never wanted, all for
the sake of family, duty and honor.

But if she would be wearing a dress today and for the rest of her miserable days, at least she would
give everyone the satisfaction of seeing her in black dresses as a symbol of her mourning for her loss
of self-identity. Surely the color of darkness would fit her perfectly because that’s what she was right
now, just a mere vessel trapped in the void of darkness and what better way to show it by wearing it
loud and proud.

Let them all see what has become of her.

Let this be her scourge.

Her black dress fell gracefully until the floor, covering her shoes and it has a simple yet elegant satin
touch to it, making it sleek under the light. It had sleeves to cover her entire arms but the neckline
was low enough to emphasize her budding bosom. She wore her hair in a low, intricate side bun
with small, wavy wisps of her hair falling beautifully on the sides of her face. Aside from that, she
decided to wear some jewelry to match her dress. She wore earrings with a small turquoise gemstone
as well as a simple silver necklace with a medium-sized dazzling gem pendant of the same color. It
clung to her neck perfectly.

When she looked at her reflection again in the looking glass, she found herself looking very regal,
very much like the future Queen of Westeros. The blackness of her dress was a contrast to the
paleness of her porcelain skin.

There.

Downright perfection.

After washing her face with water, she put on some powder to conceal the dark bags under her eyes
and a tinge of pink rouge on her cheeks to make her look jovial. She was finally ready to present
herself.

As she graced through the halls of the Winterfell castle with her direwolf at her side, every single
person who saw her within the castle would stop what they were doing and look at her. It was either
they were stunned by her new appearance or they could hardly believe what their eyes saw. Each
jaw dropped at the sight of her walking along the halls towards the Great Hall with her chin up high
and her face devoid of any emotion.

The door flung open for her and she went on with pacing carefully towards the table in the center,
facing the dais where the King, the Prince, her Lady Mother and Lord Father were seated. Just like
in the halls outside, all heads turned to her direction as she made the grandest entrance by far into the
Great Hall to break her fast.

Before taking a seat next to her brothers, she gave the King and the Prince her most gracious curtsy
and she noticed Gendry never taking his eyes off her. He looked speechless and motionless.

Good for him.

At least now she was very successful in making herself enticing yet even more impossible to him.
Let him drool at her and kneel at her feet. Then maybe, just maybe she could urge him into doing her
own bidding. For once, that would be much satisfying. If her stubbornness won’t do it, then maybe
her sultry appeal would do. That always worked for men, did it not?

Leaving a trail of a satisfied smirk on her face, she turned away from the prince and started ignoring
him and his hungry stares at her. She went to wear her mask and pretended to greet her brothers and
her sister good-naturedly.

“Who are you and what have you done to Arya Stark?” Robb suddenly japed at her with an impish
grin on his face.

Arya only rolled her eyes in mock annoyance before grabbing the plate of crispy bacon before her,
mindful enough to apply what she learned from her table etiquette lessons from her septa many years
ago. Theon, Bran and Rickon all had knowing smirks on their faces as they stifled a laugh. Sansa on
the other hand had that dreamy look on her face.

“You look so beautiful, Arya.” Sansa said admiringly from across the table. If anything, she could
really see Sansa’s sincerity in her statement.

“Thank you, Sansa.” She told her in a soft, calm voice.

Then she fixed her eyes back to her half-filled plate for she found no appetite to break her fast that
morning. But she had to at least fill her stomach with food to make her last the whole morning.

Of all her siblings who were either mocking her or admiring her, it was Jon who saw her through all
the masks she was putting. He placed an arm around her since he was just sitting beside her and
leaned his lips to her ear.

“You seem to be wearing your mask well, dear sister. I’m more than impressed of you.” He
whispered with an earnest smile. Arya stopped eating her bacon altogether and flashed her eyes at
him, completely shocked.

“You think I don’t know what you’re going through? If anything, I am more than shattered to know
that you would be leaving Winterfell in a few days, and with that, you’ll be leaving me…” He said in
a low voice, similar grey eyes piercing her.

She was aware that they were both out of earshot from the rest of their siblings because they were
already having a conversation on their own on the other side of the table.
Arya’s mouth fell at his words but before she could ask, he answered the questions she had in mind, “I spoke with Gendry.” He told her. “Rather, Gendry spoke with me. I was the first one he spoke to after the council meeting, informing me of his plans for you and what I thought of it. He told me that since I am your closest brother, it would only be fitting that he let me know first. And I told him that I agree to his decision only because he swore to protect you with his life. He has good intentions, Arya.” Jon continued.

Arya swallowed the lump on her throat. She was speechless.

“You may think that this is all about stripping you off your rights to freedom, but he’s actually just trying to protect you from Ramsay.”

Arya looked away from him, feeling a small pang of guilt for being such a stubborn brat but in the end, her denials won over and got the better of her.

“I know.” She said feebly. Tears began pooling behind her eyes but she mustered all the strength to blink back those tears from falling and looked up to him with a forced smile on her face.

“You’ll visit me in King’s Landing, right? I’ll be expecting for you there. And you’ll be proud of me for finally becoming a lady fit for the prince. Everyone will be proud to see me blossom into the future princess of Westeros.” Her words were too coerced with careful practice as she wore her mask high and proud at the refusal to acknowledge the truth behind Gendry’s reasons for taking her with him.

Jon only plastered a knowing and dangerous smirk on his face and Arya was sure that he was able to read her true, concealed self behind all those pretenses.

“Be careful of wearing your mask for so long, Arya. You might forget who you were beneath it. Never lose yourself in the process.” He whispered again to her, giving a gentle squeeze on her shoulders and pulling her close to him. “I’m off to help Robb today with our monthly sums. I’ll see you later, dear sister.” He said to her.

Much to her surprise, Jon planted a chaste kiss on top of her head endearingly. Arya wanted to breakdown at her favorite brother’s gesture. Jon rarely kisses her because he always ends up mussing up her hair, but this time, he did kiss her. It was as if he was really saying goodbye to her.

“Thank you.” Arya’s words were very little as she felt herself choking from her impending tears. Jon gave her one last smile before standing up. Robb looked at her and gave her a playful wink then his eyes averted to Jon, signaling for them to depart the Great Hall. Theon was left to play with Bran and Rickon, leaving Arya alone in her seat to finish her meal.

As she finished the last piece of her bacon, she turned to the direction of Gendry because she could still feel the weight of his eyes on her. And indeed she was right because he has been looking at her intently as he was holding his cup of whatever was in it. She only gave him a short, dead stare and her eyes darted back to her food, completely ignoring him once and for all.

When Theon and her two youngest siblings were gone from the table, she was left with Sansa who has been carefully regarding her all this time. Sansa stood up and walked around the table towards her direction and pulled her arm for her to stand up.

“Come on, Arya. Walk with me to the glass gardens.” Her sister told her.

Sansa has never asked to walk with her to the gardens before. Something was really off right now.

Was it because they all felt the weight of having to say goodbye to her in a few days’ time? Were
they really going to miss her that’s why they were this good to her?

After long minutes of walking leisurely along the grounds of Winterfell and shocking the rest of the smallfolk with Arya’s unusual choice of an elegant black dress that day, they finally reached the glass gardens.

“I know this is really hard for you to believe but… I’m really going to miss you, you know. Even with our constant bickering when we were younger, I’m still going to miss you.” Sansa suddenly spoke as she stopped to face Arya. There was a sweet smile etched on her face. “And I am more than glad to know that you will eventually become the future Queen to the Seven Kingdoms on day, Arya. I’ve never thought I’d live this day when I would be saying this to you, but you deserve it more than anyone else.” Sansa added.

Arya had a shocked look on her face.

“But I thought you’ve always wanted to be Queen? Why did you take it back anyway?” She had to know if Sansa’s reasons were true after all.

Sansa shrugged her shoulders.

“I guess when you find the love of your life, even the crown won’t matter, only the person will.” Her sister explained. “When I met Willas, I threw away all my desires of becoming the Queen. For what good would be a crown if you still won’t end up with that one person you will always love? And it turns out that I love Willas more than I love becoming the Queen. It was too shallow of me before to be as ambitious as wanting the crown for myself. But now, I am just glad that Father saw what my heart truly desired and allowed my betrothal to Willas.

“I know, you too will find love someday. In fact, I can already see the beginnings of it.” Her sweet sister giggled as she held Arya’s hands.

Arya snorted and raised an eyebrow at her.

“You’ve got to be shitting me, right?” Came Arya’s unbidden remarks. She couldn’t help herself. She really did have a very foul mouth alright.

Sansa rolled her eyes.

“Language, Arya.” She chided.

Arya cleared her throat and nodded. “Right. Sorry, I just… I’m just not really believing all of this.” She replied, almost in the brink of uncontrollable fits of laughter. Gods, this was too ridiculous.

“Prince Gendry adores you. You’ve got to be blind to have not seen it. Every one of us thinks that you are a perfect match. Even Mother, Father and the King thinks so. I don’t really know how or what you did to him but he is practically head over heels for you, Arya.” Sansa told her, looking into her eyes intently as she continued to hold her hand.

Arya rolled her eyes annoyingly this time.

“Gendry is just my friend, Sansa. I mean, yes, we are close. But it’s because he’s my best friend. Well, now that I remember, he’s the only friend I got after Ned Dayne and Micah. Gendry’s a good friend. And that’s all there is.” Arya tried to explain. Her repudiations were once again working to shun her mind off any affectionate feelings towards him.

Arya Stark does not fall in love. Plain and simple.
Sansa started walking again as Arya followed her suit like an obedient little sister. Picking up a single, beautiful winter rose along the way, Arya held it in her nose as she began sniffing its fragrant scent. She always loved winter roses. That was a known fact for her.

Sansa stopped in her tracks before she turned back to face her.

“I would understand right now why you’re refusing to acknowledge your feelings towards him considering your stubborn personality. Maybe this is because you have that certain ideology in you that getting married and having babes is like a stigma and a curse to you because it will only rob you off whatever adventure you are planning. I would understand that because you are still so young.

“But once you are mature enough to understand more things, that’s when you will begin to put together all your beliefs into a certain way of life, and you will realize that everything that happens right now is for a reason. You were meant to do so much more. We may not know for sure what that is yet, but I can strongly sense that you will somehow influence a lot of people. Prince Gendry included. I’ve seen the way he treats you. He treats you like an equal, not as someone lower his status. He regards you highly because of your distinct perspective of the world. Like him, I know that you do not think like the rest of us, which is a good thing but dangerous if someone else against you might find out.” Sansa told her.

Arya was suddenly very surprised to see her sister open up to her all about this so suddenly. She may not be able to express her feelings yet, but Arya was glad that Sansa spoke to her.

Arya looked at her silently, urging her to speak more. At the same time, she was fumbling over the winter rose in her hands to keep a grasp of reality.

“The Prince is not really hard to love, Arya. His people adore him for his kindness and I know that you can also see that. Even on the first time you met him, I’ve known from the start that you will become fast friends, and that’s what eventually became of you. Never have I seen someone more perfect for you as Gendry.” Sansa tried to sound like she was japing but Arya could see all the truth behind it. “And he’s very strong and handsome, too. What more could you ask for, Arya?” Sansa gave her a wink, smiling knowingly.

“Oh please, Sansa. If you think so highly of him, then why don’t you marry him instead? I’d do the honor of giving you away to him on your wedding day.” Arya remarked sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

Sansa shook her head. “It’s not like that at all, Arya. The Prince may be the actuality of every girl’s fantasies, but I don’t see him like that. I’m in love with my own betrothed, Willas.” She explained with patience in her tone.

Arya only shrugged. “Yes, sure thing, Sansa. You go for it…” Came another sarcastic statement coupled with a mocking snort. Sansa giggled as she eyed her mischievously.

“But you have to admit, you do find the Prince very attractive, don’t you?” Her sister teased.

“Aha, ha! You’re blushing! I knew it!” Sansa egged.

Knowing fully well that her sister was already seeing right through her inhibitions, she temporarily brought her guard down and finally gave Sansa the satisfaction that she needed.
“Fine! Yes! He is. A bit. But he’s just stupid most of the time.” Arya finally admitted, chewing at her lip and blushing even more profusely at her response.

More than half an hour has passed when they continued coursing through the depths of the gardens. They found a place to sit on a wooden garden bench near the shrubs of yellow and violet flowers talking just about anything.

In the middle of their silence, Sansa suddenly plucked the winter rose out from Arya’s hands and cut the long stem into half. Much to Arya’s surprise, Sansa put the rose on Arya’s hair.

“There. You look even more beautiful. Winter roses really suit you, you know.” Sansa stated a matter-of-factly.

“It’s because I’ve always found them appealing, Sansa. No big deal. Either way, roses are just roses, just like the sky is always blue and constant. They do not mean anything more than what they are.” Arya stated factually.

Sansa smirked knowingly. “Always the realist, are we?” She noted. Fixing wisps of Arya’s hair hanging on her face, she looked at her endearingly. “Try to see things differently for once. I’m afraid you’re too pragmatic.” Sansa suggested. “Lighten up, Arya. A great big world awaits for you.” Arya felt Sansa’s hands on her shoulders as if to encourage her.

Arya could only nod in response. Sansa was right though. She always was. But right now, Arya could not bring herself to cheer up. Silence fell through them for a few more minutes as they savored the fresh air breezing through the gardens.

Sansa all of a sudden breathed out a dreamy sigh before she spoke. “Gods, I can’t believe that you’re leaving Winterfell ahead of me, Arya. I mean, who would have expected that your days in Winterfell are already numbered? Although to tell you honestly, I can understand your sullen state right now because I know that you still do not wish to leave home, I think I should be the one leaving ahead of you because I can no longer wait to marry my Willas, you know. But I guess I’ll have to wait for a few more months before that ever happens.” Sansa blurted out.

Suddenly, it was as if the blood in her withering, cold veins were slowly becoming alive again. Arya’s ears rang the moment her sister brought those news to her. How could she be so stupid to have forgotten of her sister’s imminent marriage to the heir of Highgarden? Arya sat there in silence as she contemplated on everything.

Her mind was now slowly working wonders, like old gears oiled to roll right back on track. She better make use of her superior intellect to pull off a way to prolong her stay here in Winterfell in any means possible. If she ever believed in the existence of perfection, then Sansa’s statement sounded as perfect as her beautiful Tully features.

“Sansa?” Arya suddenly spoke for what felt like eons ago.

“Hmmm?” Her sister looked at her.

“When did you say you were supposed to marry Willas?” Arya felt the need to ask, her brows furrowed in concentration.

“In ten months. I can’t believe I have to wait that long!” Sansa mewled. This time, the idea finally materialized inside Arya’s head. As clear as day, as blue as the bluest skies. Her salvation was finally within grasp.

Without further hesitation, she stood up abruptly and grabbed Sansa’s shoulders, bringing her to a
tight hug. Arya’s widest sinister smile spread across her face like wildfire.

“You are so brilliant, Sansa! Perfect!” Arya practically squealed with controlled excitement.

Sansa flashed a very confused look on her face. “What are you talking about, Arya?”

Arya planted a kiss on each of Sansa’s cheeks before replying.

“A motion for reconsideration.” She told Sansa mysteriously. Finally pulling away from her confused sister, she waved goodbye to her and ran her way back towards the castle.

As soon as she was back inside the walls of the castle, she started searching for Gendry so that she can have an important word with him. She found herself walking back inside the Great Hall where they all broke their fast but when she got inside, it was already deserted and cleaned. She and Sansa must have gone out into the garden for a long time after noticing that there were no more people eating inside.

Arya pondered for a few seconds as she tried to think of any other places where Gendry could be. Then heading out of the Great Hall again, she paced hurried steps towards the forge but only found Mikken and his apprentice inside. Since the forge was only a few minutes’ walk to the Godswoods, she dragged herself inside the woods but only found Nymeria wrestling with Summer near the Heart Tree.

Gendry was still not there.

Then again, why would he even be there when in the first place what they have been doing the whole night was just argue and fight? Surely he would steer clear of places they used to spend time with to also avoid meeting up with her in any way.

She was becoming a little bit irritated now that she badly wanted to speak to him about her brilliant proposal. She was definitely willing to make a compromise if he was and there is nothing they could do to stop her.

Arya stormed back inside the castle with her growing impatience. A thought came across her mind and realized that perhaps he was just inside his chambers. She headed to the direction of their adjoined chambers in which she almost ran over a maid carrying a bundle of beddings.

Cursing internally for being so clumsy, she bolted immediately to stand at the door of Gendry’s chambers. As she finally stood at his door, she held her breath for a few seconds to compose herself. Her heart was either racing because of running around the castle looking for him or because of the sudden fear she was feeling about speaking to him. She still could not forget the authority he imposed on her last night, making her cower in her place. But despite his brooding authority, she basically understood why he did it because she was being a very stubborn pain in the ass to him.

She knocked on his door twice and waited for it to open. As she inclined closer to the door, she heard ruffling steps on the other side until it finally opened. But instead of seeing his face, she saw the faces of the maids cleaning his bedchambers.

“Anything we can help you with, my lady?” The maid who opened the door asked.

“Where’s Gendry?” Arya asked in return, refusing to answer their question.

They all giggled in unison before the prettier one from afar provided a response. “The Prince is in the Hand’s solar for another meeting with the King.”
Of course.

How stupid could she be for not realizing it sooner? Arya muttered a hurried “Thanks” after pressing a sheepish smile and stormed off right away to her Father’s solar.

As she was walking faster paces towards the other end of the castle, she could feel more wisps of her unruly hair falling down her face. Fixing it could wait because right now she didn’t care what she looked like. She needed to speak to him as soon as possible.

After a few minutes of walking, she finally reached the solar where three Kingsguards were stationed to guard the door. Before she could get past the door to enter, they stopped her. “Our apologies, my lady, but no one is to enter the solar right now. The King, the Prince and the Lord Hand are having a very important meeting. They wish not to be disturbed.” Ser Arys told her apologetically.

“But I need a word with the prince, Ser Arys. How long do you think would they stay inside?” She asked, implying a silent protest. Ser Arys looked at her with a hint of curiosity in his face.

“There is no definite time yet, Lady Arya. It may take a couple more hours to perhaps the rest of the day.” Came his response.

She looked at him with pleading eyes. “Can you not get inside and at least inform him that I’ll be here waiting? This is really urgent, Ser Arys. Please.” She requested, finding the need to sound a little bit desperate.

She ought to.

Any delay in speaking to him would mean lesser chances of actually getting her proposal heard out, hence her plan would all be put to waste and she would end up having to travel back to King’s Landing with all of the Southerners.

“I am really sorry, Lady Arya. Orders are orders.” Ser Arys tried to let her understand, which she did as she nodded at him.

“I know, Ser Arys. Thank you anyway.” She replied.

As she stood there right before the wooden door to her Father’s solar, another brilliant idea suddenly came into her mind. This time, her lips curled into a contagious smile as she smiled at the Kingsguards widely.

“See you around!” She waved at them goodbye and skipped happily away from them. Uncharacteristic of her but she needed to show them that it wasn’t much of a big deal that she didn’t get what she wanted.

But she will get what she want. And she will do it her way.

As soon as she was out of sight from the Kingsguards, she immediately walked on tip-toes towards another corridor where she knew about a secret passage towards her Father’s solar. She discovered this secret passage many years ago after escaping from her septa. She placed her hands on the stone walls as if she was trying to feel for something and when she finally found the secret knob, a hidden door suddenly opened. Once she was inside the dark passage towards the solar, she could hear masculine voices growing every second.

She stopped before a wooden wall with small horizontal openings and she ducked her head a little to take a peep inside. There she saw the King and her father engaged in a deep conversation. On the other end, just right across where she was standing was Gendry silently but seriously listening to
them. She had to catch his attention in some way.

She waited for a few more minutes before she could call him. And when the King and her Father were already turning their backs from her direction. She slightly opened the secret wooden door which actually looked like a bookcase from her Father’s solar and stuck out her hand to wave it towards Gendry who was still sitting right across her direction. Gendry was finally able to see her and he had a very shocked look on his face. He furrowed his eyebrows at her as if to glare at her for suddenly interrupting them.

Arya rolled her eyes and mouthed the words, “Library. Now!” at him. She spoke the words silently again until he was finally able to nod in understanding.

Before the King faced her direction, she was able to finally close the secret door successfully. She waited for Gendry to make his move. This should be interesting. She wanted to suddenly know how he could manage to get himself out of an important meeting. But he practically looked bored basing on Arya’s earlier observation. He may be seriously listening at them but he has also been stifling a yawn at the same time. A smirk played on her face.

Suddenly, she saw Gendry standing up to interrupt the conversation of her Father and the King. “Father, I apologize but I need to be excused right now. This is really urgent.” He told King Robert sternly.

Arya’s father had a questioning look on his face. The King furrowed his brows. “We are still in the middle of an important council meeting, son.” King Robert informed him. Gendry huffed a sigh and tentatively looked at the direction of the secret door where she came from. Then he turned his gaze back at them, his hand clutching his belly as if he was in much pain. He made a forced grimace as he spoke. “I can’t hold it any longer. I need to… you know what I mean.” He told them.

Her father gave an amused look while King Robert suddenly burst out laughing, which was surprising enough for Arya when she thought that the King would reprimand his son. “Well go on then. You don’t want to stale up the fresh air in this room now, right? Seven Hells, lad, what have you been eating this breakfast?” The King jested.

Gendry flashed a sheepish smile and bowed his head at them as courtesy. Arya covered her mouth to stifle her laugh.

*Gods, he is helplessly stupid.*

As soon as he was finally out of the solar, she headed her way out of the secret passageway. She climbed down the long flight of spiral stairs from the main hall of the eastern wing and just when she was about to turn left towards the direction of the library, she felt a pair of hands grab at her waist.

She bumped into something heavy as she turned around, her hands clutching to the soft fabric covering that certain hardness.

It felt so warm.

When she looked up, she saw a familiar pair of blue eyes staring at her piercingly and wondered how he got down the stairs so fast.

“What is it, Arya? Are you alright?” Came Gendry’s worry-stricken inquiry. He had his arms still wrapped around her waist to hold her.

She felt her cheeks warming up and she found herself flustered at his touch. She moved her hands away from his chest before finally pulling away from him completely. He regretfully let her go. She
tugged at the hem of his tunic as she started pacing forward.

“Library. Remember? Not here.” She told him, trying to sound calm and refusing to answer his question. But the hammering of her heart was far from calm because she was that close to him. And she couldn’t seem to think straight if she was that close to his warmth.

“How are you feeling now? Are you not sleepy? You barely slept last night.” He stated with concern in his tone as he followed behind her.

She stopped pulling his shirt and walked faster.

“That doesn’t matter now because I have a proposal to make.” She replied, still scurrying forward in hurried steps.

He huffed a sigh of resignation and just followed after her. “Fine.”

When they were both inside the library, she locked the door shut and faced him seriously, her arms crossed before her chest.

“Let’s make a compromise.” She suddenly stated.

Gendry was standing in front of her, searching her but seemingly very interested in what she has to offer.

“What compromise is that?” He asked with an eyebrow raised.

Arya held her breath before replying, “I will finally agree to be with you in King’s Landing. No questions asked.” For a second Gendry’s face lightened up but he knew better.

He raised another eyebrow at her incredulously. “Oh yeah? And how is that going to be a compromise?” He questioned, leaning closer to her intimidatingly.

Rolling her eyes, she pushed him slightly and walked past him further into the library to grab a seat. She plopped on the chair and faced him.

“I’ll leave Winterfell when my sister does. Sansa is going to be sent to Highgarden in a few months to marry Willas Tyrell anyway. Highgarden will be sending guards along with Willas to come to Winterfell and bring Sansa back to the Reach. So I will still be safe from the rebels by then, along with the men you will be leaving here. Then we will be five hundred strong going to the South. They can stop by King’s Landing to send me to you.” She proposed.

Gendry was deep in his thoughts for a few long seconds, his fingers clutching to his attractive stubbled jaw. “And when is your sister getting married again?” He asked.

“In ten months.” Arya replied almost excitedly but Gendry shook his head.

“Arya, you have to remember the situation you are in right now. That Bolton bastard is after you. I can’t just leave you here in Winterfell knowing that he’ll come for you anytime.” Gendry tried to explain to her.

Arya huffed a frustrated sigh then she looked at him with imploring eyes. “Gendry, please. You are my best friend. You have to understand that Winterfell is my home and once I leave Winterfell, I know that nothing is ever going to be the same again. At least give me this one last chance to say goodbye to my childhood home and allow me a few more months to stay here. I don’t really see anything wrong with you protecting me. If anything, I am more than grateful for that.” She implored
desperately. “It’s just that…” Arya continued, her eyes now downcast. “I need this. I need to be able to remember what it feels like to be home before I am going to be sent off to marry you… because I may never be able to get home after that.” She bit her lip tentatively before facing him to speak again.

“Please, Gendry… If you will give me this chance then I will gracefully submit myself to travel to King’s Landing with my sister in due time. I promise to keep myself safe here at all times and I will even have one of your guards watch over me if you like. I will no longer escape out of Winterfell by myself and I will do anything you want me to do when I get to King’s Landing. Anything. But for now, please allow me to do this for my own sake.” Her appeal was getting more and more desperate that she even bargained to do anything he wanted her to do just for this one last taste of independence.

When she looked up at him, Gendry was intently looking at her with a hint of pity in his eyes. Finally releasing a sigh, he spoke.

“Five months.” His face was very serious when he said those words.

Arya furrowed her brows. “What?” She hissed, narrowing her eyes at him.

“You’ll go with your sister to King’s Landing in five months, not ten. I can send a raven to Highgarden and inform Lord Willas to schedule their arrival at Winterfell earlier. Then you can all stay in King’s Landing before the wedding happens. Hence you will have more time with your sister in the capital and I will be welcoming the whole party as valued guests.” He proposed.

Arya grit her teeth in annoyance, although careful enough not to let Gendry show her temper.

“Nine months.” She tried to bargain.

He still looked at her humorlessly.

“Six months.” Came another of his proposal.

Arya straightened in her seat, holding his stolid gaze.

“Eight months.” Arya stated unalteringly, trying to sound very certain.

“Seven months. That’s final.” He told her with finality coupled with his brooding authority.

She clenched her fists to control her growing displeasure.

“Fine. Seven it is. As His Grace wishes.” She seethed through gritted teeth. This time, Gendry made a very content but smug smirk.

“Very well then.” He stated. “That’s settled. I’ll tell the rest of the council immediately. And I’ll send a raven to Highgarden after the meeting.” Arya only nodded her head.

They stayed quiet for a few minutes until she spoke. “Well, I guess that sums up our compromise. That wasn’t hard enough, was it? I should get going now.” Arya said, motioning to stand up. Before she did, she looked him in the eye sincerely. “Thank you for considering this, Gendry. I really appreciate it.” Came her grateful statement, giving him an awkward smile.

She finally stood up and motioned to walk back towards the door but Gendry blocked her from passing through.
“You’re one stubborn little shit, are you?” He stated bluntly, looking at her dangerously as he inched his way closer to her proximity.

Arya continued to stare back at him defiantly.

“Yes, I am, Your Grace. That is why I am a very poor choice for a wife.” She replied bravely.

Gendry didn’t seem to hear her sarcastic retort because he seemed to be lost in thought as he continued eyeing her.

As she looked further into those eyes, she found herself losing all her resolve and suddenly getting lost under his burning gaze. Arya subtly chewed at her lip to keep her impulses at bay. But Gendry was still looking at her hungrily as his eyes traveled from her eyes down to her lips, then to her neck and finally at the pale skin at the top of her bosom. She found the need to swallow the lump on her throat but when she felt his hand at the back of her neck pulling her closer to his face, she almost died at the sensation.

“No, my lady…” He whispered enticingly in response, his breath hot on her lips. “You were never really a part of a choice nor an option to begin with… There’s just you.” He continued. “And I can never really deny you anything, no…” He trailed off as he moved to trail his nose on her sensitive neck, giving her tingles in between her thighs and shivers all over her body.

His growing stubble ticked her most sensitive pulse points that she was even unaware of the loud whimper she elicited. She heard Gendry grunt a short laugh at her reaction as he continued to savor the scent on her neck. Then without further preamble, she felt Gendry plant a soft kiss on the swollen love mark made by him when they were making out passionately at the forge. She felt like exploding into a million minute particles.

Before she could place her hands on his chest and feel each crevice of his muscle and pull him closer to her, Gendry pulled away abruptly.

“I should get back to your Father’s solar now. We still have important matters to discuss in the meeting. By your leave, my lady.” He seriously told her.

And he was gone.

The library fell silent again and the air grew very still. Only the deafening hammering of her heart could be heard.

And just like that, Arya was left in her thoughts to ponder over all the things that Prince Gendry Baratheon just said.
Chapter 13: Parting

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Gendry

-  

He was at the forge again.

Toiling.

Sleep to him seemed like a non-existent desire now. His mind was crowded with all of his responsibilities for the North and the entire kingdom, and now, for making sure to keep her safe at all costs.

Her.

Why can she not see that he’s doing all of this for her welfare? Why can she not see him as someone with the best intentions? Does he even have the right to make her see all of this? When in the first place, she has been right.

He does not own her.

All the written papers may say that they were to marry based upon mutual agreement between their fathers, but then again, those were just papers. And she still does not want to marry. Not him, not anyone. She made it as clear as day the moment she met him.

He hammered diligently on the ringing steel right before him. Pounding. His left hand clutching to the edge of the steel while his right hand brought all of the force to it. This has always been the perfect distraction to him. Even back in King’s Landing when the weight of his responsibilities was burdening, he always found hammering steel the perfect means to keep his sanity intact.

Especially now.

He was on the verge of losing his sanity.

All because of her.

After getting to know who she was, everything has been about her and because of her. Every fabric of his being is now attached to her. After all, she was his drug and he could no longer go on existing if he does not take a dose of her.

He was going crazy for her.

He sighed. Deep.

It was exhausting.

Although he was hammering away his frustrations in the form of pounding on precious steel, his mind was adrift elsewhere. He was dangerously recalling the feel of her in his hands.
Days ago…

He was awoken to the sound of a series of knocks at his door because right after he spoke with Arya inside the confines of the library about his plans of taking her to King’s Landing with him, he bolted to his room and locked the door from the rest of the world. He was temporarily taken from the excruciating throes of their reality. And now, he was awoken to the sound of someone knocking.

Flying a mental curse inside his mind, he rose up, unlocked the door and answered.

“What is it?” He hissed in annoyance, rubbing his weary eyes and stifling a yawn.

It was Ser Arys. His most loyal Kingsguard.

“There is no need for that, Ser Arys. I know where Lady Arya is. I’ll go get her. I was the one she last spoke to last night. Please tell her maids that there is no need to inform the lord and lady of Winterfell.” He told him with assurance and authority. But deep inside, he feared that she might really be gone. That she might have ran away.

Then again, he remembered being told that she has no plans of running away. It would bring dishonor to her house, she said. But perhaps her mind has changed after their argument that night. She was after all impulsive and a little bit fickle-minded.

Gendry bolted towards the library, and when he found her asleep on the divan, a wave of relief surged through him. Nymeria was at the foot of the divan, resting and waiting for her mistress to wake up. It was as if her direwolf had understood his wishes to have Nymeria by her side at all times because her wolf never left her.

Nymeria gave him an acknowledging look and rested her furry body back on the weathered floor. He carefully walked towards her on tip-toes, still half-naked and barefoot, and not minding at all the coldness seeping through his veins.

When he saw her face, the stains of her tears were still evident and her eyes were swollen. He felt a pang in his heart. Because he had hurt her. And he had made her cry last night.

He knelt at the foot of the divan to carefully observe her, watch her. She looked very peaceful while sleeping. The tranquility of her features masked her sadness. As if she never really had to face the reality that awaits her. The bitter reality of him taking her from the only home she has known her whole life.

He slowly lifted his hand and ran his knuckles along her cheek, feeling her. Her cheeks were as soft as her whole skin. His lips curved into a subtle smile. He realized that he loved stroking her cheeks like that. He was taking his daily dose of her. Because as far as he recalled, she was his drug.

After a few heartbeats, he finally made the move to lift her up and carry her in his arms. She was a bit cold when he touched her.

As cold as her heart. He thought.

She must have been shivering from the draft inside the library already. There was a sense of urgency
the moment he lifted her up. He hoped that the warmth of his naked chest would suffice for now and give that temporary heat she needed. Because she needed warmth.

His warmth.

He was careful enough not to wake her when he started moving. Surprisingly, she never noticed that she was already being carried. Instead, she surprised him when she circled her arms around his neck and snuggled closer to him as he walked back to her bedchambers. He could feel her steady breathing on his neck and it relieved all the tension in his muscles.

He held her tighter as if he never wanted to let go.

Because he never wanted to let her go.

This was right.

Arya in his arms was always right. She was all the right things in his life. He realized.

And why can she not ever see that?

When he opened the door to her chambers with the help of Ser Arys who was already waiting outside, Nymeria padded ahead and went to her place near the glowing fireplace. Her bedmaids were already there, waiting for them to arrive. They had just finished preparing her featherbed for her. They had those dreamy looks in their eyes as they saw him carrying her. As if they were seeing the songs of chivalry come to life. As if the fantasy of princes helping out ladies were now a reality, an actuality... As if they were finally seeing love in between him and her.

If only they knew...

After he tucked her to her comfortable sheets, he sat on the side of her bed on a close proximity to her. His arm was circling the top of her head, keeping her close to him. He was still afraid of letting her go. Then he faced her bedmaids and flashed a curt smile.

“Thank you for preparing my lady’s chambers. You may start packing up her things today but please make sure to do it as quietly as you can. She badly needs to rest.” He told them. Then he released a sigh, “I need some time with Lady Arya right now. I would like for you to leave us. Thank you.” Gendry gave them his final order. “Do not come in unless I tell you so.” He added.

Arya’s bedmaids made a stifling girlish giggle before they curtsied and scurried out of her chambers, closing the door shut.

He was now alone with her.

If only time would stop so that he could be by her side when she’s sleeping. But he knew that it was impossible because he had a lot of things to accomplish that day. For the hundredth time in his existence, he cursed himself for being born as the only living heir of King Robert Baratheon. Because he had duties to fulfill to the rest of the kingdom. Because he could not spend all of his time for her. Because she doesn’t want to marry him and accept the crown along with it. Because he cannot stay her best friend all the time.

Because of all things...

His back slouched on the bedboard. He wanted to fall back to sleep, only this time right beside her. If he had to risk his life being stabbed by her because he was invading her privacy, just so that he would be this close to her, he would.
He doesn’t care at all.

Let him be damned to the Seven Hells then.

He temporarily closed his eyes and allowed the growing silence to seep through his system. He could hear her breathing at his side. She was already very deep in her sleep. He could tell.

A few seconds had passed when he opened his eyes again.

Back to the bitter reality.

He slightly turned towards her, watching her again.

He inched closer to her, hoping to inhale her intoxicating scent. It never failed. Because her scent was now engulfing his entire being.

Ensnaring him.

This felt right, too…

Then his knuckles were back to caressing the softness of her cheek. He was hoping too that she could feel his touch, his warmth. That for once, she would acknowledge him and his open affection instead of allowing herself to be eaten by her own pointless denials.

Before he willed himself to stand up, to get back to the reality, he drew closer to her, his hand now cupping the side of her face. His blue eyes were still intensely looking at her. He pulled himself a little closer until his lips were planted on her forehead. He gave her a chaste kiss there. Then it moved to her cheek, then finally, gave a lingering kiss on her soft, nearly-parted lips.

As if she could feel it.

Feel him.

As if she could feel his kiss.

Before he drove himself into irreversible madness, he pulled away.

Finally.

He willed himself to think that in time she could finally acknowledge him as more than her best friend. As more than her betrothed by paper.

He gingerly stood up from her featherbed. He gave her one last look from where he towered over her sleeping frame. He looked at that serene face once more. Then he turned away without ever looking back. Because looking back would mean pulling himself back to her. And he could not afford that. Not right now when he had to become the prince that he was meant to be. He had duties to fulfill more than drowning himself in her intoxicating presence, more than allowing himself to be inebriated by the drug that was Arya Stark.

He opened the door and walked back to his chambers to take a long, warm bath and start a new day.

A new day of being tied to the invisible chain of nobility.

He pulled back his own mask and wore it with dignity.
He was, after all, the prince of Westeros.

Gendry’s mind drifted back to here and now after he recalled those thoughts of her. Before he even realized it, the steel he was hammering was finally done.

It was ready.

He held it up right before his eyes and observed it. His keen eyesight could tell that it looked perfect now, with perfect balance and perfect weight.

It was perfect for small hands.

He dipped the steel in the bucket of water on his side and listened to the sizzling sound it gave. It was relief. It was the only song he knew. In some way, it made him feel truly at home. Because indeed, this was his trade. This was where he was best at. Not running a kingdom, not being the prince. He was best at being the blacksmith. He was best at being just Gendry.

Lips curling into a content smile, he finally craved for the long sleep he has been waiting for. A promise of a good rest was all he needed now before going back to King’s Landing and continuing his duties as the prince, leaving all the good things behind.

Leaving the best behind.

Although temporary, it still hurt him to be thousands of leagues away from her. He had to keep himself hopeful though in the promise of seeing her face again after how long again?

Seven months?

Seven Hells.

Seven months seemed like an eternity to him. But that was the best bargain he could offer. It was the best she could take as well.

It was the best for both of them.

To have time apart for each of them to grow. And if that’s what makes her happy, then so be it. Because like he said, he can never really deny her anything. Not even this. Even if it slowly kills him to be away from her. Even with the threat of that Bolton bastard looming. He had to make his guards swear their life to her. To protect her at all costs even if it meant their own lives.

He had to.

He ought to.

Because she was everything to him.

Because he was leaving the best behind. Because he could not afford to lose her. Because of many more reasons…

Arya
After almost three months of staying in Winterfell, it was finally time for the royal family to head back to King’s Landing. This time, Arya’s Lord Father will be going back with them to start his duties as the new Hand of the King in the capital, leaving Robb as acting Lord of Winterfell.

On the day of their departure, Arya woke up earlier than usual with a twinge of sadness in her heart. She was sad because her father was leaving them and even surprisingly more sad at the thought of Gendry finally going back to where he truly belonged. She felt sorry for being so adamant of fighting for her last days and months of freedom. But it was the only way for her to savor the feeling of being at home before she gets shipped off to the capital. Before she was to become the prized vessel they all wanted her to be—a lady, a princess, a wife and a mother.

She felt sorry for him. Even more sorry for still being indecisive. She was sorry for thinking that she will still never allow herself to become those things stated above. She was sorry that she would have to help him find a more fitting woman to become his wife.

Even if it would hurt her.

Deep inside.

Because he was still her best friend. Because he was the only one. But she had to fight for this.

Even if this was the last fight she would ever have…

Despite her outward and pure hatred towards their arranged betrothal, she could not really hide from the fact that Gendry was a very kind person especially towards her. She had never really thought that it could come down to this after all their arguments and bickering about some things they don’t agree on. At the end of the day, she realized that they would still run to each other for comfort and solace and become themselves without being forced to act as the prince to the Seven Kingdoms and a highborn lady of House Stark. After all the fighting and bickering, they would come back to becoming just Arya and Gendry.

They were their true selves around each other.

Sometimes, they would end up talking rather profound conversations about the way of the world and they would not even find themselves getting bored. When she came to realize it all, they never really had a dull moment. They just had that unspoken understanding about everything and it greatly surprised Arya. She may have Jon as her favorite brother, but she has never had anyone completely understand her the way Gendry did.

He was surprisingly everything she wanted after all…

Arya unwillingly and lazily rose up to sit on her featherbed. For some unknown reason, she really did not want the day to end because of that sudden unexplainable fear of waking up to another day knowing that he is no longer in the chambers right next to hers. Somehow she would miss that feeling of having him so close to her room. She slumped her shoulders and closed her eyes for a moment.

What in seven hells was happening to her? Why is a person like him suddenly affecting her so much?

She heaved a deep sigh and opened her eyes again.

After finally rising up to her feet and washing up her face, she changed into a beautiful midnight blue dress. It almost looked black if it was not focused under the light. Since she was feeling unusually tired that day, she didn’t bother tying her hair in a braid or in a messy bun. Her dark brown wavy
tresses were hung loose below her shoulders.

She made a short glance of herself in the looking glass and found that her dress still had largely emphasized her womanly features. Her budding bosom was being put into emphasis by her dress and it hugged her in all the right corners to show her forming curves. This time, she was not dressing up to show her outright imprisonment to nobility. No, she was wearing a dress to remind herself that she was still a lady by birth… and because she felt sorry for him. Because she wanted to be with him but could not afford to leave her real home. At least he would see that she was being the proper lady for once.

At least he would see that she was trying…

With one last look at herself, she turned away from the looking glass and made a few steps towards her wooden chest of clothes to get something she had wrapped in a clean cloth. She noted how she had bundled it neatly in a white and grey cloth which gave her a little pride in herself for the small accomplishment she made. She was usually a pragmatic person. And being the practical one, she normally would not mind how something was done as long as it is done nevertheless, but right now was an exception. Hugging it close to her chest, she finally headed out to the castle’s Great Hall to break her fast.

The hour finally came when it was time for the King’s party to leave Winterfell along with Father. The rest of the Stark family was out in the courtyard just like when the royal party arrived. Arya stood beside Bran and Sansa as they bid their goodbyes to the King. Gendry followed and left his departing words with his older brothers and Theon, seeing that they have already formed a close bond in the months that he stayed in Winterfell. Then Gendry bid farewell to her lady mother, to Sansa, Bran and Rickon.

Gendry said his goodbyes to Arya last on purpose. When he was already standing in front of her, he gave her a solemn yet sincere smile. The rest of her family, especially her brothers were now looking at both of them knowingly as they exchanged their farewells. Bringing the bundle with her, she carefully lifted both her hands and handed the bundle of cloth to him.

“Here’s the cloak you lent me that day we got soaked under the rain. You see, I washed it clean all by myself, Your Grace.” Arya told him with a hint of pride in her mocking tone. “And you’ll find yourself equally surprised that I have wrapped your cloak very neatly with this cloth. It took me the whole hour to do that considering my lack of fine graces with my hands.” She added with sarcasm, giving him a wink.

Gendry gave her a wide snicker when he motioned to take the bundle from her. But instead of fully taking it in his hands, he pressed one of her hands with his palm and held it firm and pushed the bundle back to her. “That’s yours to keep now, my lady. You can even sleep with it to keep you warm every night if you want to.” He told her dangerously in a low gruff voice that made Arya blush, returning a wink to her.

Arya glared at him as she felt pure embarrassment in front of her family. But her cheeks betrayed an evident flush.

“Stupid. Are you serious? You think I’d fall for that?!?” She spat almost loudly.

She wasn’t mistaken when she saw her mother and sister giving a disapproving shake in the head and a very fatal glare. Her brothers only tried to stifle their laughs, including her father and the King. Gendry let out small bursts of laughter at her response.

Then without minding the whole of Winterfell’s eyes on them, Gendry extended his hand to her for a
formal handshake. A gesture that told her that he has forgiven her for all her stupid stubbornness. Arya took it willingly and gave his hand a firm and civil grasp. It was nothing too intimate. Gendry only looked at her intently as he continued to hold her hand while Arya’s other hand was clutching the bundle of cloth to her chest.

Then she found herself getting lost into those blue eyes once more. She felt her heart make a sudden lurch. Before she could turn her eyes away from his piercing stare, Gendry pulled her closer to him through the hand he was holding and brought her to a chaste embrace. His arms were now gently wrapping around her small frame. She felt his warmth radiating from his chest like the familiar furnace and it made her insides go ballistic. She wanted to pull away from him completely because she might not be able to control herself any longer. She might end up not letting go of him nor his tight embrace.

She might end up traveling with him back to King’s Landing at all…

“Stay the same, Arya. I’ll see you real soon.” He whispered carefully in her ear in a raspy voice, low enough to be out of earshot to anyone looking at them right now. “Although to me, seven months seem like a lifetime of waiting for you. But I know that this is what makes you happy. So please keep yourself happy. Because I could never afford to see you sad. Especially if your sadness is because of me. Because you are still my friend after all. You are still my best friend. Please keep yourself safe. At all times.”

Arya was sure that she felt her cheeks blushing when he said those words. She felt her body shiver and tremble at his words, and his touch. He only tightened his embrace. As if he really did not want to let go. She found herself speechless. She found herself suddenly trying to hold back those tears.

“Look under your pillow when you head back to your chambers today. I may have left something of importance there. You can keep it if you want. Or you can break it. Either way, it has always been yours to keep. I am leaving away a part of me to you. Use it as you will.” He added, still in a soft whisper.

“Thank you, Gendry. For everything. I’m sorry for being a pain in your ass. But you’re still my best friend regardless.” It was all that Arya could say. Because if she said more, she would surely burst into tears. And then it would go back to willing herself to come with him to the capital, weakening her resolve of staying in Winterfell.

Gendry lightly chuckled. “That’s surprising coming from you. But thank you, too. I’ll miss all our arguments and bickering for seven months.” He japed.

Arya tightened her hold on him.

Gendry still had his arms wrapped around her, feeling that furnace-like heat emanating from his body.

She felt at home.

She didn’t want to let go.

Because of all the reasons she couldn’t yet dare to admit herself.

“Don’t let anyone, even me, make you forget who you really are, my lady. Grow to be the strong woman you were meant to be.” Came his final words before finally pulling away to meet her eyes.

His sincere blue eyes were now looking down at her. Arya allowed herself to look back into his intense gaze. Then to her surprise, he inclined closer to her to plant a soft, chaste kiss on her temple.
She felt him inhaling in her scent. As if to savor her for one last time.

Then she found herself even more surprised when his lips traveled to the junction of her ear and neck to plant another kiss there. His other hand was cupping the other side of her neck and jaw. The moment his lips touched her pulse points, she died. Only to be risen again to the burst of this new alien feeling inside her.

It felt right.

This feeling felt right. She could tell.

And he felt right.

Someday soon, all things considered, she would feel this kind of warmth again after seven months.

Seven months.

*Seven bloody Hells.*

She never realized how long a wait that could be. She never realized how long they would both be apart from each other. She willed herself to think that she ought to do this. For once, for her own sake. Before she submits herself to her duty as a lady. Family. Duty. Honor. She had to live by those words after seven months.

Seven months.

Her mind made an internal curse. His warmth left the moment he pulled away from her. She mustered all her strength for self-control. Or else she would openly throw herself at him. And perhaps beg him to take her with him.

But no.

Seven months.

That’s all that’s left of her last days of freedom.

She ought to use it well. She ought to be thankful to him even for considering. Because he was the kindest prince she has ever known. Because he was her best friend.

Because he was everything after all.

*****

After the royal party departed, all of Winterfell was silent.

Everything was as it was before.

As for Arya, instead of joining the rest of her family for a midday meal, she ordered her maids to bring her food to her chambers, making an excuse that she was caught under an excruciating headache. Whether her family believed her or not, she didn’t care. Let them think what they would like to think. She didn’t feel like interacting with anyone anyway.
She wanted to be alone. She needed time for herself. She needed time to wean herself from the after-effects of Gendry Baratheon. She needed to get used to this feeling of not having him around.

Before she could peek under her pillows to feed the curiosity that has been looming inside her after he told her of what was in store for her, she tried to distract her subtle growing excitement by taking off her dress. She threw it on the wooden chair across her chambers. She found herself more comfortable in her nightclothes so she changed into them right away.

When one of her maids brought in her midday meal, she ordered not to be disturbed for the rest of the day. After her maid was gone, the only audible sound was the crackling fire in her fireplace. Then she finally willed herself to sneak under her pillows.

There she found an unexpected surprise.

It was a small silver dagger glinting under the ray of sunshine from her window. And by instinct she knew that it was forged by Gendry. She picked it up and held it in her hands. She inspected the steel closely and immediately knew that this was not just any steel.

It was Valyrian steel.

And as she squinted, her eyes caught a small engraving on one end of the dagger. It had a mark of a bull.

It was just so Gendry.

A smile formed on her lips.

With a swift, practiced left-hand, she tested the dagger for herself, swinging it before throwing it on her wooden door. The very sharp edge of the dagger landed with a muted thud. It hit straight on her target. Just on the right spot.

Perfect.

Even the balance and the hold of the dagger was perfect.

It was as if he knew what was right for her. Of course he always knew what’s right for her. All the time. Arya lazily stood up to retrieve the dagger and she carefully placed it on top of her bedside table.

Aside from the dagger she found under her pillows, she also found a familiar folded piece of paper with the seal of a bull. It was the exact same seal from the first letter she got from him. She picked up the letter and broke the seal with her new dagger. It tore away the wax seal in an instant. She inhaled a deep sigh before finally unfolding the paper. There she saw his very neat and familiar handwriting.

A,

I hope you are liking the dagger under your pillow. It is a simple gift as a sign of our friendship. This may be made under the fires of Winterfell’s forge but it has been branded by my own blacksmith seal. Do whatever you want with it. Keep it, discard it, destroy it. Use it as you will. This was only ever yours to keep.
I’ll see you in seven months. For the meantime, I will drown myself in reading the same books you have read in your library just to let time pass by. I think the library in the Red Keep also has them.

I’m anticipating an excruciating wait, by the way. Because Seven months is too long being apart from you. Because I’ll be missing your stubbornness. Because you’re one stubborn little shit. But I don’t mind. You’re still my best friend.

Please write back to make it easier for me while waiting for you.

Until we meet again, My Lady.

Always your dear friend,

G

Arya heaved a deep breath she didn’t know she was holding. She lay on her bed, her hands splayed across her sheets. Her eyes darted at the ceiling.

How is this even possible?

How is it even legal for him to exist and be everything to her?

He was obviously doing something to her. Perhaps thawing the glacial winter in the depths of her soul. His warmth was touching her.

Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to be immersed in deep contemplation.

Gendry Baratheon was again successful in taking her breath away.

-
"As for me, I know for a fact that you are the only one driving me to insanity, Arya. I am going crazy just thinking about you. And I can never really stop thinking about you. You do something to me that I really cannot explain. As it is hard for me to admit, I am afraid that I am going crazy for you."

Chapter 14: Corresponding

- 

Dearest Gendry,

Indeed, I am ever grateful for the token you gave in the form of a very prepossessing dagger. More than that, I found myself really glad and very much surprised that you know the things that strike my fancies. With that, I shall forever be thankful.

How was the trip back to King’s Landing? I am guessing that an awful lot of boredom awaits you on the road back, seeing the sullen look on your face when you left. How sad. How shall I say it in a more “empathetic” way? Well, there, there... you poor thing. You need not worry though, we shall be seeing each other in six months and fifteen days. More or less, if the weather permits.

You might be wondering where I am writing my response to your letter now. Well, I am basking in the comforting solace of the First Keep after having escaped Septa Mordane’s most boring lessons about advanced dress-making and sewing. By the gods, those lessons are awful! I would rather be here by myself, keeping watch of the whole of Winterfell while they are indulging themselves in pricking their pretty little fingers.

On a lighter note, Nymeria also misses you, you know. I tell you, that wolf of mine has grown a certain thing for you, I’ve noticed. You seem to be her new favorite, she’s even sulkier now that you’re gone. Silly wolf favoring the handsome prince over her mistress!

I think I hear the guards looking for me below. I better go. And don’t worry, your guards are doing a wonderful job protecting me. I am keeping my promise of staying away from harm or danger. Be cheerful for that.
Take care of yourself for me, or else I won’t have anyone to tour me around King’s Landing.
Looking forward to visiting Flea Bottom. Your stories about where you grew up honestly intrigued me.

Till next time, Your Grace.

Your most loyal subject and friend,

Arya

****

My dearest Arya,

I am very glad to know that you liked the dagger I made. And I am more than happy to know that I’ve struck your fancy, considering how hard to please you are. But I don’t mind, as long as I was successful in making you happy.

I honestly did not expect that you are taking much of your time writing a response to my letter. Please take no offense to that though, because after the raven came and when I received your folded piece of sealed paper, I was overjoyed. Literally. I could not bring myself to stop smiling stupidly. Because your letter is my saving grace to the unending adversities I am facing right now in helping my father rule this damn kingdom.

If only you know what a headache those stupid council meetings are. Oftentimes I find myself having the urge to bang my head on the wall and hope that it will fracture my skull. It’s excruciating and tiresome. I have always been tired lately, especially after I came back from Winterfell.

And since you asked how the travel back to the capital was, well, you were right in all means. I was bored. And aside from that, I know sarcasm when I see one. Or in this case, when I read one. Very well done, my lady. Always the sarcastic little Stark, are we?
You should at least be kinder to your septa, you know. She taught you about life, regardless. And stop trying to escape all the time. At least do it, once or twice a week, not all the time. If I was there, surely I would be the one turning you back in to her. She still deserves credit for all her hard work of keeping up with your behavior. So try not to give her a headache.

And what can I say? I’m flattered. Really? You just called me a ‘handsome prince’ so that should mean something, right? So you do find me handsome? That’s fresh. Now at least I know you’re not immune to all my ‘handsomeness.’ It’s a great achievement to at least know that you admit to that.

I miss Nymeria, too. Like I said before, your direwolf likes me. It’s obvious enough. And it’s also very, very obvious that she takes after her mistress. Nymeria is practically showing me what you are refusing to show and trying to deny. I like your wolf a million times already for that.

And I miss you too… because you said “Nymeria also misses you,” which is a direct translation to you telling me that you “also” miss me. You’re so endearing, my lady.

I am glad you are keeping yourself safe. Don’t worry, I’ll do the same to preserve myself. For you. Just for you. Because I’ll show you to Flea Bottom where I grew up.

And you’re not my subject, you’re my equal. My best friend. Remember that.

I can’t wait to show you my world, Arya. I’ll see you soon. Till next time, My Lady.

Sincerely yours,

Gendry

****
Dear Gendry,

I am not your ‘dearest.’ Surely there are other girls at court who are more dear to you right now. And they’d be willing to give you their world. I am just your friend, your confidante, your helping hand. I am your best friend. I am not so sure what lies behind the context of ‘dear.’

Anyway, I would like to thank you for responding. It feels heartwarming knowing that you want to show your world to me when I get there. To be honest, that’s one of the few things I am looking forward to when I move to the capital. At least, getting to know your place will give me a new perspective to the world outside of Winterfell. Because after all, learning new places and new things is a continuous, constant process.

And yes, I have always been sarcastic. Surely, you could also see the sarcasm underlying in the word ‘handsome’ used to describe you. Stop being so full of yourself, stupid. Screw Nymeria too. That foolish wolf has been nothing but a pain in my arse right now. It’s as if she’s always looking for you. And not me. How in Seven buggering Hells did you bribe her into liking you?

I am writing this letter in the middle of the night inside my chambers, just so you know. I am having trouble sleeping right now, so I’m writing away everything I am thinking to you. I am literally burning the midnight oil as we speak.

And as you ordered, I didn’t skip my lessons with Septa Mordane this week. In fact, I was rather well-behaved and she was surprised at that. She even got to the point of asking me if I was sick. Funny. You should have seen the look on my poor septa’s curious face.

What about you? What have you been up to lately? Still busy with the council meetings? I would have asked you about how my father is, but he also writes to us frequently. I do hope that he’s fine out there though. But I am confident that Jory and the rest of the Winterfell guards are well-abled to protect him from any harm.

I know this is hard to admit but yes, I do miss you. I miss our times here in Winterfell together. Surprisingly, I also miss our procrastinating hours in the godswoods doing nothing but talk about all things.

Hopefully we could get to do more things there in King’s Landing. Take me to your favorite places. I want to see how beautiful they are. Take me to your library so that I may discover all the books I haven’t encountered yet in my entire existence. Take me anywhere you want to take me so that we
could relive those memories when we grow old… because apparently, we’re intended to grow old together, are we not? Might as well start those little marvels when I get to King’s Landing…

Tell me your thoughts. I want to know all of them.

Thank you for taking your time to read my replies.

Your friend for always,

Arya

****

Dearest Arya,

You silly girl. By this time, you should already know that you are the only dearest to my heart, especially for the fact that you are my closest friend. You are actually the only one I share these thoughts with. And I wouldn’t want it to be with anyone else either way. I still want to share everything with you. Please have it in your mind to remember that.

Well, I am also writing this letter in the middle of the night. Because for the past few weeks, I have always been very busy during the day. And good job by the way for sticking to your lady lessons. That’s my girl. I’m proud of you, my lady.

As for me, the council meetings here and there have been very hectic. I have been going out of the Red Keep more often to look at the on-going construction of some infrastructures here in the city, including the fortification of the walls. Tiresome job. I envy you sometimes for staying there in Winterfell.

As you know, I’ve always loved Winterfell’s cold weather. And I wish I was there to feel the coldness of the autumn snows. I hate the heat here in the capital. Seven Hells. If I could, I would have preferred to not wear any top at all and walk around the castle half-naked. You’d love that, wouldn’t
Don’t blush now, you’re so beautiful when you fluster. Did you know that? And besides, you can get to see me half-naked when you get here. If you wish to. Because I’ve been constantly working in the forge to relieve my stressful days. Why? What else were you thinking? Gods, I can’t seem to forget the look on your face the day I saw you standing at the door of Winterfell’s forge, watching me hammering steel.

And yes, my dear Arya, I will take you to my favorite places in King’s Landing. It’s going to be just the two of us. I will share to you all the things I love. We could even go stargazing if you’d like. I know a place where we can be under the stars by ourselves, undisturbed. I can’t wait to show everything to you.

More than that, it is the greatest news having to know that you are finally admitting the fact that you miss me. It wasn’t so hard to say, was it not? Besides, there’s nothing wrong saying those words to me. If anything, those words keep me going. It is my drive and my hope that someday, soon, we will be seeing each other again.

And you want to know my thoughts? Well, here’s one... I think... that you’re the most amazing and interesting person I have ever met.

How about you? You know, we should do this every time. A thought for every letter. And let’s see where this goes.

You should get some sleep now. Although I know that by the moment you receive this letter, you would have already slept your way to a soulful slumber... but either way, you know the logic.

Rest well, my lady. And sleep tight. You look so peaceful when you sleep. I like watching you sleep.

Missing you,

Gendry
Dear Gendry,

You stupid, crazy oaf! I wasn’t blushing! And I don’t care if you parade around the whole of Westeros half-naked! Because really, there are more pressing matters than swooning over that stupid body of yours. They’re all just muscles anyway and you can show them to the world for all I care!

And how many times do I have to tell you that I am not your ‘dear’? And I am not your girl… no one owns me.

This response will be shorter for now. I find myself really exhausted today. I’ve been practicing with Jon this morning.

Anyway, I liked your suggestion about giving one thought for every letter… and here’s what I think, I think that you’re the most infuriating, stupid, prince I’ve ever known in the whole of Westeros… but I also think that you’re more than amazing. You do wonders, Gendry. You can change the world if you can. Seriously.

I’m off to slumber myself away now. You should take a rest as well. Or take a day off from your princely duties and have time for yourself.

Goodnight, Your Grace.

Partly missing you,

Arya

****

My dearest Arya,
Stuck in council meeting today. Stuck and bored. Literally listening to Grandmaester Pycelle blabbering about some shit I don’t really know.

I’m pretending to listen to him while I am writing so my handwriting may not be that eligible, but I know this is still better than your normal one. Yours is horrid, I tell you.

My thoughts today? I think you’re just trying to deny the fact that you’re so into me right now. Admit it already. Or else I would never ever stop teasing you. I love teasing you like this.

And you’re wrong. I can’t change the world. But together, we can. Me and you. Remember? We can do things differently when we rule.

I’m missing you every day.

Yours for always,

Gendry

****

Dearest Arya,

Are you mad at me? I didn’t mean to tease you like that, I’m sorry. I haven’t received any replies from you lately so I’m guessing that you might be angry at something I said. Whatever it is, I apologize.

What I think right now? I think not hearing from you is the most excruciating feeling. Because then you would keep me guessing. And I am left hanging. And I don’t know what you’re thinking right now. It scares me. So much.

Please write back soon.
Sincerely,

Gendry

****

Dear Gendry,

I’m sorry I was not able to reply to your previous letters. Unfortunately, my left hand got injured when I sparred with Bran in the practice yard. I got hit with his wooden sword and my hand was swollen for days. Maester Luwin told me not to use my hand for two weeks.

Well, on the lighter side, I get to skip my sewing lessons and lie around my chambers the whole day, sleeping, eating or reading anything I want. I cannot order Sansa or my brothers to write a response to your letters on my behalf because they don’t even have any clue at all that we’ve been exchanging letters in the past months. This is like our little secret, you know. No one else knows of this. Except for Nymeria though. And I like that this is the one thing we get to share… just you and me, our little piece of peace and quiet.

My thoughts? I think you are going a little bit exaggerated when you said that waiting for my response was excruciating. There’s nothing more excruciating than the physical pain I felt in my hand when stupid Bran accidentally hit me. I think that you badly need a day off from your job. That’s a tiresome one, I reckon. I think you should go out and have fun. Take some time strolling the corners of King’s Landing without being the prince. Go out, disguise yourself and survey your city dressed as a commoner, in that way you would know the real thoughts of your people. I think you would do well with that considering your humble beginnings.

And you know what else I think? I think you’re the most humble prince that ever existed. You never brag about your status and you never use it to gain validation. I like how true you are. Although I know you have used your authority over me, I am well aware that you only did that because I was being very stubborn. And I understand it now. Thank you for always thinking of my welfare. You should also think about yourself sometimes. Don’t be too selfless.

I miss writing like this so this letter might be a little longer. I feel like I’ve missed out on a lot of things to tell you these past weeks.
Winterfell is peaceful so far. No threats whatsoever from the Bolton Bastard. Your guards are still doing a great job guarding Winterfell’s walls.

Robb and Jon, even Theon are busy running the rest of the castle with their delegated responsibilities. My Mother has also been helping Robb out with the finances. Sansa has been exchanging love letters with her betrothed and she swoons like a simpering little lady every time a raven arrives from Highgarden. Bran is still Bran, except that after he accidentally hit my hand, he’s been visiting my chambers more frequently because he’s feeling a bit guilty of what happened to me. Oftentimes, I would find that to my advantage because I get to order him around and he obediently obliges. Like there was this one time when I asked him to go fetch me some water because I was really thirsty, he immediately bolted out of my chambers and after a few short minutes, he was back with what I needed.

And oh, I get to tease him by the way about his newly announced betrothal to Meera Reed without him getting annoyed. But I think, deep inside, he really fancies Meera that’s why he was not so affected with what was arranged for him. Bran and Meera’s brother, Jojen, are even very close friends. My brother’s obviously in love with her.

Then there’s Rickon. Well, he’s sometimes a pain in the arse. He still looks for you, by the way. He always looks up to you, I’ve noticed. I think he also likes you the way he does for my brothers.

And I forgot to mention to you that finally, after years of waiting for the right lady for him, Robb finally found someone he wanted to marry. It’s unfair, really. Why does he get to choose who to marry without being forced into an arranged betrothal? Maybe Robb and my Father had made an agreement a long time ago about that.

Robb’s going to marry Lady Jeyne Westerling. And they are going to get married in the next few months, even way ahead of Sansa. I think he just can’t wait to... never mind that. I think he’s so in love with her. Well, both of them are so in love with each other. I can’t blame them, my brother is really a charmer when it comes to women. It’s also a good thing that Lady Jeyne is kind-hearted and down-to-earth, or else I would have to sabotage their betrothal if she was being a bitch.

Lastly, I miss Jon. Although he’s here in Winterfell with us, he seemed rather distant lately. I couldn’t even talk to him that much anymore because he’s always busy or perhaps he’s just keeping something to himself. I don’t really know.

Anyway, my eighteenth name day is fast approaching. Mother insists on having a big celebration but I insisted on not having one. Because of many things.
My dearest Arya,

You’re wrong. I never get bored with your letters. More importantly, your handwriting is enough to keep me well awake at trying to figure out the words you are writing. Truly, they are a form of art. Very abstract and surreal.

Getting to the real deal, please know that what happened to your hand truly saddens me. I’m sorry for being insistent about hearing your replies. I hope you are doing better now. But then, seeing your quite lengthy response, I know that you are more than better. I am relieved.

I did what you suggested about posing as a commoner in the streets of King’s Landing. I had to grow my hair a little as well as grow a full beard for weeks. And it did work. You’re brilliant, you know. Not only did I know the honest thoughts of the people, immediate action was done for their concerns. They couldn’t be happier. At least my hard task of ruling this country has paid off. It felt fulfilling, and most of this was because of your suggestion. You can be a good strategist. Perhaps when you get here, I can give you a seat in the council. But only if you want to.

Thank you also for sharing with me little snippets about how your family is doing. I am very happy for Robb. I’ve actually met Lady Jeyne already. Your brothers, Theon and I went out for a ride to Winter Town and that’s where Robb met Lady Jeyne. He wanted us to keep quiet about it for the meantime and he wanted to tell it to all of you himself. Well, I am glad that Robb is happy.
I’m sorry to hear about Jon, too. He may have a lot of things going inside his head but just give him a little more time and space. He should open up to you in no time. I know that I can never replace Jon’s place in your heart, but for the meantime, if you really need someone to talk to or share all the things you want to share, I can be a good listener. You can confide in me. Well, you’ve been doing that since we started exchanging letters. But if you wish, you can share your deepest thoughts with me. Even those unspeakable ones. I know you’ve done that already with me many times when we are in the godswood. But should you need a shoulder like Jon, I can be that person too, albeit temporarily. Because Jon will always be your favorite brother. And I am better at being your best friend.

I badly want to be there on your name day to celebrate it with you, but as much as I want to be with you, I can’t. Because my father now relies so much on my decisions. He has fallen sick with the flu two days ago and has been absent from the council meetings. Nothing grave though. The maesters said that a little rest and proper diet would do to get his health back.

Please keep yourself healthy, too. I don’t want you to get sick now that the months are growing shorter and I’ll be seeing you again.

I miss you, Arya. I can’t wait to see you before the end of this year.

Be safe always.

Yours truly,

Gendry

****

To my dearest Arya,

Happiest eighteenth name day!
You thought that the silver necklace was my main present for you, did you? Although I always thought about how that necklace would look on you because you, my dear, have the most beautiful neck, it still wouldn't compare to the smile you would make when you receive something you really like. Hence the knife I forged myself just for you.

You could use that along with your dagger. At least you will have a selection of weapons just in case. I know you’d love that over some necklace.

But I still want to see you wear that necklace when we meet though. And I hope that you liked it too. I had to specifically request the jeweler to make something that would really suit you and at the same time remind you of our friendship. So I requested to have a direwolf and a bull pendant made. Not a stag though. Because I’ll always be your stupid bull, remember?

I hope you will wear that all the time. I know you do not have a flare for jewelries, but at least make that an exception.

More than the things I gave you, I want nothing more than to see you happy and safe at all times, Arya.

I know you’re sad because your Father is not there to celebrate with you, but I hope that the letter he sent you made you very happy. I also hope that this letter would do the same.

Stay happy for me.

I’m off for today’s council meeting. See you soon.

Always yours,

Gendry

****
Dear Gendry,

I was indeed surprised because you’re right, I thought that the necklace was your main present. But then your guards gave me another wrapped package and they said it came from King’s Landing. I was overjoyed because I have another weapon to add to my collection. You are really a talented blacksmith, you know. Even our smith, Mikken, sees very great potential in you. He said that you were trained well.

I am wearing the necklace right now. And I have been wearing it since the day I got it. If it pleases his grace, I even wear your necklace when I sleep. Don’t worry, I liked it because it has our sigils and it is very lightweight, just like the knife you gave me. I’ll definitely be making this as an exception—as a sign of our deep friendship.

Thank you also for offering your ear in lieu of Jon. It was a very heartwarming gesture indeed. I’ll do my best to continue opening up to you about all my thoughts. I think that is a great idea because if I don’t get to speak with someone who understands me like Jon here, then I’ll go mad. In fact, if we weren’t exchanging letters at all, I really would have gone mad. Because I won’t have someone to run to and share my thoughts with. You are my lifeline actually. Well, you keep my sanity. You keep me on my toes. Because you’re one of the few people who truly understands me.

Nevertheless, I appreciate all the efforts you have done for me. Most especially in keeping me sane. You are indeed one true friend.

Thank you for the gift of friendship.

Forever grateful,

Arya

****

- I miss you, Gendry. Terribly. I’m not even sure why. I don’t even know why. But I miss you. Maybe I just have a lot of feelings right now because it’s the middle of the night, and your thoughts were supposed to go into a frenzy in the middle of the night. But I miss you, more than you will ever know.
and more than I will ever realize.

- 

**Arya**

- 

Arya crumpled the letter in her hands and tossed it in the fire. She made one last look at the burning paper and turned around to walk back towards her bed, throwing herself into oblivion and endless denial.

****

Dearest Arya,

I received the grave news about the Bolton Bastard suddenly attacking Winterfell after he had discovered about our plan of taking a decoy of you back to King’s Landing so that he will be made to believe that you are no longer in Winterfell. But I guess news about this plan has reached him. And he was not happy about it.

I received a letter from him. He wasn’t happy about being tricked into believing that you travelled with us to the capital. He was infuriated and it earned me a million death threats. But then again, they are nothing more than threats. I had doubled the protection of your Father instead, because basing on the way he was devising his plan, I could read through his words that he’s meaning to attack, not just me, but your Father. I am doing all I can to keep Lord Stark protected at all costs.

And despite their surprise attack, I am still glad and relieved that Winterfell was able to defend itself from the Northern Rebels. It truly saddens me that there were some minimal casualties, but nevertheless, I am still thankful that you and your family are safe. And I still appreciate all that the guards have done for you and for Winterfell. You can be assured that when their bodies are sent back to King’s Landing, I will be giving them a funeral fit for their honor. I will honor their loyalty in dying to protect you. Their families will also be well compensated for the rest of their lives. Their children will be educated and their wives will be given decent jobs. They will have a funeral fit for heroes.

I know you feel sorry for them, but I am more than sorry because I was the one who made them swear their lives for you. I know you are still feeling bad for yourself. I just know it. Because I know you. But please don’t remain under the cloak of guilt. It will weaken your resolve and eat you up. Instead, live every day knowing that someday you can get to avenge their deaths so that it won’t be for nothing.
Only a few more months, Arya, and I will get to see you again. I can protect you here in King’s Landing and my mind will fully be at peace knowing that you are by my side. As a dear friend.

Please don’t feel bad about yourself now. I know you are refusing to reply because that’s what you are feeling. I assure you that those guards did not die in vain. They died fighting for a worthy cause.

Please write back. I am dying to know how you are feeling right now.

Take care out there. For me. And for both of us.

Yours now and for always,

Gendry

***

Dear Gendry,

You’re right. I didn’t write back for weeks because I felt guilty for the deaths of some of your guards. I hated myself for being weak. I would have also defended them myself if I could. More than that, I hated the fact that everyone else here treats me like I’m some delicate flower, like I am breakable. But I am never breakable. But I still hate being born a lady regardless. Because I cannot truly fight. Because they always try to stop me and keep me away from the fight. They tucked me inside the safe room like I’m someone very helpless.

But guess what? For once, I did something to that fucking Bolton bastard. I have managed to escape the safe room during the attack, and when I saw the bastard hiding behind his men, I launched an arrow at him and it hit his thigh. With that single arrow was a note written especially for him. It doesn’t matter what I said. But as soon as he received the message, he stopped the attacks altogether.
You have to tell your guards stationed here to let me help them defend Winterfell against that bastard. I can fight, Gendry. And I know that you need men to defend Winterfell. So here I am. I can help you. You just have to trust me. I could do this too. Please. You have to give them your orders to let me fight back for my home.

I don’t think I can write any further. I am downright exhausted with the frustration I am feeling. I feel inadequate right now. I think I need time to think.

Until then, Your Grace.

Respectfully,

Arya

****

Dear Arya,

Please stop sulking now. Nothing is ever your fault. Allow yourself to feel frustrated but don’t let that stop you. You can do this. You are a lot stronger.

And if my lady wishes, then I will let you fight and defend Winterfell. But only if you are able to. Make sure you are not too exhausted. And make sure you fight from a distance. I am very confident that you are a very good archer. Use that to your advantage and steer clear from close combat. That’s all I ask of you.

I have already ordered my guards to be more lenient towards you. But they will still protect you and follow you around if needed be. This is for your own good. Because by the gods, I will never ever forgive myself if something bad happens to you.

You said so yourself that I was your lifeline, and you said I was keeping you sane. I tell you, nothing is more endearing than knowing those words from you.
As for me, I know for a fact that you are the only one driving me to insanity, Arya. I am going crazy just thinking about you. And I can never really stop thinking about you. You do something to me that I cannot explain. As it is hard for me to admit, I am afraid that I am going crazy for you. I thought you should know that by now. I don’t have any reasons to give you right now, but I am telling you my honest feelings.

Please be well. As always, keep yourself safe.

Write back as soon as you can. Let me know your thoughts.

Still crazy for you,

Gendry

****

Ramsay,

You want me? Then come and get me yourself, you bastard! But just make sure that you do not in any way include anyone else in this battle. It’s between you and me. Stay away from the king, my Father, my family, and most especially the prince! Stay away from Winterfell!

If you do not follow my words, and if you keep attacking Winterfell and King’s Landing, then the rest of Westeros will wage war against your house. Do you understand me? Then I’ll kill you with my own hands. You want that, right?

I never ever want to see you set foot in Winterfell again. Ever. Or your blood will be spilled with my own hands.

-A. Stark
My Lady,

I’d love to see you try. More than that, I’d love to see you writhing and screaming when I take you. You are the only one I have ever wanted. And I always take what I want. I get what I want.

Tell that bastard prince of yours to break your betrothal and marry me instead. You will make a fine wife for me. I have always wanted you.

Break your engagement or there will be blood spilled in Winterfell and in King’s Landing. I will kill your beloved prince myself and take you away from him.

Lovingly yours,

Ramsay Bolton

****

Dear Gendry,

There are now a lot of people in Winterfell since the party from Highgarden has finally arrived, bringing along with them a thousand of their men. Four hundred of which will be left here in Winterfell to help guard the castle from the Bolton Bastard, along with your men. We are now three thousand to four thousand strong. There are also guards stationed in Winter Town and in every strategic location in the North to guard Winterfell against the rebels.

As for me, I am preparing myself mentally, emotionally and physically to leave Winterfell without a heavy heart and start a whole new life in the capital with you. Don’t get me wrong. I know that you are my best friend and all, but I can never really hide from the fact that I will definitely be missing my home. I never thought it would be this hard letting go of the home I’ve come to know my whole life. And I never expected that I will be leaving Winterfell at all because it was never in me to marry someone.
I have a lot of feelings right now. In a few days, we will all be leaving for King’s Landing save for Bran and Rickon who will be left to act as lords of Winterfell while Robb is gone. For added security, the Reeds have also sent reinforcements to Winterfell, sending Meera Reed and Jojen Reed along the party to help Bran and Rickon defend the castle from any attacks.

The Bolton bastard has actually responded to the message I sent him. And as expected, he wanted me to break our betrothal or else he will continue to threaten us all with his attacks.

I want to kill him myself. I want to drive the dagger you made me into his heart and twist the muscles of his heart in knots just so that he would know the amount of trouble he has cost us. More than that, while I drive the dagger into his heart, I will slit his throat with your knife and then rip his eyeballs out and feed them to my direwolf. Then I will hang him for all of the Dreadfort to see that no one can mess with a true Stark Northerner.

My hands are itching for his blood, Gendry. And gods, I am into a state of frenzied bloodlust right now. I am itching to kill him. But I can’t. Because I am stuck here. And I cannot escape Winterfell because the castle is now very heavy-guarded. But it’s a good thing, because I could still get to have a grasp of the humanity left in me so I won’t turn into a ruthless monster.

I will get to finally see you in the next few weeks. I honestly do not know if I should be sad that I will be leaving my home or happy that I will get to see you again. But my heart aches right now with the thought of leaving home. It’s too difficult to let go. But I had to. I ought to. Because of family, duty and honor.

I have to go pack my things now.

See you then.

Kindly,

Arya
My dearest Arya,

You crazy, silly girl. I don’t know where to start in berating you for your murderous tendencies. More than that, it was stupid of you to provoke that Bolton bastard. And now he will never stop. But at least you will be on your way to King’s Landing any time soon.

Please don’t do anything stupid, and just don’t respond to his letter. As what was planned, you will be riding to the capital with a decoy. And you will disguise yourself as a lad. I have already communicated with your brothers about this plan.

I will be busy in the next few days and weeks for your arrival so I may not be able to write back to you anymore. I will just see you then here. I will be patiently waiting for you.

I have read enough books to last us the entire week of talking about it, so get here as soon as you can. I miss you badly.

I’m going to the council meeting now.

See you, my lady.

Yours for always,

Gendry
Leaning closer to him, she whispered in his ear. “Do you want this to be real?” Came her baffling question. When she slightly pulled away, there was an obvious glint of lust in her eyes. And she was biting her bottom lip. “Yes, I so want this to be real.” He said to her, giving her hand a soft kiss. When Arya drew closer to his face, Gendry pulled her to him and kissed her hard. What he couldn’t say in words, he did it well in actions.

Chapter 15: Reuniting

Gendry

Gendry opened his eyes slowly.

He was awoken by the sudden stirring inside his chambers. As soon as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he was surprised to see a figure standing at the foot of his bed, wearing a very sheer white nightgown. His heart skipped a beat the moment he realized that it was her. The nightgown she was wearing partially obscured her perfect figure but from the light of the glowing fires in the fireplace, he could see that she was bare underneath.

It left very little to the imagination.

He noted how her beautiful face was illuminated by the moonlight from his window and the way her hair cascaded on her chest made the heat spread to all parts of his body. She looked very enthralling. Immensely ethereal.

He immediately rose up to a sitting position, his bare chest rising and falling to an even faster pace.

“Arya…” He trailed off in a soft whisper, eyes still wide and full of wonder.

Arya’s distinct lop-sided smile grew wider at the sound of his voice. And there was that very hungry look in her fiery, mysterious grey eyes. She gingerly sauntered towards him, walking at the side of his bed, her fingers trailing the white sheets of his blankets.

“Hello, Gendry. It’s been awhile…” She greeted him in a soft whisper.

Gendry’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“Did you just arrive in King’s Landing?” He had to ask her.

Arya stopped walking as soon as she was already standing right before him. Before replying to his inquiry, she sat on his bed.
“We’ve arrived hours ago. They said you have been exhausted so they did not disturb your sleep because you badly needed it.” She replied calmly, never breaking from her gaze. “They have given me the princess’ chambers as my room. I couldn’t sleep at all so I wandered around my chambers until I discovered that it’s just connected to your room. So I came here to see you.” She added, her grey eyes darkening with a certain kind of need he could not fathom.

Gendry found himself speechless for he could not believe that she was actually here, in his room, sitting on his bed.

It didn’t seem like a dream.

His lips formed into a content smile.

“Well, I’m glad that you’re finally here. I’ve been waiting a long time…” He trailed off, his words truthful.

Arya blinked back innocently. Then her subtle smile came back.

In a few heartbeats, Gendry found himself very surprised when her hand cupped one side of his cheek.

“I’m happy to see you again, too.” She retorted.

He swallowed the lump on his throat at her sudden gesture. His heart was now pounding twice as fast at her touch. He could hardly believe it. It made his cock twitch in response.

Then as if by instinct, he held the hand cupping his cheek, softly caressing it in return as he began to lean into her touch.

“Is this real?” He suddenly spoke in a whisper, the question more likely directed to himself than at her.

Leaning closer to him, she whispered into his ear. “Do you want this to be real?” Came her baffling question.

When she slightly pulled away, there was an obvious glint of lust in her eyes. And she was biting her bottom lip.

“Yes, I so want this to be real.” He said to her, giving her hand a soft kiss.

When Arya drew closer to his face, Gendry pulled her to him and kissed her hard. What he couldn’t say in words, he did it well in actions.

Arya didn’t seem to protest when he wrapped his arms around her, bringing her closer to him without breaking the kiss. In a few short seconds, her back was now on the soft featherbed and he was on top of her. They continued to share the kiss as his large hands travelled down the length of her thighs, hiking up her nightclothes higher in the process. Arya moaned at the sensation of his hands spreading his warmth on her. She instinctively parted her legs as one of his hands reached her plump nether region.

Gendry’s mouth finally found its way to her neck to savor her scent. The scent that weakened all his resolve for self-control. Before her lips went back to his mouth, she gave the lobe of his ear a lick, sending all the right shivers down his spine.

Her moans were getting more distinct now that her mouth was closer to his auditory senses. He
partly drew back a few inches to look at her face, her lips slightly parted and swollen from his kiss. She was breathing heavily as her eyes looked back at him. Then without any preamble, he kissed her hard on the mouth again, earning another seductive whimper from her. His cock was more than eager to take her then and there.

It was as if Arya read his thoughts because her body gave him approval when she pushed her hips closer to his crotch. He abruptly broke off from their kiss as he ripped her nightclothes into pieces, revealing the beauty that is her body, glistening under the light of the moon and the fire. Her legs were spread wider and he could see her cunt sopping wet with need.

He licked his lips as he stared at her hungrily.

“Please…” Arya whispered her plea as she was biting those luscious lips.

Gendry smiled at her wickedly as he positioned his fully engorged cock in between her thighs. His cock touched the folds of her wet cunt and finally—

Gendry was awoken to the sound of a hooting owl flying outside the nearest window.

Sweat trailed down the sides of his face. His breathing was still erratic when his eyes travelled at the foot of his bed where he swore he saw Arya moments ago. Only now, there was no one standing before him. He tried to blink back as the reality began to sink in.

It was all just a dream.

“Fuck!” He hissed a curse through gritted teeth, his hands covering his face.

Just when he thought that everything was real, he bloody woke up from that perfect dream. He slightly rose up to sit on his bed, feeling the slickness of his sweat trickling down his bare back and found himself alone.

And hard.

Very hard that his swollen cock was tenting on his blankets.

Damn Arya Stark for haunting his dreams again for the hundredth time in the past few months. And he cannot get over it unless he relieves himself from his lecherous desires.

Lying back down on his featherbed, he brought his hand down to his cock and began stroking it. He closed his eyes as he began to get back to where he was in his dream when he was about to fuck Arya Stark.

Up and down, his hand went.

He took a sharp intake of air as he allowed his hand and his thoughts to pleasure himself. He was imagining how he would fuck her and how she would moan and whimper under his touch.

That’s right.

He was so hard for her that he could somehow hear her moans inside his head as he continued to fuck his cock with his hands, wishing that it was the tightness of her cunt he was feeling. His mouth gave way to a guttural groan at the heightened sensation of his arousal.

Arya was now writhing in his imagination, screaming, moaning and shouting his name as he continued to ram himself inside of her. Gods, he badly wanted to know how it would actually feel
like to be finally inside her. She will definitely be the death of him because he cannot seem to get enough of her. Even his thoughts were slowly killing him. After a few seconds of stroking his very hard cock, he finally found his release, his seed spurting all over his hand.

*****

Since he could no longer find it in himself to sleep again, Gendry lit up the candle on his bedside and after putting on his breeches, he began walking half-naked towards the secret passageway to the princess’ chambers adjoining his room in the faintest hope of finding Arya asleep on the bed. But reality seemed to strike him hard as he found the chambers empty and dark.

Arya was never inside.

The room began to slowly illuminate from the light of his candle and he took a few seconds to scan the room. It was only the third time he has been inside this room. The first time he was inside was during a tour of the castle when he just came from Flea Bottom. The second time was when he had requested the maids to have the room neatly cleaned for Arya’s eventual stay in the castle. And the third time was that night. When he found out about his betrothal to Arya almost a year ago, he still could not quite believe the fate he was about to face, so he lived in constant denial by avoiding this chamber. But now that his feelings for her were growing and surging like the roughest waves in Storm’s End, he could no longer help but long for her to be here close to him.

He put the candle on the empty bedside and sat on the soft yet empty featherbed. He splayed his fingers along the satin sheets as he took a second to pause all his thoughts and listen to his breathing and the longing heartbeats only meant for her.

*****

“I am there be anything else that needs to be discussed before we adjourn this small council?”
Gendry asked the council members surrounding him in the table

“Your Grace…” Came Grand Maester Pycelle’s voice.

Gendry was once again seated in his King father’s seat in the small council as he was made to lead the meeting in lieu of his father who was out hunting in the Kingswood for a few days. The council meeting was just about to end and Gendry was about ready to depart the council room immediately when the Grand Maester had other plans of delaying. He made a mental sigh as he turned to face the Grand Maester.

What could the Grand Maester possibly want from him now?

The Grand Maester slowly rose up from his seat and paced towards Gendry. As usual, he wore his stolid, princely look. He loathed council meetings so much, he’d rather prick himself with a needle and learn how to sew stitches.

“What is it, Grand Maester?” He asked.

The Grand Maester produced a piece of folded paper from one of his sleeves. “A raven just flew in today. From the Stark family who is now traveling to King’s Landing. Here’s one letter for you….”
He told Gendry giving him the folded paper.

Upon closer inspection, it had his name written almost illegibly. A faint smirk formed on his face.

When he heard the family name ‘Stark,’ it immediately caught Lord Stark’s attention. The Grand Maester came walking towards Lord Stark.

“And here’s a letter for you, My Lord Hand.” Pycelle informed Lord Stark while giving him the rolled parchment.

“Thank you, Grand Maester.” Lord Stark said as he unrolled the letter.

He took ample time to read its contents while the rest of the small council members were looking at him and waiting for the news.

Gendry on the other hand had his mind drifted somewhere else. He could no longer contain his excitement and his hand was already itching to open the letter and read it. But he found that it was still best to wait until he was alone to finally read his letter.

Moments after, Lord Stark paused for a few heartbeats and then turned his gaze at Gendry.

“The party from Winterfell is only three days away from King’s Landing, Your Grace.” He informed.

Gendry flashed him a warm smile. “That’s great to hear, my Lord. I am very certain that you have missed your family so much. Indeed, this would be a great opportunity for you to be finally reunited with them.” Gendry told him politely.

Lord Stark smiled back at him and nodded his head.

“Yes, I have missed them so much. Especially my youngest daughter, Arya. I hope she’s not giving her mother too much of a headache especially now that they are traveling to the capital.” Lord Stark winked, giving him a knowing grin.

Gendry was deemed speechless and he was sure that he flushed at the sound of Arya’s name and his heart was stupidly racing like he was some bloody little girl.

Seven buggering hells.

A few more seconds after, Gendry made a gentle clap with his hands as he motioned to stand up.

“Very well then. Seeing that everything’s been discussed, I shall be adjourning this meeting now.” He told them as he hurriedly started walking.

He could no longer control his excitement.

He needed to read the letter now.

As soon as he got out of the council room, he made a few faster steps until finally reaching the long flight of stairs in the Red Keep towards his bedchambers.

When he reached his chambers, he bolted the door open and shut it close behind him, making sure to lock it tight. Then he threw himself on his large featherbed and hastily broke the seal of the grey direwolf waxed onto the rolled parchment. He held his breath for a few good seconds until it finally revealed the contents of the letter. The handwriting was still very poorly written that it seemed
Hello Gendry,

So it obviously looks like I am writing back a response after you told me not to bother about it. Well, guess what? I am bored. I don’t have anyone to talk to inside this gods-forsaken bedchambers in the inn we are staying because everybody else is dead tired!

I have been obediently following what you have said about your plan, by the way. And as always, I enjoyed dressing up as a common lad. Because most of the people don’t bother to give their fake curtsies towards me.

I cannot sleep as you can see. I would have wanted to bring along the books I find interesting in the library but I don’t want Mother to see me with those banned books because she will gut me before I even know it. I hope that when we reach King’s Landing, you will give me a tour first to the castle’s library. I could stay there inside for the rest of my life and never want to be disturbed.

How are you, by the way? I know you have been very busy right now especially that we are close to the capital and you are also sending out more Baratheon forces to protect the North against the Bolton rebels. I am actually glad and relieved to have your men attack the Dreadfort out of retaliation to what they have done to Winterfell and to your guards. It was unfortunate though that they were not able to capture the Bolton bastard yet, but I know that we are close to our victory and that Bastard can be tried and executed for his crimes against humanity and the kingdom.

If I could, I want to be the one to pass on the sentence and swing the sword and kill him. If men can do it so can women. We are as powerful as men anyway. I know you agree because I always like how you treat me as your equal.

Gods, I can’t believe that I am finally going to set foot in the capital. I used to always dread the day I would leave Winterfell and be shipped off to be married. Now, I don’t even know how or what to feel anymore. I am starting to miss Winterfell badly now, especially that the weather here in the South is getting warmer and more humid. I miss the cold weather in the North. These days that we are traveling down South, I would always find myself covered in sweat from the sweltering heat of the sun.

Anyhow, at least being given the privilege of riding on horseback with Jon, Robb, Theon and our men is the only consolation to the warmth of the weather than having to stay inside the wheelhouse with Mother and Sansa. I hate being stuck inside because I hate hearing the gossips that seem to be limitless for my sister. She always knows everyone’s business. It’s so annoying.
Sometimes, I even see Sansa and Lord Willas awfully being very sweet that it makes me want to throw up my breakfast at them. Can’t they be any more discreet? Well, at least they will be married in a few months’ time. That should finally give them peace and full approval to touch each other in any way they want. They seem to be so in love. And honestly, I am surprised to find myself definitely seeing nothing against their betrothal because for the first time in my life, I am happy for my sister. I know we used to always fight when we were younger but I am happy that she is happy now. Maybe that’s all that matters even if the way they adore each other is still making me want to puke. I am laughing by myself right now just thinking of it.

Maybe we will end up laughing together when we see them hand in hand in the Red Keep.

Well, I hope the council meeting is not killing you. I know you’re still bored. Worry not because we are almost close and you can finally have company. My brothers and Theon cannot wait to see you. They have so much to tell you as well.

I ought to force myself to sleep now because we still have a long way tomorrow.

Thank you for taking your time to read my letter. I wish you well, Your Grace.

Your most loyal and faithful friend,

Arya

His heart swelled at the latest letter he received from her that he could not even stop himself from smiling like a stupid idiot. He never knew why Arya Stark always had that kind of effect on him.

Even on the first time he laid eyes on her almost a year ago in the lake, he was always drawn to her. There was something in her that lures him to keep her close. She was indeed unlike any other highborn lady he has met in court. She had a certain profoundness in her that no one else can fathom.

More to that, she was as fierce and as strong as the northern wind. She was the most stubborn, most infuriating lady he has met, and yet here he was being entranced by her overall personality and pragmatism. Her unyielding bearings towards traditions and norms was what made her unique and more difficult to achieve.
Yes, he finally willed himself to admit that all these months he has been thinking about attaining a certain achievement out of Arya Stark.

Because he wanted her so badly.

Surely the fact that they were betrothed to each other was already enough for him to think that she was his. But deep inside and truth be told, it wasn’t just enough. They were arranged to be married eventually and she will be his queen in the future, but it doesn’t necessarily guarantee that he will completely have her. He can never have her heart for it was clear enough even on the first days of their acquaintance that she never wanted to marry nor become a wife.

But truth be told, Gendry Baratheon wanted more.

Mayhaps his instincts were telling him that he should win her heart. He ought to win her heart or else he will live the rest of his life miserable even if they were married in front of the Seven Gods and in front of the eyes of the Seven Kingdoms.

He rose from his featherbed and stormed towards his study table on the other side of the room. He produced a blank parchment paper and made himself sit comfortably on the chair. He grabbed his quill and ink and started running his thoughts on how he could write his reply to Arya.

He had to remember that in order to win a lady like her, he needed to take things slow, one step at a time or else he would never see the light of day again when he meets the pointy end of Needle. He was certain that Arya would no doubt kill him, after torturing him, if she had the slightest idea that he was already planning on pursuing her affections. This will be a slow torture in attempting to win her completely.

But he also knew that it will all be worth it.

When he came to live in the Red Keep after he was legitimized as King Robert’s only son and heir, it has always been a given fact that he could take any girl in court he would want to bed in the snap of his fingers because he was considered the most eligible bachelor in the whole of Westeros. Those girls would no doubt pursue their ambitions of becoming the next queen to the Seven Kingdoms aside from wanting him for his crown and his attractive looks (not that he really believes himself to be attractive). His appetites for the flesh was closer to the borderline like his father but not close enough to produce any bastards, thank the gods. He used to have girls pleading and running to him to take them including their dignity.

Everything was set on the table right before him.

They never gave him the slightest sweat to challenge him and yet, Gendry found all those girls boring and unfavorable.

It can be pretty much ironic how a simple northern girl like Arya Stark can be his greatest challenge, the paradox of it all being the fact that she was his betrothed and yet she treated him only as her friend and confidante and nothing more. She was simple for the fact that she never flares herself in wanting to look good and she never cared about her looks.

She only wanted what was practical and convenient to her at the moment. She only wanted the basic things that will make her survive.

A pure pragmatist in its sense.

Aside from that, she doesn’t seem like the girl who would come running after him for his crown and his title. No, Arya Stark would fight tooth and nail just to dismiss their impending marriage and free
herself from this ordeal. Supposing she has actually agreed to marry him (out of coercion from her parents), he knows that she would still force him to implement a certain kind of law that would dismiss her from being the queen. Her voluntary commitment to finding a suitable bride to his liking was even evidence enough. But Arya doesn’t understand that it was her that Gendry wants.

Now it was clear as day.

By the gods, this would be the most difficult task to accomplish.

He closed his eyes and released the breath he has been holding. He put away the quill, ink and paper in his desk and rose from his seat.

He had a better way of welcoming Arya to King’s Landing.

**Arya**

Arya woke up grumpy that morning when she heard her Mother instructing one of her maids to let her wear a dress since they were already a few hours away from the Red Keep. Her mood only became worse when her mother stripped her off from the comforts of her blankets and forced her out of bed before leaving her to prepare. She couldn’t possibly be ready for today since she was still very sleepy.

After taking a long bath inside the bathing chambers of the last inn they were staying, she was forced to wear a grey and white satin dress to represent the colors of House Stark and was told to sit inside the other wheelhouse after she was dressed. That wheelhouse was only meant for her when she will finally be presented to the Red Keep as Westeros’ future princess.

The thought made her want to throw up all the contents of her dinner from last night. It was worse than seeing Sansa and Willas fondling each other. She rolled her eyes as she glared at the looking glass before her. Her maid had just finished curling her long brown hair and setting it up in an intricate bun.

There was a sudden knock on her door and her Mother went inside again. Arya shifted her gaze in the mirror towards her Mother who was wearing that usual strict and imposing look.

“Mother, I do not think that wearing a dress will be proper since we are still to travel towards the Red Keep for a few more hours. And I can ride well on horseback than sitting inside a stupid wheelhouse. And you know that.” Arya tried to whine in protest.

Her mother gave her a fatal glare, pursing her lip in the displeasure of her words.

“You will do well to be in your best behavior today and for the rest of your days now, young lady. And you will do as I say.” Mother started, looking at her tersely.

Arya only glared at her reflection, her mood hitting a downward spiral. She did not need any of her Mother’s lectures about how to act proper right now. Not especially when her mood is pretty much very shaky.

Noticing the scowl on her face, her mother leaned closer to her. “And you will smile and be pleasant to everyone in the castle. You will not be spoiled and disrespectful and you will greet any lord or lady you see in court properly. You will not engage in fights with your betrothed nor will you
provoked him to be angry at you or I swear to the Old Gods that I will lock you up in your rooms until you learn to be the lady and the future princess you are expected to become. You will not fail us or bring shame to this family. Do you understand me?” Lady Catelyn added. Her voice dropping with authority. Nothing in her tone sounded matriarchal or motherly.

Arya gazed back at her mother through the mirror, still speechless.

“Do you understand me, young lady? Answer me.” Her mother commanded her.

Arya grit her teeth before finally nodding her head.

“Yes, Mother. I understand.” Her words came short because anger was flaring deep inside her.

But she could not help the next words she was about to utter.

“Are you happy now? Are you finally happy to see me miserable right now?” She finally snapped.

How could her mother do this to her?

Why can she not see how much she despised becoming the next princess of Westeros?

Her mother’s eyes widened in shock at her statement.

“By the gods, Arya Stark! I don’t want to hear any more of your sarcastic remarks. Keep them to yourself and keep your mouth shut if you do not have anything good to say! Where are your manners? Is this how you talk to your mother now?! Is this what you have learned in years of education from your septa?” Her mother exclaimed exasperatingly, berating her to the highest level. She huffed a sigh of obvious frustration.

“No, Mother.” She said rather indignantly through gritted teeth. She was now seething in anger. “But I still refuse to become a pawn to this stupid alliance. And you all know it.”

Her mother only raised an eyebrow and stood up tall before her.

“Regardless if you like it or not, this is your duty. You have no choice but to abide by them. No questions asked.” Her mother stated coldly.

Arya wanted to shout out all her frustrations and pull her hair out from her stupid bun. She was so infuriated that she wanted to burst into fits of rage and tantrums in front of her mother. But instead, she mustered all of her courage to control her temper.

Finally sighing in defeat, she nodded her head albeit begrudgingly without saying more.

“Good. When you are done, you are to immediately go to your wheelhouse. No more riding on horseback or it will ruin your dress and your hair.” She commanded her, still with a very stern voice.

“Yes, Mother.” Was all Arya said before clenching her hands into tight fists.

After her maid finished dolling her up to become the most presentable stupid human being to be paraded to the King and the Prince, she gave her maid a fake smile and told her that she will be heading now to her own wheelhouse and to tell everyone not to bother her, including her siblings. Nodding to do her bidding, the maid hurriedly scurried outside the bedchambers.

Arya’s fake smile turned to a sinister smile as she finally left the room and hurried off towards her wheelhouse.
The beautiful blue seas of King’s Landing suddenly became very interesting to her after their heated agreement with her mother.

**Gendry**

Gendry stood beside the Iron Throne where his King Father was seated as he was patiently (impatiently) waiting for the Stark and Tyrell party to finally set foot in the Red Keep. Lord Stark was on the other side of his father’s seat, trying his best not to show his obvious excitement. Word has it that they were already within King’s Landing and riding for the castle. He had mixed feelings of being amused, excited and nervous all at once especially that he will finally be seeing her after waiting for seven long months.

He shared a few words with his father and Lord Stark, drowning himself in casual conversation to hide his anxiety and anticipation. Just when he was about to give a response to his father’s question, the huge wooden doors to the Throne Room burst open.

His heart made a huge leap.

But instead of seeing the entire Stark family emerge in the Throne Room, he was surprised to see only Lady Catelyn and Lady Sansa who was hand in hand with Lord Willas, and a few of the Stark and Tyrell guards walking with them. His heightened feelings sank when he did not see Arya’s face. Her brothers and Greyjoy were also missing. More to that, he saw the horror and the worry in their faces. Before he could ask questions about Arya’s whereabouts, Lord Stark beat him to it.

“Cat, what happened? Where are Arya and the boys?” Lord Stark asked his wife as he stormed towards her, bringing her to a tight embrace.

A tear fell from Lady Stark’s eyes. “Ned, it’s Arya…” She trailed off worriedly, pulling away from her husband’s hug abruptly. “She’s nowhere to be seen. We thought she was inside her wheelhouse but she was gone when we checked. She must have either ran off or… she must have been taken away.” Lady Catelyn sniffed as she hugged Lord Eddard once more.

Robert was deemed speechless as he stood from his seat.

“So our boys are off to look for her?” Gendry heard Lord Eddard ask his wife.

Lady Catelyn nodded. “Yes, with the rest of our guards and the Tyrell guards.”

The color drained from Gendry’s face.

Impossible.

Arya can never be taken away without a good fight. He knew that too well.

And besides, the guards would have seen her being taken away if she was inside her wheelhouse the whole time. Any sort of unusual activity such as an abduction could be detected if the guards were close by and she was inside her wheelhouse… unless…

*By the gods.* Gendry cursed, clenching his fists upon the obvious realization. How can she be so daft and reckless?
Without further preamble, he began to storm away from the Throne Room with a very angry and serious face, leaving everyone wondering.

“Where are you going, son?” His father asked.

“I’m off to find her, Father. And I think I know where she is right now.” He growled with an infuriated voice.

Yes. Ours is the fury, Arya Stark.

Even his thoughts were seething with sudden rage and anger. How could she do this to him? After everything they have shared. After the *friendship* they have shared.

He walked away from the maddening crowd of highborns and guards inside the Throne Room and headed towards the stables to get his destrier without waiting for any of the guards or the Kingsguards to follow him. He didn’t need anyone to help him anyway.

**Arya**

Fine.

So she sneaked out of her wheelhouse with Nymeria following her suit.

She could not help it. Not especially when her mother was intentionally getting on her nerves. Besides, the splendid view of the bluest seas in King’s Landing already await her. She had seen its marvel beckoning her to come see it when they arrived in the King’s road a few days ago. And now, nothing can stop her from getting a closer glimpse of the bluest seas and the whitest sands.

She didn’t even bother riding her horse this time because it would only attract unwanted attention. Instead, she walked towards the open beach by foot. Nymeria was scouting the area first and when the coast was clear, she headed her way to the beach, savoring its beauty while she still can and while she can have it all for herself… for now.

No one seemed to look for her, especially when she did well in instructing her maid that she will not be bothered in any circumstance. And here she was, sitting on the white sand with her shoes off and her bun already messed up.

She will definitely get a good berating after this day but she didn’t care. Not now when all that mattered was the picturesque view of the sea. She had only ever seen the sea once or twice in her life and she had never thought that it will be this beautiful. It was very calming and relaxing.

From a very far distance, she could see the structure of the Red Keep on the cliff. And judging from where it was located, it would definitely take days instead of hours for her to reach the castle by foot. More to that, it was where Gendry was waiting for her.

She felt a tinge of guilt spreading across her system as she remembered that he was and has been waiting for her arrival for months. And here she was, clearly making herself susceptible for any kind of lurking danger. But as far as geography was concerned, there were no rebels south of Westeros because it would take a very long time for the Northern rebels to recover from the attack of the Baratheon soldiers a few weeks ago.
She was safe.

She had to tell herself over and over as if thinking of it would act like a soothing balm to her growing remorse. She ought to be safe because she needed this kind of personal space for herself.

She needed time to think everything through.

A deep sigh was released from the tension inside her lungs. The closer she was to King’s Landing, the tighter her invisible shackles felt. And any time soon, she will be stripped off from her freedom and from her dreams. She will be forced to live a life of royalty and she will be coerced into becoming someone she will never be. It shattered her heart to a million more pieces again.

A passing sea breeze gave shivers all over her body. She had to make Gendry agree on a certain form of treaty to relieve her from becoming queen once they are married. That was the only way, and perhaps Gendry will agree to that because he was after all a very kind ruler.

And he was her friend.

*But now, I guess I just ruined it.*

Shrugging her shoulders and resting her arms on her knees as she sat on the sand, she bore her eyes on the horizon right before her. She felt the sand in between her toes when she started wriggling them under her skirts.

If only she could be someone else.

If only she could escape her eventual fate…

Suddenly, her senses felt a snap of a twig from behind. She immediately broke off from her silent reverie to turn around. Her eyes widened upon seeing a group of five scruffy-looking men looking at her with very hungry eyes. Arya immediately stood up to assume a defensive position.

“What’s a lovely-looking lady doing alone in this part of King’s Landing?” One of the men asked her, licking his lips as he continued to leer at her.

Arya’s heart thundered in her chest. She swallowed the thick lump on her throat. The men were suddenly moving closer towards her. All ready for a good raping from the looks of it.

She unsheathed Needle from her belt and pointed it at them.

“You will leave me alone or else I will kill all of you!” She threatened boldly, refusing to look afraid in front of them.

The men only laughed at her. “You’re a slight little thing, little lady. You ain’t no threat to us…” The other one said calmly, smiling sinisterly at her. “You see, we’ve been very tired from work… and all we need right now is a good fuck… And you seem to be very available to us right now. I bet your cunt is still as tight as your ass…”

Arya’s eyebrow twitched at those foul words. It made her fingers itch for some action. She was very ready to kill them. And they had no idea what she can do to all of them. They had no idea who they were messing with.

“Stay away!” She shouted again.

They only laughed harder.
“Come on, love. It’s not going to hurt that bad… we will be gentle to you…” The tallest one among the group said to her as he inched closer.

Arya on the other hand tried to move backward towards the sea water.

“I said back off!!!” She growled angrily.

Before the tallest of the group could attack her and pin her down, she was quick enough to dodge his advances. Her reflexes were on overdrive as she moved at his back to pierce Needle right beside his spine with her two hands supporting her sword from behind, earning a painful grunt from him.

The next brave idiot tried to lunge at her but she was able to read his move before even coming closer to her. With that, she immediately pulled out the small dagger given by Gendry strapped to her thighs and threw it at him, puncturing the most fatal artery in his throat. She only heard a gurgling sound coming out from his mouth where blood was immediately pooling, bleeding him to death.

The third man who attacked her seemed to be the smarter one among the group because he sneaked from behind her and pulled her arms behind her back and in the process, it made her let go of Needle. Arya made a sudden yelp at the painful sensation because he was obviously stronger than her.

“Let go of me!!!” She shouted loud enough for anyone in the vicinity to hear even if no one else was around. But at least it would give a warning to Nymeria for her wolf to come and help her.

“Hold her tight in my stead because I will do the honor of claiming her most precious jewel of a maidenhead.” The man holding her from behind told his companion.

Before she was passed on to the next man, she was made to face the opposite direction, now facing the sea.

“At least we will let you face the beautiful sea while we fuck you, love. It won’t really hurt. We promise.” He whispered to her lecherously.

Arya’s heart only raced faster as her breathing suddenly became more labored.

“Let me go!” She hissed through gritted teeth even if she knew it was to no avail.

As she was being held by another stupid idiot now, the smartest among them all was already beginning to hike up the skirts of her dress.

“No!!!” She wailed loudly, her tears now falling hot on her face. “Stop it!” She screamed again.

She tried to set herself free but they were all stronger than her. Before her skirt was about to be ripped off, she had managed to give the man a very painful kick in his balls, causing him to crouch on the ground.

“You stupid bitch!!!” He cursed as he winced in pain.

Then in a heartbeat, she heard the familiar growl of Nymeria from behind, immediately lunging towards the man who was currently holding her. When she was released, she was thrown on the sand right next to the one she kicked in the balls. He was still deemed helpless in his state because of the searing pain she gave him.

When her eyes saw the fifth member of the gang trying to attack Nymeria, who was busy
chewing the neck of the one who used to hold her, her hands tried to search for the knife on the other side of her thigh. Before she could throw it at the person about to attack her wolf, she was surprised to see the life flash out from that person’s eyes as a long sword pierced through his stomach. When the person fell to the ground, Arya was more than surprised to see the furious face of Gendry Baratheon.

“Gendry?” Arya’s voice trailed off in a soft whisper.

Her hands were now trembling on her skirts as she tried to stand up, still dumbfounded. Nymeria padded back towards her, her snout bright crimson with fresh blood after her direwolf made sure to dismantle the neck of Arya’s perpetuator.

Gendry didn’t say a word. He only looked at her with those fuming blue eyes as he walked towards her direction. But instead of going to her, he went to the person behind her and grabbed at the collar of his tunic with all of his force, making him stand up.

“Don’t you dare touch her! You have no right to touch her!” He growled angrily.

It was the first time she heard Gendry’s mad, ear-splitting voice.

“Please…” The man whom Arya thought was the smartest cowered in fear at the prince’s fury. “Please… forgive me…” He stammered again, looking straight into Gendry’s angry eyes.

The man’s eyes widened at the realization that hit him just by looking at Gendry’s face.

“Your Grace… I’m sorry… I—“ The man was cut off when Gendry roared again.

“It’s too late for your apologies.” He said with a cold tone.

Gendry turned to look at the group of Baratheon guards moving their way towards them.

“Bring this fool to the dungeons and lock him up. He should already be executed for what he did but as a citizen of this kingdom, apparently, a scum like him still has the right to a trial.” He ordered them with an authoritative voice.

The guards nodded their heads before taking the man.

“How about the rest, Your Grace?” One of his guards asked him. They all surveyed the bodies lying on the sand.

“Check if any of them are still alive and bring them to the dungeons with the other one. If they are dead, burn them.” Arya noted Gendry wiping the sweat from his forehead. “But judging from what it looks like, I think they’re all dead. Just find out who these men are and bring a report to me immediately once you have the information.” He commanded them.

Finally, he shifted his gaze towards her. But nothing in him held the friend she knew. He looked so cold and distant.

“You…” He snapped, glaring at her angrily. “You haven’t even set foot at the Red Keep and you’re already giving us all a headache! What has gotten into you? You just put yourself in a very compromising situation! What were you thinking?” He scolded her, his voice rising again.

Arya ducked her head low, unable to speak and defend herself because she knew she was wrong. She couldn’t find it in herself to use her reasons as defense. They were all too pointless anyway. It was a good thing that Nymeria was there to nuzzle her hand with her wolf’s bloody nose.
For a few short seconds, she scurried towards where her dagger previously landed, which was on the neck of the dead man and wiped the blood off unceremoniously on the skirts of her dress. Then she went back to picking up Needle and sheathing it back along with her other knife.

Gendry walked closer to her direction as he tried to search for her eyes again.

“Are you hurt?” He suddenly asked, this time, looking worried.

Arya shook her head then she jutted her chin towards the dead men the guards were carrying.

“As you can see, I have managed to bring down some of them with the help of Nymeria.” She replied with a hint of stupid pride in her voice.

He huffed a sigh of exasperation before he grabbed her arm. “You’re riding with me. And you will not try to escape this time. Your family is so worried about you.” He told her icily.

Arya shot a glare in the space between her and him as she allowed Gendry to drag her back to his destrier with Nymeria following suit and forgetting all about the shoes she was wearing.

*They’re only worried because losing me might mean losing this stupid political alliance.* She told herself bitterly, almost biting her tongue to prevent herself from saying it out loud. Saying anything more will only worsen her situation with Gendry.

When they reached his destrier, he helped her up to let her sit in side saddle on his horse, much to her dismay, before he swung himself behind her. His non-dominant hand possessively wrapped around her waist, pulling her body closer to his hard chest as his other hand pulled on the reins of the horse.

They both kept silent as they rode for the Red Keep. She could understand his deafening silence because it was after all her fault for sneaking out and making everyone worried about her. She had no right to fight back. Not now when Gendry had just saved her.

Well at least partially.

In the middle of their journey, Arya was supposed to fight the urge to rest the side of her head on the crook of his neck. But his masculine scent was enough to weaken her resolve and surrender to his warmth. So she did while her free hand wrapped around the side of his waist. Gendry in turn tightened his arm around her and she could swear that she felt him either inhaling the scent from her hair or planting a kiss on top of her head, or both. Her lips involuntarily curled into the faintest smiles as her heart grew a thousand-fold. She felt the warmth enveloping her.

She felt safe.

And in some mysterious, unexplainable way, she felt at home.

Her eyes grew heavier and heavier, and before she knew it, she drifted off to sleep to the sound of his heart hammering a song in his chest.
Chapter Summary

“I saw that. I so want to punish you for the poor conduct you have shown today, you bad girl.” He noted seriously, earning a murderous glare from him. Arya scowled back at him.
“Then what? Are you going to chain me in the dungeons, too?” Came her sarcastic response.
It was his time to release a frustrated sigh.
“I’d rather tie you up in my bed until you come back to your senses.”

Chapter 16: Transforming

Arya

“Arya, wake up.” She heard his voice in her sleep.

Her eyes flung open when she realized that she was still riding the horse, her head resting on his chest. The world around her was moving.

Upon noticing her stirring, he spoke again. “We’re almost close.”

She looked up at him, blinked her eyes and saw the humorless look of his face.

Right.

Because he was still angry at her for behaving so poorly.

His eyes flew towards her for a few seconds before they averted back to the road.

“Word has it that your brothers have now arrived in the Red Keep. I had someone go ahead of us to inform them that we’re on our way back. Now they’re all just waiting for us to arrive. Brace yourself.” He informed her seriously.

Arya only nodded in understanding. She wasn’t sure if he meant bracing herself to meet the worst form of chastisement she will be getting from her parents, or if she will be getting it from him when they could finally have time alone to talk.

The thought unnerved her.

She hated this authoritarian side of him, especially when she’s obviously at fault.

Arya swallowed hard after seeing the looming structure of the castle now only a few meters away. The thought itself of arriving in the capital was like facing the gallows with the executioner sharpening his axe or sword, waiting for her neck to be placed on the block. She was slowly facing
her death and the death of her dreams. The servitude being the metaphorical shackles of royalty and nobility as she was forever bound to wear the crown.

She tightened her grip on Gendry’s loose tunic at the same time that her jaw clenched. He must have felt her tight hold on his clothes because he hunched his head a little lower so that it could be at level with hers.

“What’s wrong?” He asked, still keeping a stern expression. His blue eyes were scrutinizing her face.

She held his gaze, however, she found her tongue stuck in her throat. The throbbing in her chest was suddenly uncontrollable. Instead of replying, she looked away from him as they finally reached the brass gates of the city.

The gates opened wide to warmly welcome their party. There was already a handful of commonfolk at each side of the street who must have been patiently waiting for their arrival.

In a few heartbeats, Arya felt all of their eyes on her and she couldn’t help but feel very little as they were all examining her like she was an unwelcome outsider.

“Don’t fret, my lady. The people will soon warm up to you.” He assured her with a firm voice.

Gendry must have greeted the commonfolk with all of his sincerity because they started cheering for him, giving him an applause as their horse passed by. “Just give them a smile, too.” He whispered, his lips very close to her ear. She felt a rush of blood on her cheeks at the closeness of their proximity.

Doing his bidding, she flashed the most awkward smile and a sheepish wave at the people on the streets who were cheering for them. On closer inspection, her smile would have even looked like a grimace. She could tell. Because she rarely shows her smile to most people and her smiles back in Winterfell were mostly earned. She didn’t need to force herself if she didn’t want to. But this time in the capital, it was very different.

“I think they like you already.” Gendry whispered again, a tone of contentment evident in his voice. But it all changed when Arya only rolled her eyes before huffing an annoyed sigh. “I saw that. I so want to punish you for the poor conduct you have shown today, you bad girl.” He noted seriously, earning a murderous glare from him.

Arya scowled back at him. “Then what? Are you going to chain me in the dungeons, too?” Came her sarcastic response.

It was his turn to release a frustrated sigh. “I’d rather tie you up in my bed until you come back to your senses.” He retorted, more like murmuring to himself than speaking to her. But she heard all of it anyway. She could swear that she noticed his ears turning red.

“You don’t dare!” She hissed in annoyance. Gendry only gave her a gruff snort and ignored her.

As they arrived at the Red Keep’s courtyard, and right before she got off Gendry’s destrier, he suddenly stopped her. She saw him looking at her bare feet under her the skirts of her dress.

“Where are your shoes?” He asked her, furrowing his eyebrows and frowning at her.

Arya chewed her lip. “I left it at the beach because you literally dragged me to your horse
even before I had the chance to pick them up.” She replied indignantly as she folded her arms before her chest.

Gendry shrugged nonchalantly, holding a smug expression on his face. “Well then, I guess I’ll just have to carry you all the way to your chambers.” He told her as if it was the most natural thing in this world.

“What?!” She exclaimed. “I can walk on my own, barefoot or not!” She protested.

“Mind you, this isn’t like Winterfell, Arya. There are far more vile things on the grounds of the Red Keep that will earn you a lifetime of diseases if you are not being careful.” He interjected.

Arya shook her head stubbornly. “No! I will never ever give you the satisfaction of carrying me around the castle for all the people to see! I can walk by myself even without my shoes!” She said, her voice raising this time. Gendry snorted and only rolled his eyes. She wanted to punch him in the face.

“I can’t believe I gave you the satisfaction of letting you carry me around the castle for all the people to see! Gods!” She said, much to her chagrin after Gendry picked her up from his horse and carried her all the way to the Throne Room where the rest of her family was already waiting.

After giving her awkward curtsies and saying her apology to the king, all while Gendry was carrying her, she turned to her family with an apologetic look on her face. Her parents’ faces were unreadable from everyone’s perspective but to her, she knew that they will definitely be giving her a good berating. She had braced herself for it the moment she sneaked out of her wheelhouse. Now, it was time to face the consequences.

“Arya, are you hurt? What happened to you?” Jon asked her worriedly as he approached them along with a very distressed-looking Robb.

“I’m fine, Jon.” She replied with assurance.

“But what happened? We looked everywhere for you, little sister.” Robb told her, mussing her hair as if she was still a child.

Before Arya could respond, Gendry spoke for her.

“I found her at the beach, being attacked by a bunch of sodden rapers. It’s a good thing she was able to defend herself when we got there. We got everything taken care of. The only survivor is now being brought to the dungeons for questioning and eventual trial.” He told them in a very princely way. She made a mental roll of her eyes.

“Thank you for coming to her rescue, Gendry.” Jon said to him gratefully, giving him an earnest smile and a pat on his back.

“No problem, Jon.” He retorted. Then he turned his gaze back towards where the king was. King Robert was engaged in a small conversation with her parents. “By your leave. I shall take Lady Arya to her chambers and call for her maids.” He informed them before giving them a bow.

The walk to her chambers was a bit lengthy and awkward as they both remained in silence. Gendry was still carrying her as if she was only a sack of feathers.

“You know you could put me down now, Gendry. It’s only going to make your arms sore.” She spoke, breaking their awkward silence.
“You barely weigh a thing, Arya. I’m fine.” Came his headstrong response.

“Fine.” She resigned.

“Can you not be such a stubborn little shit for once?” He told her. She could still sense the annoyance in his tone.

“As His Grace wishes.” She said sardonically.

He slowly kicked the door to her chambers and sauntered towards the huge featherbed. Arya’s eyes traveled around her room. It was twice as large as her chambers in Winterfell and it was intricately designed with white furniture and sheets. It was surprisingly beautiful.

Gendry finally put her down to sit on the bed. Instead of turning away from her, he knelt down before her so that they could be at eye level again. His hands were both anchored on the white sheets with her in between. He didn’t say a word. He only looked at her with those piercing blue eyes.

As blue as the ocean in King’s Landing, she noted. For a second, she found herself lost in those eyes.

His lingering gaze made her insides squirm so she raised an eyebrow at him in question. “What?” She asked.

“You.” Came his serious retort.

“What about me?” She asked again, although she was already melting under his stare, she still managed to sound indignant and look unfahttering.

He shook his head. “You’re so impossible.” Came his baffling reply. Before she could talk back, he interrupted her. “And reckless, and stubborn, and stupid…” He trailed off as he drew his face closer to her.

Arya found herself folding her arms before her chest in defense. “Then deal with it.” She spat.

“You’re such a bad, bad girl, Arya Stark.” He told her with a low, gruff voice before clicking his tongue in disapproval.

“I said, deal with it.” She reiterated. Her heart thudded in her chest at the closeness of their faces.

Gendry’s line of sight traveled from her eyes down to her lips, which made her even more conscious. His eyes then traveled down to her neck. She realized that he was looking closely at the necklace she was wearing—the same necklace he gave on her name day with the direwolf and bull pendants.

If he had noticed the bobbing of her throat after a deep swallow, he didn’t tell her but his lips twitched slightly upward in a rather satisfactory fashion. Before she knew it, he found his way to the crook of her neck, his nose trailing her scent. She bit her lip at the betraying and wonderful sensation of Gendry Baratheon on her. She sucked in some air as she felt his nose, his lips and his growing stubble ghosting over the sensitive skin of her neck. She realized that she has missed this feeling. So much.

Before she could say anything more to protest, he turned his face back to her, holding that
stolid, emotionless look on his face.

“You stink. I’ll have your maids prepare a good, warm bath for you.” He pointed out plainly.

Arya’s mouth fell open as she gasped in embarrassment. She could feel her cheeks burning in resentment and shame.

_The nerve!

What she couldn’t bring to say out loud, she hissed in her thoughts. Sure, she looked disheveled but she doesn’t stink! She could still even smell the usual perfume that her maid put on her when she was dressed up early that morning.

When she finally gathered herself, she snapped back. “No, I don’t! Maybe it’s you smelling like a horse!” Rolling her eyes, she muttered angrily. “Stupid idiot.”

Gendry’s smug expression was back. This time, one dimple on his cheek was showing as he gave her a wicked, lop-sided grin. “Doesn’t matter, you still stink.” He insisted.

“I do not!!!” Arya protested, sounding very appalled.

Before they could go on with their verbal frenzy, she heard footsteps outside of her chambers in which her door was still widely open. Gendry turned around to face the direction of the sound the same time she did. Three castle maids finally emerged at the entrance to her chambers. They greeted them with their best curtsies.

“Your Grace, my lady.” They all said in unison.

Gendry finally stood up.

“Arya, meet your maids, Estelle, Sofia and Lucinda. They will be your personal maids from now on.” Gendry introduced her to them.

“Pleased to finally meet you, Lady Arya. We are at your service.” Lucinda, who from the looks on her face passed as their leader, greeted her with a warm smile.

Arya smiled back at them sheepishly.

“Give my lady a thorough bath. She badly needs it.” Gendry commanded them albeit jokingly.

He must be joking, right?

Her maids stifled an amused giggle. Then he turned back to look at her.

“Take the whole day to rest. I’ll see you at the feast tonight where your presence is highly expected. Tomorrow, our engagement will be announced to the rest of King’s Landing. You are also obviously expected. No buts and no excuses. Is that understood?” He told her authoritatively, one of his hand was in his pocket.

She only nodded her head bitterly.

He bowed down slightly before saying, “By your leave, my lady.”

Arya wanted to throw a pillow at his face. But instead, she just resorted to grasping at her sheets tightly. She never said a word even after he left. She still felt humiliated.
She couldn’t really smell that bad, can she? She never smelted even in Winterfell. Gods, he’s so infuriating!!!

*****

Arya may have been finished with her warm bath after what felt like ages, but she wasn’t finished dealing with her parents about what had happened that day. As soon as she was dressed into her nightclothes (even if it was still day time) before planning on sleeping for the rest of the day, her parents went inside her chambers and gave all the chastisement due to her.

She was right. It took all of her mother’s courage not to hit her with something for her sheer recklessness and stupidity. She couldn’t blame them entirely though because she had to consider the notion that they do care for her safety after all, most especially her father.

Where her mother was verbose with her frustrations, her father kept his words at bay and calculated. She admired the patience that her father has shown to her in her lifetime and with that, she swore to do her best not to disappoint him anymore. Or at least not give him a heart attack when she does something stupid. Something stupid like sneaking out of the castle and going into the streets of King’s Landing dressed up as a boy. She had to admit that she always had that idea in mind. But perhaps it could wait. She needed the temper of her mother to cool down. And she needed to behave. At least for a few moons.

After her parents left her chambers, she threw herself on the huge featherbed and found herself very surprised that it was very soft and comfortable. At least she could look forward to sleeping on this bed every day for the rest of her life.

Because this was her prison now.

Arya was too tired to shed a tear for being scolded harshly along with sensing the first effects of the loss of her freedom so she decided to drift into slumber land where all her dreams were waiting for her. At least in her dreams, hope was still existent. Where all her hopes and dreams were shattered in the real world, at least she will have sleep as her only consolation.

I love sleep. Life has the tendency to fall apart when I am awake. She told herself, quoting those lines from a book she read.

Gendry

The moment he went out of her chambers, his smile spread like wildfire across his face. He was smiling to himself like a lunatic. Although he was still infuriated at what Arya just did to cause this much trouble to herself, he still could not help but think of her fondly. At least she’s finally where he wants her to be and that is living under the same roof with him where he can protect her with his life.

He idly walked along the empty hallways back to the Throne Room with her scent lingering on his nostrils. That scent was enough to bring him to kingdom come if truth be told. It was all that he has been waiting for after seven long months. Much to his amusement, he couldn’t help but tease
her about smelling bad and the look on her face was priceless. He had to control himself from bursting into stupid gales of boyish laughter.

That was one of the things he loved most of about her.

She can be very tough and headstrong one moment but teasing her could make her coil back to looking like a normal girl, not immune to his silly puns.

Shaking his head to himself, he wiped off the doltish smirk from his face and straightened himself as he entered inside the Throne Room.

**Arya**

Arya wanted to scream and rip her eyeballs out the moment the ebb and flow of sleep drifted away into oblivion.

First, she was woken from her glorious sleep that lasted the entire day, only to be told that she was to be dressed up like one of those fancy dolls Sansa used to own. The preparation was for the feast that evening, her maids told her. Secondly, much to her horror, one of her maids, Sofia, was standing there waiting for her to be undressed by her other maids, holding a long-boned coutil laced corset.

A corset.

She never owned a single piece of it. Not after the pseudo-disaster that almost erupted in Winterfell just a year ago when her mother told her to try wearing one. She literally cried when the corsetiere started to tighten the corset about her waist.

How can anyone move with that thing strapped around one’s body? Apart from its uncomfortable feeling, it was like a symbolic depiction of women being confined to their own limitations being considered the weaker, second sex by society.

It just won’t do.

Arya shook her head after she saw that thing being presented to her as if it was the most precious gift any girl could get.

“I’m not wearing that one.” She told them with a stern voice.

“I’m sorry, my lady, but your mother says.” Sofia told her apologetically.

“No, you can’t force me to wear it. I cannot breathe in that thing.” She protested, eyeing the corset with disgust.

“Please, my lady. It’s only for the feast tonight. Your lady mother said that you need to be very presentable to the royal family. And you won’t fit in the dress we have prepared for you if you will not wear this. It will not fit.” Sofia explained.

Arya rolled her eyes. “Only for tonight’s feast? Really? Wait till my mother orders all of you to dress me up for my sewing lessons or for whatever ball, party or event the castle will hold.”

“My lady, please. It is imperative that you wear this. You ought to.” Sofia said. Her face
belied the calmness of her voice. Had her position allowed her to, she would have slapped Arya hard on the face for being such a stubborn brat.

She huffed in resignation, her shoulders slumping unceremoniously. “I pretty much don’t have a choice, do I?” Came her sarcastic remark.

They all shook their heads contritely.

“Well, fine. I know it’s not your fault. You’re all just doing your job. Go ahead then and dress me up. The sooner I am done, the sooner this night will be over.” She told them as she raised her arms for them to remove her nightgown.

Arya had to grasp the wooden pole of her four-poster featherbed to keep herself from being jerked off her feet as her maids were working their way with binding her abdomen. Every time Sofia would lace the back, a fraction of her breath would be taken away. She had to close her eyes to steady herself. If this was the kind of punishment her mother was meaning to give for her lack of refinement, then her mother definitely won.

This was plain torture.

The gods are truly mocking her.

Long minutes passed when she was dolled up like a stupid little princess. As soon as she was done, her maids all shared triumphant faces perhaps for the job well done they did to her. When she was presented before the looking glass, she could hardly recognize herself. There was no denying that she looked impressive.

Her cream-colored satin bodice glittered with sparkling grey and silver gems all over. The neckline was revealing enough to show the tops of her budding bosom while the sleeves clung to her arms like skin. When she moved, her dress would twinkle in the light of the glowing embers.

She was practically like a walking jewel.

When she looked at the lower part of her dress, the soft organza material of her creamy-peachy colored skirts would flow gracefully at her every movement.

Her maids did not remove the small silver necklace given by Gendry but they put a small diamond stud earring on each of her ears. To match the earrings, they let her wear a silver-chained bracelet with glistening diamonds all around it.

Arya’s hair was kept in a low bun with small wisps of wavy hair accentuating her face. She could also notice something shining on her bun which on closer inspection was actually an elegant hair piece with the same diamonds on her bracelet and earrings.

They put a little rouge on her cheeks and lips and to top it all off, they sprayed perfume on the pulse points of her neck, just below her ear, on her inner upper arm (where the brachial artery was located, she knew) and on her wrists.

The scent smelled heavenly. She had to admit. It wasn’t too much as well. It more or less smelled just like her, she realized. How do they know that this was the kind of scent she had harbored?

One of her maids, Estelle, smiled at her the moment they inhaled the enticing scent.

“This is perfect for you, my lady. The prince loves this scent, you see. He was the one who
specifically told us to use this on you.” She explained.

For a moment, Arya would have believed it was so, but then she remembered him sniffing at her this morning when they arrived at her chambers, telling her that she stinks. Perhaps the stupid idiot would think that offering her this perfume would be a polite way of saying that he doesn’t like the way she smells and that it had to be concealed by the scent of this perfume.

But then again, the perfume smelled like her. So there goes the baffling mystery behind it.

It wasn’t long after they all heard a knock on the door.

When one of her maids opened it, she was surprised to see Ser Arys.

“My lady, I am tasked to escort you back to the Great Hall where the feast is about to start.” He informed her after bowing slightly.

Arya gave him a toothy smile. “Good to see you, Ser. Of course, it will be an honor to be escorted by you.” She told him kindly.

She turned back to her maids and gave them her warmest gratitude for the wonderful job they did to her. She may hate the notion of being dressed up properly, but she never forgets hard work from the smallfolk like her maids and the guards. And if anything, she never belittled their job, instead, she treated their servants as equals befitting their natural rights.

The walk towards the Great Hall felt like only a millisecond and before she knew it, she was now standing right before the huge brass doors. Ser Arys whispered something to the guards in the door and slowly, the wide doors flung open.

Arya stood there motionless.

Her world suddenly felt so constrained and she swore that she was having tunnel vision. The corset suddenly sucked out all of the air in her system, making her more pallid and her back was sweating profusely.

She swallowed the thick, invisible lump on her throat and said to herself, here goes nothing.
Feasting

Chapter 17: Feasting

Gendry

He was in the middle of a conversation with Robb and Willas that evening, gingerly sipping his wine. All of them were still waiting for one more person to arrive before their feast could start. They were at the main table on the dais along with King Robert, his uncle Renly, the Lord and Lady Stark as well as Lady Sansa. Theon and Jon had to be seated on the other table below the dais, much to Gendry’s displeasure because according to custom, bastards and outsiders were not allowed to sit with the royal family.

He made a mental snort at that.

He was a bastard before he was legitimized so he never really understood why Jon had to sit on the other table. To Gendry, it did not really matter if Jon was a bastard or not. For all he cares, he could be a serving maid’s son and still be good friends with him. Because as for Gendry, he made sure to treat people equally. Even Greyjoy would earn his fair treatment even if he can be a prick sometimes.

In the middle of their discussion on the table, one of the serving men tasked to pour wine to refill their cups suddenly approached Gendry.

“Your Grace. The Lady Arya is here.” He informed him.

Gendry nodded in acknowledgment before the serving man bowed at him.

He excused himself tentatively from Robb and Willas then turned to his father who was seated beside him.

“She’s here.” He whispered to Robert.

Robert nodded in return and finally gave instructions to the guards at the door to open the door and signal the herald at the same time.

Right after Arya’s name was announced to everyone in the feast, Gendry finally stood up from his seat and walked near the table of the other high ranking officials of King’s Landing who were seated below the dais.

He stood there to wait for Arya to reach the center of the Great Hall.

As soon as the huge doors were opened, he literally forgot how to breathe.

Stunned was an understatement.

He was enraptured by her entrancing beauty that night. Her elegant gown and her over overall look only highlighted her best features and she was literally gleaming under the light in the Great Hall. The sight of her that night was a gentle reminder for Gendry Baratheon that she was after
all the epitome of perfection. Because as much as he wanted to suppress the fact, Arya Stark was the perfect girl in his dreams –headstrong, contradicting, pragmatic, intellectual, annoying, infuriating, beguiling, beautiful, sultry, nubile, hypnotizing… she was everything and even a prince like him would willingly bow down to her.

And yet, what makes it even more enthralling was the fact that she was oblivious to her own charms.

Surely he would be the envy of every eligible bachelor in the Great Hall right now because he was intended to marry her. Perhaps he could also be the most endangered bachelor right now because some green-eyed monster might kill him in his sleep just so that he could wed and bed his betrothed in his stead.

It felt unnerving. And yet, here he was, totally frozen in place as the bewitching Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell –his Arya, started walking towards the center of the Great Hall where she was to meet with him.

He could sense most of the people gasping the moment she entered the Great Hall. All heads turned to her. The men leered at her with lust while the ladies looked at her with jealousy, feigning disgust. Truth be told, Gendry knew that every lady her age would want to be in Arya’s shoes right now. Her dress was a contrast to the colorful outfits of most of the highborn guests inside. Where everyone else looked heavily-adorned with bulging gems, jewelries and headpieces, Arya simply looked ethereal –like a goddess graced upon by the heavens to satisfy his fantasies.

Perhaps even his carnal fantasies.

Gendry made a huge swallow as his eyes traced every fiber of her existence that night. His cock twitched in autonomic response. He had to position his arms in the middle to at least try to conceal his bulging erection. Because he had to be honest with himself. He wanted to share all kinds of intimacies he could think of to her.

Only to her.

He tried to erase those prurient thoughts away and instead focus on how he should greet her without sounding like a lost little boy. Because that was what he was right now.

Lost. So lost for her. He was completely taken.

Arya was looking at him the whole time she was walking towards his direction with careful, practiced steps. He knew that she was very nervous right now and he so wanted to take her away from the eyes of the people so that they could have a moment alone where she could be herself. He missed her being his friend after all. Perhaps after the feast they could talk.

When she was already a few meters away from him, he composed himself once more and wore his mask of princely nonchalance.

“My lady.” He greeted her as he held out his hand to her.

Arya took his hand, slightly shaking. She was clearly very tense. “Your Grace.” She half-whispered with a sheepish smile which was borderline to a grimace.

As soon as their skins touched, he was not surprised to be holding a very cold and clammy hand. He held her hand tight to at least give off a little of the warmth he has. Arya may have noticed because she was holding his hand a little tighter in return.
Before they could walk back towards their table in the dais, he faced her completely and bowed down slightly after lifting her hand.

“What are you doing?” She asked in horror.

A small lop-sided smirk curled on his lips.

“Tradition.” He replied. Then he brought the back of her hand to his lips, giving it a soft kiss. When he did, her scent diffused inside his nostrils. It took all of his self-control not to lunge at her and wrap her around his arms and kiss her full on the lips.

He could see Arya flushing scarlet.

All the guests applauded at his gesture. Then Robert silenced them after the kiss.

“Let it be officially known to everyone in this feast that House Baratheon and House Stark will finally be joining houses soon through the marriage of my son, the crown prince and my only heir, to the youngest daughter of Lord Eddard Stark, Lady Arya Stark of Winterfell. Tomorrow, they will be presented to the rest of the people in King’s Landing. Here’s a toast to the joining of our houses!” King Robert jovially announced, raising his wine cup.

The people inside applauded again.

Arya and Gendry had no choice but to smile at the people cheering for them. At least Arya was being cooperative right now instead of being stubborn.

After Robert’s announcement of their betrothal, Lady Sansa and Lord Willas Tyrell’s engagement was next to be announced. Much to everyone’s surprise, the young couple have moved their wedding day months earlier. They were to be married in a fortnight in Highgarden. It was Willas who told Gendry of their sudden change of plans earlier that day because according to him, both him and Sansa could no longer wait to get married.

When both of them were finally seated as the feast was about to begin, Arya turned to Gendry with a raised eyebrow. They were still both holding hands. Arya didn’t seem to mind so he didn’t release his hold on her.

“That was really unnecessary, you know.” She told him, rolling her eyes but she was hiding a smirk.

“We can’t really defy tradition, can we?” Came his witty response.

“You’re mocking me.” She snorted, noticing his sinister grin as her eyes studied his face.

She seemed enthralled at the sight of him. He could tell because her cheeks were very red. He drew his face near her, his eyes cutting through her soul.

“And you’re staring.” He retorted, giving her soft hand a gentle squeeze.

Arya blinked back to reality and turned away from him, breaking her firm hold on his hand upon the realization.

“I wasn’t.” She denied.

“Your maids have outdone themselves. You look like a real human being right now. Impressive.” He whispered again, teasing her. Because in some way he didn’t want her to see how
he really regarded her that night like a very alluring goddess. In some way he still held that little reservation in himself as opposed to blurring out how he was so crazy for her right that instant.

This needs to be gradual, he reminded himself. Because winning her heart was like a battle between life and death and to make one single mistake would mean the end of the chase.

Arya lifted her wine cup and brought it before her lips. “Sarcasm.” She simply stated before taking a sip of her wine.

“Truth.” He shot back, holding up a serious face.

“Irrelevant truth.” She snapped, flashing a glare at him.

“But still the truth, regardless.” He knew he won their petty argument when she didn’t say another word.

When the dinner courses were being served and they all had started indulging in the food at their table, Gendry noticed how Arya ate so little. It was unusual knowing her to have an appetite like a grown man.

“Not hungry?” He suddenly asked her as he leaned closer beside her.

“Extremely hungry. But apparently, I cannot eat much. Mother had a very creative way of punishing me tonight.” She replied, suddenly wincing as if in pain.

He noticed one of her hands touching her waist.

“What’s wrong? What punishment are you talking about?” He asked, getting a little bit worried now. Arya breathed out a thick air.

“She told my maids to force me into this stupid corset, you see.” She replied.

His mouth fell slightly open. No wonder she looked very stiff and rigid. It was because of the binding piece of clothing strapped around her waist. He felt sympathetic but Arya shot a murderous scowl at him.

“Don’t… look at me like that. I’m alright. For now. I promise.” She assured him, her voice softening.

“Alright. But if you’re in so much pain already, just tell me. Do you understand?” Arya nodded her head.

A thought may have crossed her mind when she glowered at him once more. “Why? Are you going to help me out of this tight thing? Do you even know how to unlace things most especially this one?” It was her turn to be sarcastic.

Wrong move, Arya Stark.

Suddenly, a picture flashed in his train of lecherous thoughts with Arya wearing only her corset and nothing else. Sure, he had seen women wearing only corsets in the confines of his chambers, squirming underneath him, but it was different for Arya. Because she was still innocent, and pure and… everything at once. The thought shot a large amount of blood to his cock enough for it to become tumescent.

He shunned those thoughts away after he berated himself. But he held a sinister, knowing
look on his face.

“Oh, you don’t know how good I am at unlacing a woman’s undergarments. But for you, I could just rip it all off with a single dagger.” He teased her, eyeing her suggestively.

Her cheeks flushed red again.

“Lewd, are we? Tell me, are you that vile?” She equaled his intimidating tone.

He shrugged, feigning innocence. “What are you talking about? I wasn’t suggesting anything lewd. After all, your airway, breathing and circulation are still the most fundamental things that keep you alive, are they not? How can I prioritize those things then if I would do the usual way of unlacing them with my large, clumsy hands rather than running a dagger through it? Think.” He tried to rationalize.

Arya shook her head in sheer disbelief. “There’s no point arguing with you, Gendry, because you always try to find ways to intellectualize things. I’d rather enjoy this scanty dinner, thank you very much.” Came her resigning statement.

“It takes one to know one, eh? You’d know that about me because you are one yourself. Clever.” He remarked.

Arya gave him a sideways glance and her lips curled into a lop-sided smirk before taking a bite of the roasted beef from her fork.

A few minutes of chattering here and there have gone by until he finally finished his meal. He finished it off with his favorite dessert. He tried to offer Arya what he was having but she politely declined.

“Are you no longer able to hold anymore if you eat this?” He had asked her.

Arya looked at him and shook her head. “Something like that, and I’m not one for too much sweets either. You’re lucky because there will be more for you. You can even have my share if you want to.” She replied, shoving her plate of dessert at him with a faint smile.

His eyes widened at her gesture but he smiled warmly anyway. “Thank you, Arya. Well, if you insist, then I should have this. Waste not, want not.”

In the middle of their conversation with just about anything, Robert suddenly called for them to start the dance. All the people applauded, urging them to get on their feet and head to the center of the dance floor. Arya’s eyes bulged from her sockets as she flashed a look of horror towards him.

“I can’t dance!” She mouthed worriedly.

Gendry gripped her hand. “Don’t worry. We’ll do this at your pace.” He assured her calmly.

As they were slowly walking towards the center of the open dance floor in the Great Hall, Arya whispered to him, “Why did no one ever tell me that this was part of tonight’s feast? I will only bring shame to you and my family. I can’t dance, Gendry.” She warned him.

He held her hand while he brought his other hand to her waist, pulling her closer to him as they readied themselves for their first dance.

“Apparently, this is also part of the tradition here.” Was his serious reply as he looked straight into her eyes.
Arya glared. “Well, apparently, I am not aware of this tradition! And like I said, I can’t dance!” Panic began to settle in her face.

He noticed that she was now beginning to sweat as evidenced by her moist hand. Most of all, he was getting worried because she was now starting to have labored breathing.

The music finally started.

He began to sway around with her as their dance began. Audible awes and gasps could be heard from afar.

“Just follow my lead but we will take this slow… at your own pace, remember? Just try to think of those dancing lessons you had with your septa back in Winterfell. And please, try to relax. Can you do that for me?” His voice was gentle now as he leaned his face closer to hers. He was still gazing at her intently.

“That’s the problem... I am used to sneaking out… almost every time Septa Mordane will give us dance lessons… Because I have two left feet.” Arya grimaced at the thought, her words now broken.

She was eyeing her surroundings consciously and her erratic breathing was not getting any better. She was looking paler than ever. She was now in a state of panic, he knew. It was not good. She was slipping away, drifting off to her own fears and insecurities. He could feel her body shaking under his hold.

“Arya.” He called out her name seriously.

Arya immediately turned her gaze towards him. “Gendry, I can’t…” She trailed off, her voice now very faint as her chest continued to heave as if she was losing all of her breath. “I can’t breathe… Please, I need… air… I can’t… breathe…” She told him still with broken words as she pulled away from his stare.

Their dancing was now set at an even slower pace. Gendry eyed her worriedly but he had to do something. So he pulled her closer to him by holding her waist and her hand a little tighter.

“Arya…” He called her again. “Look at me.” He commanded her.

Arya looked back at him, blinking.

“Only look at me and no one else. Do you get me?” He said once more with authority. “Breathe…” He encouraged. “Breathe… you can do this. We can do this.”

Arya continued to hold his gaze.

“Look at me. Only at me, Arya. Don’t you dare turn your head around for anyone else. For now, just look at me and breathe.” He told her in a calming whisper with a tone only meant for her. She nodded again, doing his bidding.

From afar it would seem like they were very passionate about each other. It seemed as if they were an epitome of young love because he was holding her very close to him that they were already almost kissing. But little did the people know that he was helping her cope up with her state of sudden panic.

Gendry never left his eyes on her. “Just think for one moment that we are the only people around. It’s just you and me. You and me, Arya, and no one else. You’re safe… You’re safe here
with me.” He added. “Say something, Arya. Anything.” He requested.

“I feel so safe with you, Gendry. You’re right. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be…” The words suddenly uttered came unbidden, her eyes lost under his. She looked entranced.

“That’s good to know, Arya… How are you feeling now?” He asked her.

“I honestly feel kind of… better now…” She told him.

He felt relieved.

“Because you are my lifeline.” She said to him gratefully.

Her voice was closer to its usual normal tone. He smiled at her warmly.

“What else are you thinking?” He urged her to speak up while they were dancing.

“That I really need to practice my dancing steps so as not to disgrace you? I guess I badly need a dancing partner. Because I can sense that there will be more of this stupid dancing in the weeks to come, considering Sansa’s sudden change of plans to marry way ahead of time.” She rolled her eyes dramatically at the mention of her sister.

Gendry smiled at her. He noticed that her breathing finally stabilized and she was no longer tense as her body finally adjusted to his hold. His lips quirked up to a smirk.

“I can be your dancing partner.” He offered.

“Touching.” She smiled back at him, this time she was beginning to feel comfortable, which was good. “But I guess you are my only option. Because after all, we’re engaged. Obviously. Who else would want to offer to become my dancing partner?” She japed.

He shot a playful glare at her and gripped her hand tighter. “I’d kill anyone who will try to offer their hand to be your dancing partner.” He threatened albeit jokingly.

She snorted. “Your possessiveness is endearing.” She remarked with a playful smirk. Then she shook her head. “But you see, there’s no need. Because I will see to it that I’d kill anyone else who will do the offer. All you have to do is sit back and relax while I do the killing.” She interjected.

“Cunning move.” He remarked. “I’m glad you’re now talking. For a moment I thought you’d throw up your dinner at me right in front of all the guests inside.” He added.

“Maybe I could do that some other time. Not now when my Mother still wants to skin me alive for what I did today.” She told him.

His gaze turned serious. “Yes. You still need to explain yourself to me later when we talk.” He ordered her.

“Are we not talking right now?” She asked sarcastically as she raised an eyebrow.

“Later.” He pointed out.

Much to Arya’s surprise, he suddenly twirled her around him and saw how perfectly and exquisitely beautiful she was in her sparkling gown. She already looked like a princess—his princess. Then he caught her with his arms wrapping around her waist as if it was meant to fit perfectly to hers.
“See? That wasn’t so bad. Our dancing lessons will be a breeze.” He said to her. But he could see Arya tensing again as she found herself speechless.

“Hey, it’s alright. You’re doing fine now, Arya.”

She nodded her head. “Yes, sorry. It’s just that… this is all so new to me. I haven’t even been here for more than a day and this is already what I’m doing.” She explained.

“I know. You’ll get used to this eventually. And I’ll do my best to make your stay here as painless and seamless as possible, okay?” He assured her.

“Thank you, Gendry. Although, not to impose. I know you’re already busy enough ruling this kingdom.” She said.

“I’ll do my best to make time for you as much as I can, Arya.” He could see her blush spreading across her face even if she was trying to hide it. “I do miss having a friend around, you know.” He said to her again in a close whisper, giving her a wink.

For the first time this evening, he saw Arya flash a toothy smile that was only meant for him. She looked even more dazzling. He had been wanting to tell her how beautiful she was in her stunning gown but he knew that telling her would only freak her out. So he chose to remain silent by observing her at a close distance.

When the people in the Great Hall were already starting to join them in the dance floor, Gendry took it as their chance to stop dancing and sneak away from the madding crowd. He led Arya away from the dancing people and the Great Hall and brought her to a very secluded balcony in the Red Keep while holding her hand the entire time they were walking. He had specifically chosen the spot where the splendid view of the sea would meet with the shining stars above.

Arya had to release her hand from his hold as she dashed towards the railings of the balcony when they arrived. She was obviously in awe.

“This is King’s Landing?” She asked him, her eyes never looking away from the view before them. He placed his hands in his pockets as he sauntered towards her side.

“Yes. It’s just a part of it. And this is my favorite view. We are actually on the other side of the Red Keep.” He informed her.

“I’ve never seen anything like this in my entire life. I never thought something as beautiful as this could exist.” She said to him. “And I’ve never really appreciated the stars until I saw how lovely they are from here.” Arya added.

He gave a low laugh. “I’m glad you liked the view. I’ll be showing you more when we have the time. Just like I promised in my letters.” He told her, regarding her carefully. The mere mention of their letters made Arya’s cheeks turn bright red. He swore he could see Arya biting her lip.

“You remembered.” Came her sudden remark, doing her best not to look at him.

“Of course, I remember everything.” He said with pride in his tone.

For a few heartbeats, they fell silent.

From time to time, Gendry would make a side glance at her and he could notice her trying to contemplate in her thoughts. He allowed the silence to grow to give her ample time to think. After what seemed like long, agonizing minutes, she finally spoke.
“Gendry…” She looked up into his eyes seriously. “I know there was no excuse for what I did today… And I’m really sorry for causing everyone, especially you this much trouble. I truly am.” Came her remorseful statement. After saying those words, her eyes were downcast. Apart from feeling sorry, it seemed like she looked… sad.

Gendry found himself speechless as he gazed back at her. Only the beating of his heart seemed loud enough. He hoped to the Seven Gods that Arya could not hear it.

“I think I just needed that time earlier for myself before I straighten up and face my fate… but I feel ashamed for what I did. You’ve been nothing but kind to me but I repaid it with my stubbornness. I’m sorry for that as well.” She spoke to him again, her words barely a whisper. For someone as proud as her, it was very unusual for her to be apologetic and repentant.

“You’re right. I was stupid and reckless and—”

“Stop.” Gendry suddenly interrupted her. His fingers tugged at her chin gently so that she could look back at him. He peered at her fiercely. Arya’s eyes widened in shock, her eyebrows raised.

“What is it?” She asked innocently.

Gendry found himself tongue-tied. He was already out of words before he could even utter anything. Because he was not really good with words and she would always make him speechless. So he did what he did best and showed it to her thru actions. Without any preamble, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer to his chest while his other hand was holding the back of her head, gently massaging her scalp and her hair. He inhaled the wonderful scent of her hair and savored the feel of her skin.

Then he closed his eyes.

“What you did this morning was really stupid. And I was utterly furious. But more than that, I was very scared. Because you could have been hurt. And I couldn’t bear seeing you get hurt…” He trailed off, tightening his embrace.

A smile spread on his face the moment he felt Arya’s arms wrap around him in return.

“I’m fine, Gendry. I’m here now.” Her voice was muffled on his chest. He broke a soft laugh.

“Yes, you’re here now. And it’s all that matters.” He whispered more to himself than at her. She was all that matters.

And he has fallen helplessly…

He had to pull away before he could do something more to her. The expression on his face shifted. “Don’t you ever do that again or else I will really tie you to my bed. Do you understand me?” He said with mock authority.

Arya rolled her eyes and blew a playful punch on his chest. “You’d have to kill me first before you could do that, Your Majesty.” She said mockingly.

“Insolent little shit.” He japed before his large fingers started tickling her armpits. It earned a girlish giggle from her.

“Stop!” She cried out in between gales of laughter. But he didn’t stop. Because he realized
that he loved hearing her giggle like a girly-girl.

“By the gods! The great Arya Stark is a ticklish little girl!” He said as he continued to tickle her funny bones. Their bodies were now very close to each other.

“Please, stop!” She mewled once again. Gendry finally stopped with his arms circling her waist and holding her in place.

He could see the glowing flush on her pretty face as she tried to catch her breath. His hand brushed a stray lock of her dark brown hair away from her face. He was looking at her and she was looking back at him. There was silence except for the rhythm of their breaths and the fast beating of their hearts.

She parted her lips as if by instinct as he drew closer to her face. She did the same by allowing herself to come closer. So close. He had been waiting for this for so long… and he could hardly believe that he was mere centimeters away from those lips…

“Pardon me, Your Grace.” He suddenly heard that familiar voice at the entrance of the balcony.

Arya immediately pulled away from him and tried to straighten herself. When he turned to look at the person speaking, he wanted to punch him in the face for interrupting them—again. Nothing like Ser Arys to break a perfect moment for a long-awaited kiss.

Shit.

“What?!” Gendry’s annoyance was evident in his tone.

Arya had to stifle a giggle at his raging reaction.

“I apologize for the interruption, Your Grace, but a raven just flew in from Winterfell… important news from one of your generals.” Ser Arys informed him before handing him a piece of sealed paper.

“Thank you, Ser Arys.” He said, his voice calmer as he snatched the paper from him.

He felt a sudden dread looming in his chest and he hoped to the Seven that this was not something very grave. It took him a minute or two to finish reading the letter while Arya was looking at him, eager for some news from her home. She held that same worried look as his.

A wave of relief surged through him when the letter stated that everything was fine in the North and that the army he has sent there has been doing their job of fortifying Winterfell with their lives.

Right now, he couldn’t decide if he wanted to laugh at the perfect timing of the circumstance they were almost caught under or if he wanted to kick Ser Arys hard in the balls that he will be sore for the entire week.

Why does it always have to be him who keeps on interrupting them?

“Well?” Arya suddenly asked. “How is Winterfell?”

He handed her the piece of paper he just read. “They’re just reports from my general.” He told her as she read the contents. He heaved a sigh. He would have to inform his father and Lord Stark about this even if this was nothing serious. Because after all, it was his job.
Arya handed back the letter to him after saying her thanks.

He turned to Ser Arys seriously. “Ser Arys, please escort Lady Arya back to her chambers now. I will need to get to my father and the Lord Hand immediately to deliver the news.” He said authoritatively. Ser Arys nodded his head. Gendry felt sorry for having to leave Arya again because he needed to carry out his duty.

He walked closer towards her as he faced her completely. “Arya, I apologize if I won’t be able to stay any longer. Ser Arys will escort you back to your chambers. I will be seeing you tomorrow.” He explained to her, his face crestfallen.

Arya harbored the same expression.

She gave him a curt smile. “It’s alright, Gendry. I understand that it’s part of your job.”

He put a smile on his face as he looked at her. Then he held out her hand before him and kissed the back of her palm. “Goodnight, my lady.” He said good-naturedly.

“Have a pleasant evening, Your Grace.” She replied with all of the formality in her tone.

Arya

They walked along the solitary halls of the Red Keep on the way back to her chambers. She managed to remain quiet as she tried to absorb everything that had happened that night with him – starting from their conversations at the feast, to the first dance they shared, to the way he saved her life that night in the midst of her hyperventilation, to the warmth of his skin when he wrapped his arms around her and how much he was dead-worried about her, to how their night almost ended with a kiss… it all seemed perfect… and very natural. Like she was really meant to do those things with him.

And the almost kiss with him.

She had to admit that she had been furtively longing for the taste of his lips. Because it was the most wonderful thing in the world. And she was pathetic for firmly believing it in spite of her stupid denials.

But in some way, after what had happened earlier, Arya was greatly surprised of herself for finally letting her guard down around him. It was as if they haven’t been leagues away from each other for seven long months. As if they have never been worlds apart because she was once again beginning to feel comfortable around him. And it was as if they were not bickering stupidly about what had happened earlier that morning either.

Perhaps their exchange of letters over the past months had greatly helped in strengthening their bond, or the fact that they are best friends first before the acknowledgment of their betrothal. Or perhaps she was just well-rested after sleeping through the rest of the day, that’s why. But now after all that they had gone through, Arya had to admit that they were getting closer than ever.

It was unnerving and exhilarating at the same time.

Apart from all those rationalizations and constant denials, Arya Stark knew deep down that she was finally releasing all her inhibitions. Because now she is a woman grown and, in some way,
she had to gracefully embrace her womanhood.

This epiphany suddenly brought her to a new light, a different way of regarding the invisible chains of nobility she was wearing around her neck. It no longer felt constricting. It no longer seemed like a heavy burden at all now that Gendry was here. She had to always keep that in mind... or else everything will cower back into the pit of the darkness lurking deep inside her soul.

Although she was now walking in a new light, she knew that she had to take this one step at a time. She had to slowly embrace the inevitable change and face it like a real woman. Because she will definitely be needing a lot of her strength to empower herself.

In the midst of her silent reverie, she noticed the way Ser Arys was smirking by himself when she made a side glance at him.

“I know what you’re thinking, Ser Arys.” She suddenly told him calmly, one eye closed and the other eye looking at him “And it’s not what you think.” She continued, trying to stifle her lips from curling upward involuntarily.

The Kingsguard’s knowing grin only grew wider. He was obviously teasing her with what he saw earlier between her and Gendry. For a second, Arya was reminded that he was as human as she was.

She could no longer hold the smile forming on her face so she broke into soft gales of controlled laughter as they continued to walk back to her chambers. Ser Arys sniggered along with her.

“What?” She tried to act innocent but to no avail. She was not sure why she was suddenly feeling so jovial that night, considering her struggle earlier with everything that had transpired within the day, and most importantly, the unending throes of her constricting corset.

“You know, you could just tell His Grace and get it over with, my lady.” He suddenly told her knowingly.

“Whatever do you mean, Ser Arys?” She japed, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, you very much know what I mean, Lady Arya. Or shall I say ‘Your Highness’ already?” He shot back, still grinning at her.

Arya snorted, wrapped in her coat of denial. Ser Arys can tease her all he wants but she will not give in.

“I’ve seen the look on Prince Gendry when you entered the Great Hall this evening, my lady. He has never looked at anyone like that.” What the Kingsguard told her surprised her to a great extent.

Her face suddenly felt hot and she could feel a blush creep in.

Ser Arys was now looking at her. “I told you earlier that you look very beautiful with your dress tonight. Everyone else thinks so.” He continued, saying those a matter-of-factly.

“You are really so endearing, Ser Arys. I could tell that you are a romantic.” She remarked, giving him that lop-sided smile.

“Indeed I am, my lady.” He acquiesced. “His Grace will definitely be glad to have you around. He’s been swamped with work these past few months. With you around, he will have
“Well, I hope I won’t bore him to death. As you see, I am a very boring person. And I hope Gendry can spare his time. I know he is so busy with council meetings and all and being the prince to the rest of this kingdom. I don’t want to be a bother to him.” She said, looking straight into the long corridor.

“You are never a bother to him, my lady.” He told her with assurance.

Arya shot a quizzical look at him.

“His Grace would sometimes open up to me about you. He said that you share a deep friendship. And it’s rare for arranged betrothals to have a friendship like yours, mind you.” Ser Arys answered her silent question.

After long minutes of conversation on the way to her chambers, she finally bid goodnight to Ser Arys and thank him for his company. He told her he would be guarding her door for tonight and offered a hand if ever she needed any help. She was never used to having someone guard her door so it felt awkward.

At first she insisted that she was fine but Ser Arys said that he was working on the Prince’s orders. Of course. The ever protective Prince Gendry Baratheon ordered his Kingsguard to watch over the ‘future princess.’ Arya made a ‘pffft’ as she threw herself on the soft featherbed.

At least she should be thankful that people still care a lot about her. As she tossed and turned on her soft bed, she felt the constricting corset around her waist again. She abruptly stood up and undressed herself starting with the sparkling ball gown she was made to wear. When she was down to just wearing her small clothes, she grabbed the knife strapped to her thigh and ran it through the laces of her corset, finally freeing her upper body from its constraints.

She could breathe again.

Her upper body was now bare. And for the first time in her life, she was thankful. After removing her corset, she also took time removing her garter belt and unrolling her skin tone stockings from her thighs until she was completely naked as her name day.

She gathered the dress she put on the feather bed and the rest of her clothing articles and set it on the table neatly. She took out her white nightclothes from her wooden chest and put it on without wearing any smallclothes. It was too warm in King’s Landing to be wearing thick clothing.

Since she was practically left with nothing to do inside her chambers, she sauntered over towards her other personal belongings settled on the other side of her room and looked for the wooden sewing box she brought all the way from Winterfell.

She sat back on her bed, facing the open window and gingerly opened the wooden sewing box. Arya never liked sewing stitches, no. So instead of finding needles and threads inside that sewing box, one would be surprised to find a stack of folded papers neatly pressed and kept intact.

Arya has been keeping Gendry’s letters and she made sure to bring it along with her to her new home, here in King’s Landing. A small smile tugged on her lips. These papers were one of her most precious possessions along with Needle and her knife and her dagger, and more importantly, her necklace.

She took one of the folded papers and studied it. Just when she was about to unfold the letter, there was a knock on the door.
“Shit.” She whispered a curse as she hurriedly stuffed the paper back in the wooden sewing box and hid it under her pillows.

She rose to her feet and faced the door. A relief flashed on her face as she saw Sofia entering her room with Lucinda. Sofia was carrying a tray with her.

“My lady.” They curtsied.

“Prince Gendry ordered us to bring you some food in your chambers because he said you haven’t eaten much during the feast. He said you need to eat before you sleep for the night.” Sofia informed her before sauntering towards the small dining area in her chambers. Lucinda on the other hand was surprised to find her dress already neatly folded on the table.

“My lady, you shouldn’t have bothered folding your dress.” Lucinda told her shyly, her face red.

Arya waved her a dismissive hand. “It’s fine, Lucinda. It’s nothing that I cannot do.” She said as she walked over towards the dining area and sat on the chair.

Before her were mouth-watering plates of the beef and the potatoes and the steak she had been wanting to eat but could not. On the other side of the tray was a bowl of the thick cream of chicken soup she loved. The heavenly scent was making her hungrier.

She plastered a smile on her face as she thanked her maids for their hard work and finally indulged herself in her midnight meal.

Arya will definitely be sleeping with a very satisfied stomach tonight. And it was all thanks to Gendry.

Her friend.

Her best friend.

Or perhaps he was already something more.

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