

The children inside the palace walls

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/29475285) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/29475285>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	F/M , Gen
Fandoms:	Game of Thrones (TV) , A Song of Ice and Fire - George R. R. Martin
Relationships:	Arya Stark/Gendry Waters , Arya Stark & Bella , Arya Stark & Mya Stone , Arya Stark & Sansa Stark
Characters:	Arya Stark , Sansa Stark , Gendry Waters , Mya Stone , Bella (ASoIaF)
Additional Tags:	Friendship , attempts at arranged marriages , bastard prince gendry au , all of robert's bastard kids were raised in the palace
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-02-15 Updated: 2021-12-25 Words: 12,518 Chapters: 4/?

The children inside the palace walls

by [TheDameintheRaininMaine](#)

Summary

Arya doesn't want to leave Winterfell to live in the Red Keep. But at least she potentially has a couple of new friends to make her time more interesting.

Notes

The whole fic is inspired by this great piece of fanart-
<https://bookedandbusythough.tumblr.com/post/190601582276> (originally posted by Oatmealraisinbagel)

Chapter 1

Arya hadn't been terribly excited for the King's caravan to make it to Winterfell.

Curious to be sure. She'd never met the king before. But it also meant she'd been wrestled into a dress, forced to stand still and smile and be quiet.

She watched the royal family disembark while fighting the urge to fidget. The fat king passes her over with barely a glance, and his queen's face reminds her of Sansa's whenever she had finally found the sheep's dung in her bed. Their children hold Arya's attention even less so, the oldest looking just as odious as his mother, his face pinched as though everything in Winterfell was offensive to him.

And already, Sansa seems taken with him, her smile turning girlish and giggling as soon as she curtsies and calls him "your grace". As soon as Arya sees an opening, she wanders.

Even the Queen's brothers aren't interesting- Jamie Lannister looks nearly as perfectly golden and perfectly odious as his twin. And despite her curiosity about the Imp, Arya quickly realizes he's no more intriguing than any other man, just smaller.

There's a another group standing near the back of the wheelhouse, surrounded by servants and the king's men, but not rushing about to unload things or begin any other work. Two girls and a boy. They all look close to Jon and Robb's age, give or take a year. All three are quite tall, with black hair.

"Arya!" a voice yell, before pulling her back into line with her family, and she says nothing about the others.

She doesn't see them again until the feast. They are seated away from the dais, just like Jon, because Mother won't allow him to sit with the family.

The boy (a bit younger than Jon, perhaps from his face, but even taller) is sitting hunched, chewing sullenly. Arya passes him by. The younger girl is all smiles and bouncing curls, but the older one wears her hair shorter than most ladies would. Arya squints, trying to see better how they're dressed, when she's distracted by Sansa giggling over the prince.

Ugh. Arya reaches for her spoon.

Later, after she's crept back after being taken off to bed by Robb, Arya searches until she finds Jon and pesters him for answers.

He doesn't want to talk at first, but Arya knows she can get him to tell.

"They're the King's bastard children," Jon finally admits. Arya blinks.

"He brought them to court with him?" Even at nine, she knows this is unusual. She's heard whispers enough about Jon, how Father has kept him close to his side, educated with his

trueborn children. And three seems like a lot of bastards to have, even though Arya's heard Ned's stories that Robert was always popular with women. Having seen him, she can't understand why.

Jon nods.

"The eldest is Mya. You should invite her to go riding tomorrow. I think you two would get along."

And with that, Jon ruffles her hair and turns to leave.

It's easy enough to follow his suggestion though. During the royal family's visit, Septa Mordane has backed off on lessons a bit, and Arya has the morning free.

She's grateful. That morning's lesson was to be singing.

Mya's sitting with the others, and when breakfast is finished, Arya approaches her. She thinks maybe she ought to have been nervous, but she just blurts out the invitation as she usually would to anyone else.

Thankfully, Mya agrees readily. That makes Arya happy, that she didn't brush her off like a gnat because she's so young.

"I go riding every chance I get in King's Landing," Mya tells her as she leads her to the stables, "It's my favorite thing about living there. I even liked having to ride most of the way north."

"Are you actually from King's Landing?" Arya asks, remembering the story that the city is so crowded it constantly smells of shit.

"My mother's from the Vale. She still lives there."

That makes Arya's foot catch. So her mother doesn't live at the Red Keep with her. Though, she reasons, Mya looks practically like a woman grown, maybe living away from her mother doesn't bother her.

Mya shakes her head. She's much too big for a pony like Arya's, so she tells her she can borrow Sansa's mare, since she never goes riding anyway.

"She doesn't like riding?"

"Sansa doesn't like anything fun. She hates getting dirty. She only likes sewing and dancing and other stupid things."

Mya had nodded slightly. They were starting off at a gentle trot around the yard, no matter how much Arya longed to go out into the Wolfwood.

"Bella and I get lessons in those things too. She's much better at them than me."

Well, at least it wasn't just Arya who was a hopeless lady. She urges her pony to slow down.

“Bella’s your other sister?”

Mya nods.

“I’m six and ten, Bella’s five and ten and Gendry’s four and ten.”

Gendry, Arya tucks the name away.

“And King Robert brought you all to live in the Red Keep, even though you’re bastards?”

Mya winces a little, but Arya hadn’t wanted to mince words. She knew how much Jon hated that word, but she hates euphemisms more.

She shakes her head a bit before answering.

“I remember him coming around a bit when I was little, before he was the king. Mum said he kept coming around to see me long after he lost interest in her. That’s...something, I guess. Bella came a few years later, and Gendry maybe a year or two after that. Even though it’s been nearly ten years since he came, he still doesn’t act like he’s used to it”

Arya frowns and changes the subject.

“You rode the whole way from King’s Landing? Will you do the same going back?”

Mya nods, and picks up her mare into a trot.

“Bella got tired really easily, and Gendry was grouchy the whole way, but I thought it was amazing to see everything from horseback.”

Jon had been right. Mya was easy, even if Arya thought she was a bit old to be a proper friend.

Bella ended up being easy too, but for an entirely different reason.

It’s the next time that Arya finds herself forced into an embroidery lesson. She’s late of course, and doesn’t notice at first that Bella’s sitting away from the others. Myrcella’s in their lesson today, and Sansa, Jeyne and Beth are all so busy fawning over her that even Arya’s late entrance isn’t noticed by anyone but Septa Mordane, who thankfully only gives her a glare rather than a lecture.

Halfway through the lesson when Arya’s trying to undo a knotted string, she sees turn Jeyne head toward Bella and giggle. The anger flares up within her without any explanation, she doesn’t need it.

“Did they say something to you?” she shout-whispers to her. It’s not Bella’s embroidery, she imagines. It’s impeccable, much less embarrassing than her own.

Bella makes a face.

“I tried to sit with them when I came in, and your sister and one of her friends started laughing. By the time Myrcella came in I was too embarrassed to sit anywhere near them.”

Arya can feel her face burning when Bella continues.

“I think they must have heard one of the adults...or Joffrey, saying something about my mother being a whore.”

Arya’s nostrils flare. That does sound like Sansa, whoever Bella’s mother was, Arya didn’t think it was any of Sansa’s concern, much less Jeyne and the others, especially if Bella hadn’t brought it up. And bringing up rude details about someone without their permission sounds exactly what Arya already thinks about Joffrey.

“Stick behind with me once we’re done, and you can help me sheep shift her bed in revenge.”

Arya dares not say anything else during the lesson, but when they are dismissed she grabs Bella by the hand and drags her off to the sheep pens.

Bella holds herself back when Arya retrieves her sample and carries it in a wooden bucket back towards the family’s quarters.

“So how long have you lived in the Red Keep?” Arya asks as she flips over Sansa’s mattress and tears open the seam that had been sewed up since her last trip. Bella’s watching the door.

“A man came and found me when I was five or six. He talked to my mother for a bit, and she said I had to go. Said it would be better for me.”

Arya raises an eyebrow.

‘Has it been?’

Bella shrugs.

“We eat whenever we’re hungry and the rain never blows our roof in and nobody ever tries to buy you...I’ll take it.”

Arya doesn’t understand parts of what Bella said, but she finishes basting up the hole in the mattress before flipping it back over.

“Do you do this all the time?” Bella asks her, looking at her movements dubiously.

“Only when Sansa makes me extra angry,” Arya replies, neatening up the furs so the change won’t be too noticeable.

“I think it’s been long enough since I did this last time it’ll take her a nice long time to remember and figure out where the smell is coming from,” Arya says with satisfaction. While they move to stash the bucket, and henceforth, the evidence, she tells Bella.

“Sorry my sister’s so mean. I think she’s just that way, it’s not you. Her and Jeyne started calling me horseface a while back.”

Bella wrinkles her nose.

“You don’t look like a horse.”

“They just mean it as shorthand for ugly.”

She pauses a minute before continuing.

“Are the King’s other children mean too?”

Bella makes sort of an odd face.

“The Queen prefers we don’t spend too much time with them...but the youngest two are nice enough. Tommen spends most of his days playing with his kittens, and Myrcella has a little garden.”

She’s not mentioning Joffrey, pointedly. But Arya doesn’t want to talk about him anyway, she would much rather skip off and play monsters-and-maidens with Mycah.

And maybe Bella won’t sneak her sword lessons or archery practice, but if Sansa and her friends were already fond of making of her, then Arya thought they would get on just fine.

The days go on, and it is announced that Arya and Sansa will leave for King’s Landing with Ned, with Mother and Bran joining them in perhaps a year.

Arya is upset, and she expresses this by being even more disagreeable than she normally would be. Septa Mordane tells Mother one day that she could count on the fingers of one hand the number of lessons that Arya hadn’t avoided and left instead to chase Nymeria or spy on the boy’s lessons, or play come-into-my-castle with the servant’s children.

Mother had sighed, trying to force a comb through her messy hair, and muttering about how King’s Landing would give her some refinement, instead of her spending all of her time with lowborns and bastards.

Arya didn’t understand Mother’s problems with the lowborns and bastards. They were much better company than her own sister.

These expectations would have been bad enough, but the move is apparently also because Sansa is supposed to marry Joffrey, and seven hells, she will not shut up about him, and Arya spends much time avoiding having to listen to her fawning.

Her outlook is brightened only by Jon’s gift to her, the day before he leaves to join the Night’s Watch, that she dubs Needle.

The morning that they’re supposed to leave, she sneaks into one of the back courtyards, one that’s mostly only used for storage because it’s shadowed by the back of the library tower. Needle is smuggled out wrapped in burlap, and she withdraws it, brandishing it inelegantly in a form she’s only vaguely seen Bran practice. It feels solid in her hand, obviously real steel. She wonders what Jon told Mikken when he had it made.

“You’re form’s not right,” Arya hears from behind her and jumps. It’s the older boy who had come with Mya and Bella- Gendry, Mya had said his name was. He’s taller than both of them, but with the same thick black hair and blue eyes. He’s dressed to leave, his hands in his pockets. Arya feels a flash of anger.

“And I suppose you could do it better?”

Gendry scoffs slightly, his posture dropping even lower.

“Not reallym, no. I’m no good with a sword. “

Arya wrinkles her nose. If they were being cared for in the Red Keep, surely the king wanted him to be trained to fight.

“Then what do you use?”

Gendry shrugs again. He looks sort of embarrassed.

“The master-at-arms suggested I could try an axe or a warhammer instead.”

Arya scoffs.

“An axe or a warhammer? You’re huge already, pick up one of those and I could hit you blindfolded with a kitchen knife!”

“You could not hit me, I’m twice you’re size.”

Arya huffs. He is not twice her size. He’s big, bigger than Jon, but he’s not a giant from a story or something, he’s still obviously just a boy on the cusp of manhood. She could hit him easily, if he gave her cause.

Gendry appears to have chosen to change the subject.

“Do the others know you play with swords?”

“I’m not playing,” she insists. Why was she always the one “playing with swords”, but Bran was practicing and Robb was training?

“Got a lot of people you want to poke full of holes then?”

Arya huffs again. Maybe not. She fought with Sansa often enough, but not usually to the point of actually wanting to stab her.

“No, but I’d like to be able to do it if I did want to stab someone. Wouldn’t you?”

Gendry’s face shifts, and Arya wonders if he has anyone he ever wanted to stab. Mya hadn’t said where he had come from before the Red Keep.

Her concern disappears when suddenly she has the image of Mother or Septa Mordane finding her with Needle and it being taken away, and her chest goes tight. Jon’s already gone

away, that was enough.

Her face must betray her thoughts, because Gendry's face softens a bit.

"I won't tell, if that's what your worried about."

Arya's heart soars.

"You won't?"

"Well you'll be living in the castle with us, and I'd rather not have to live in the same castle as someone who wants to poke me full of holes."

Arya softens. Maybe he's not as stupid as she first thought when he said he was hopeless with a sword. She wraps Needle back up in the burlap and hides it under the skirt of her kirtle. Then she turns and her and Gendry begin to walk back towards the rest of the keep.

She watches Gendry's back. Despite his first words, he hasn't been teasing her or cutting her down. She wonders if she could ask him to show her some of the forms he'd learned in the castle. Maybe he would. Bran sometimes did, but recently had started saying he shouldn't, because she was a girl. Gendry was a bastard, treated like he had to be some way because of something he was that he couldn't help either. Maybe he would understand, Jon sort of did after all. She'd always heard people say that Arya Underfoot could make friends out of a rock, maybe it was true.

They are interrupted by the padding of fur-covered paws and panting of Nymeria bounding out to meet them. She's getting big as fast as her littermates and is now the size of a large snow dog.

"Nymeria," Arya chides her, pushing one hand against her head above her eyes, "You're supposed to be with the others in the Godswood. They won't let me bring you if you get in trouble."

Arya knew that direwolves weren't pets, but she still felt her chest go tight at the idea of leaving her behind.

Nymeria's turned away, and is sitting up on her haunches and ignoring Arya's words when she twists and sees Gendry staring.

"Why's your dog so huge?"

Arya makes a face. Maybe her first assessment was correct.

"She's a direwolf, stupid!"

Gendry might take some work, she thinks.

Neither of them can see up on one of the walkways, where both of their fathers can just make out their figures on the ground.

“I’m telling you Ned,” King Robert began, his eyes staring far off as if into the past. “Your children will have a ball in the Red Keep. All of mine are well cared for.”

His eyes train on the small figures of Arya and Gendry.

“And you should continue to consider my other offer. Join our houses, once or twice. They could have what Lyanna and I were supposed to.”

Ned watches below, as Gendry reaches out one hand to try and pet Nymeria, and falls straight on his backside as she extends her tongue to lick him. Arya laughs herself sick beside him, and Ned imagines he can hear her laugh, high and free, even from this far away.

Despite this, he knows his friend’s wish is not born out of altruism, or love of his children, natural or otherwise. He’d seen him completely dismiss his younger daughter on the first day of his visit, she held no interest for him then. And he knows exactly how Arya would react to an unexpected betrothal, any of them, especially one if she discovered it was based entirely on how she looked. Ned’s heart pulls in his chest. She’s only nine years old. Sansa may not have been much older, but at least she was old enough to have even the smallest interest in getting married.

And so he reaches for the easiest way to deflect.

“Catelyn would never agree to betrothing Arya to a bastard, royal or otherwise.”

King Robert chuckles, almost without mirth.

“Never would have I thought you a man to be cowed by his wife Ned.”

Ned does not respond to the goading, and Robert continues.

“She’ll be at the Red Keep either way. Give it time, perhaps she’ll even come to want it for herself.”

Ned watches Arya and Gendry below. She’s helped him up, and he’s rubbing his bruised backside and looking embarrassed. He does think that they could come to be friends, in time. But he still does not have great confidence in Robert’s words.

Arya stashes Needle in her things, then finishes up her packing and joins the others where they’re gathering to leave. She hugs Mother and Robb and Bran and Rickon and even gives a token promise to behave.

She saddles her pony, and looks around. She was planning to ride with Father, but spots Mya off to one side, and pulls the reins to follow after her.

“Arya, really?” she hears. Arya snaps her head around, finds Sansa, sitting awkwardly, uncomfortable on her own saddle.

“We’re going to be living in a palace, with the whole royal family, and you still want to spend all your time around bastards?”

Arya’s anger flares up anew. She knows Sansa means it to be mean.

“Don’t call them that, they have names you know!” Mya’s sitting upright in her saddle, Bella and Gendry behind. Gendry looks almost as awkward in a saddle as Sansa does. “And besides, they’re my friends”.

Sansa shakes her head, Now she’s prattling on about maybe being invited to ride in the wheelhouse one of these days. Arya ignores her, and in the corner of her eyes, sees Lady trailing after Sansa’s horse. She turns her attention back to Gendry, Mya and Bella. They’re the king’s children, she thinks, and they aren’t even allowed in the wheelhouse. She glances off to where it sits, all two stories, pulled by forty horses. All for just three people.

Not that she would want to be in there with the queen anyway.

Arya pulls on her pony’s reins, and walks her to join the others.

Chapter 2

Arya at least wasn't bored during the trip to King's Landing. Every step of the road seemed to have something new to investigate, and new places to explore and the whole of the caravan had so many people to talk to. Arya didn't even think to complain about how long the trip took, even though she could see Father growing frustrated with the King every time he insisted on stopping to hunt.

When they're crossing through the Neck, Arya mistakenly discovers the poison kisses. Despite the itching, she still thinks the flowers were pretty, and she doesn't completely regret picking them. The next day, while she's waiting for the rash to heal, Mya entertains her with stories about where she's from in the Vale.

"That's where my aunt Lysa is from," Arya tells her, "I've never met her, and never been there though."

"It's great," Mya says, "There are mountains so high that in harsh winters, they are completely impassable. My mum was the daughter of a mule breeder, they were better than horses for the craggy terrain, stronger, more sure-footed, and if they thought something was dangerous no rider would be able to make them move a hoof. Clans of mountain men live high up..."

And Arya listens to every word.

Bella hadn't had too many stories about growing up in the Riverlands, just her vague memories of her own mother, and the other ladies who worked where she did.

"I mostly remember bright colored dresses, and lots of noise. All of the women wore sweet perfume, the whole place smelled of flowers, even if there weren't any people in it....

Her eyes go distant at the memory.

"I miss my mum, I missed her badly at first, but she had insisted that it would be better for me to go to King's Landing, that I would be safe and provided for, so I did."

And she is grateful for Arya's tips on how to ride for a long time without getting tired.

Gendry had proved more elusive. The day that Sansa had been gushing about them being invited to join the Queen in the wheelhouse, she had been hoping that she could find him while they had stopped.

She shakes her head when she sees Lady after her and Sansa part ways. Sometimes she wonders if Sansa remembers what she is. And what she said was true, the Queen would never allow a direwolf to ride in the wheelhouse, she doesn't even let her servants do that.

She finds Gendry sitting by himself. He always seems to be by himself when he's not with his sisters. Didn't he have friends?

“Gendry!” she calls out as she approaches, He reacts to her voice, but looks alarmed at it. She holds out the two long sticks, broken handles of brooms from the look of them..

“You said before you’d had proper sword-fighting lessons. Show me!”

He gives her an exasperated look, but takes one stick and stands. He’s not as easy to goad as Jon, but he shows her a few stances, and shows her how to hold them to swing and parry and lunge.

It only goes on for a bit, Arya’s barely even broken a sweat when he smacks her just above the elbow.

“Beat it,” he tells her, “I’m not going to get caught trying to hit you with a stick.”

Arya pouts a little, but moves on. He didn’t tell her no immediately, so she can always try again another day.

She finds Mycah easily enough. He’s always up for a fake fight.

Arya tries to show him the same forms Gendry did. When they start trading hits back and forth, Arya can feel the difference. Mycah is taller than her though, and he gets an edge quickly. She realizes easily that if she ever hopes to be able to beat him, she’ll have to get faster, have to be-

Then she hears Joffrey’s voice behind her and her mood turns instantly.

Everything after that is a rush. A rush of anger and rashness and then deep, deep fear. If pressed, she wouldn’t be able to describe exactly what it was that made her first strike Joffrey (it was anger, it always was, that Joffrey drunk as a lout, thought to terrorize someone just because he could) or why she threw his sword into the water.

By the time she runs, with Sansa’s high-pitched, squalling voice behind her, she can’t even be proud that she got Joffrey’s sword away from him. All she feels is fear.

Fear that continues to build in Arya’s gut as the day turns into night, turns into day again, and then all over again. She wonders what will happen, if the searching men would find her, or if she would just live in these woods for the rest of her life. Nymeria sticking by her side is the only thing keeping her from panic. She strokes her neck, free of the mud she’d brushed from it earlier that day.

Jory does find her eventually, and oh, Arya is so glad that it’s Jory and not anyone else. Gendry is with him as well. Part of her wants to run again, but she’s too tired. Tired and hungry and scared still.

“Your father’s worried sick,” Jory says, as he takes the lead and Arya and Gendry follow.

“Did Nymeria hurt Joffrey badly?” Arya asks Gendry, in a small voice.

“No, she just bit his arm, it’s all bandaged,” Gendry replies, “He’s certainly acting like she did though. Way he’s been talking you’d think she tried to bite his head off.”

Arya wishes she had. Then she freezes, and looks to Nymeria, who's padding on the path beside them.

"We have to make her go away," she says hoarsely, "They'll blame her."

"They'll blame you," Gendry tells her, "Joffrey won't shut his mouth."

Arya's stomach is turning in knots as she watches Nymeria.

"I can defend myself though, she can't," and her voice trailing off, Arya picks up a rock.

It takes too many rocks, and too much yelling. Jory and Gendry both agree that they won't speak a word of this to anyone.

The rest of the way back to camp, Arya's voice is hoarse from yelling. Jory leads, and Gendry walks closer to her than he had before.

"Heard you gave Joffrey a good whack to his empty skull before you ran off," Gendry whispers to her.

Arya feels her lips twist into a perverse grin.

"I did."

"Good," Gendry tells her, and Arya feels a little flicker of happiness.

It doesn't last long. She hears Jory swear under his breathe when they approach the gate, and even Arya can see it's the Queen's men guarding it. One of them grabs her, and Arya feels herself begin to cry from the fear that's come back.

Just out of the corner of one eye, she sees Gendry rushed by his sisters. She can't hear what he says to either of them, but they both rush off, and no one notices to stop them.

Being brought before the king brings up almost every emotion Arya has ever felt, one after another. Fear to start, anger at Joffrey's words, a flicker of hope that Sansa will speak up, and indigent anger when she lies, then more righteous anger returns when the Queen passes sentence on Lady.

Because that isn't right. As mad as she is at Sansa, Lady wasn't there, wasn't involved at all, doesn't deserve even the tiniest bit of punishment.

And off to one side, beside his uncle Renly, she sees Gendry's face. And he looks like he expected this.

But all of this is washed away, even the small fear of her own punishment coming from Father, by the news about Mycah, cut down by the Hound as if he were a boar.

She can't even feel happy when she hears that Lady had broken her chain and run off into the woods before either Father or the Queen could have her executed.

Even with this turn of events, Sansa won't speak a word to Arya, and she's not too upset about that. She doesn't want to speak to her anyway, not after Mycah. It's not even a week before Sansa's back to fawning around Joffrey as if nothing had happened. She hardly even seems to notice the absence of her wolf, while Arya still feels Nymeria's absence deeply.

Arya's sitting by herself just outside their camp one day, when a shadow falls over her eyes.

Gendry sits to her right, Mya and Bella to her left. There's no one else around, which must be why they chose to speak to her now.

"We were sorry to hear about the butcher's boy," Mya says.

Arya blinks, and looks at Mya's face, flat and serene.

"You knew?" she says, "You knew she would have the Hound ride him down?"

It's Bella who answers.

"If he hadn't run too...he'd have been dead before the hour was up. The Queen was in a state...well I won't say I've never seen her like that before..."

Gendry's face is impassive, but in a defeated manner. Like he's seen this before.

"You were right in the forest," he tells her, "They would have blamed Nymeria. No matter how fierce a direwolf could be, the Queen would be wearing her fur, for the sake of her son's bloodied arm. And we would all be fools if we thought that she wouldn't have considered any direwolf good enough for the blood she demanded."

Arya is slightly astonished, considering his words.

"You-"

"There was only one guard by the gatehouse," Bella says, "Easy enough to distract."

"The chain was old too," Mya adds, "I barely even needed a stake to break it. And you knew Lady, quiet and polite. No one saw her run off."

Arya likes that image. Gentle, good natured Lady, running in the woods, the tattered remains of the chain around her neck. Maybe she would find Nymeria and they would prowl the Riverlands together. They were sisters after all.

But still...

"But you couldn't do anything for Mycah?" Arya asks, bitterness dripping from her words.

Mya and Bella both shake their heads, and Gendry lets his fall, so he can't meet her eye.

"Lady's a beast," Mya explains, "And even King Robert, the great hunter, wouldn't be able to hunt a single beast in a forest, especially one this size. Mycah was a boy, and a butcher's

son...the search parties wouldn't have come back until they found him....and since he ran too....”

Arya knows this. She hadn't realized Mycah had run away like her at first. She's glad he did, though she also knows his last days must have been terrifying.

“If he had been found by anyone but the Hound...it would have only delayed the inevitable” Bella says, then trails off. Arya's stomach burns again. She will take that over the despair.

“You need to be careful,” Gendry says, his voice cracking, “After Lady....”

“The Queen still thinks your father must have pulled something,” Mya continues, “Even though he called for his sword, even though he didn't leave the King's audience before Lady's broken chain was discovered, she still thinks he was responsible.”

The rage boils deep in Arya. And Sansa still so admires the Queen...

Bella and Mya both stand, and pat Arya on the shoulders before leaving. Gendry stays where he is sitting. He is quiet for a time, and Arya appreciates that.

After a while,

“A few years ago, when I was ten maybe...all of us had already been living in the Red Keep for a while...I had a crush on one of the girls who worked in the kitchen, her name was Elinor and she always brought us our breakfast.”

Arya frowns. This sounds like one of Sansa's stories to tell the truth, and the anger is still welling in her chest, but she stays quiet and lets him talk. His face is hard, harder than she's ever seen on Jon or Robb.

“Joffrey found out, and told his mother that she had tried to kiss him, and probably me too. She was...only three and ten or four and ten at most. And I was still just a boy, so it was never anything serious like that. I brought her a flower from one of the gardens a couple of times...”

So Joffrey was always a liar, is what Arya takes from this story.

“The Queen had her whipped, and then dismissed her. Even though what Joffrey said wasn't true, and I told her it wasn't true...I don't know what happened to her after that.”

Arya blinks. Of course the Queen would take her own son's word as gospel and ignore anything to the contrary. She just had the week before, Arya had seen it with her own eyes.

“What did the King say?” Arya asks, though she can tell it's a slim hope.

“Nothing at all. He was on a hunting trip when it happened. I think she said something about me obviously being his son, already chasing after girls. He didn't say a damn thing about Joffrey or Elinor.”

“Sounds about right,” Arya says, her voice low. King Robert may not have let the Queen punish her as she wanted, but he also clearly only wanted the whole deal done with so he didn’t have to handle it anymore.

“The point is,” Gendry continues, “That I told the truth, that was what I could do, and it didn’t matter. The Queen did what she wanted anyway. You can’t blame yourself for Mycah. Joffrey was always going to lie.”

“He was my friend,” Arya says, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, “We used to play games together all the time back at Winterfell. I played with lots of the servants children. And now he’s dead, and no one cares but me and his father. And his father can’t even say anything, because he’s too scare of earning the Queen’s ire.”

“I’ve never even bothered trying to befriend any of the servants since then,” Gendry tells her, bitterness evident. “Only reason I can think of that Joffrey did it was because he knew it would hurt me and he considerd Elinor no more imporant that a fly he could pull the wings from.”

Arya pulls her knees up to her chest.

“And he’s going to be king someday.”

Gendry shakes his head.

“I figure I’d warn you the best you can probably do is just steer clear of Joffrey as much as you can-”

He claps her on the shoulder, much in a manner Jon would have.

“And to tell you again that there was nothing you could do about Mycah. It took me a long time to stop thinking I could have done something about Elinor. Mya and Bella too- they blamed themselves because they thought the only reason Joffrey even found out was because they teased me about her so much...”

Arya stares off to where the road continues, outside the camp. Everyone said they would reach the Red Keep in one or two weeks time, barring anymore hiccups. She’s never seen the Red Keep, and something tells her that the stories she’s heard won’t help.

“Is that all we have to look forward to?” she asks Gendry, “Spending all our time in a castle avoiding Joffrey?”

“It’s not that hard, thankfully,” Gendry assures her, “You’re a girl, so you won’t even share any lessons with him.”

Arya rolls her eyes, though she is grateful for that.

“And the castle is huge, and full of places to hide and explore. You could probably spend all your time there and never have to see him at all.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Arya pauses before the next question.

“What about the rest of King’s Landing.”

Gendry takes a deep breath.

“Stinks. Literally, it smells of shit almost all the time. It’s terribly crowded, especially in Flea Bottom. That’s- that’s where I was born.”

Arya tilts her head at him.

“Who was your mum?”

“She worked in a tavern, had yellow hair, she liked to sing.”

Arya thinks Gendry must favor Robert. Mya and Bella certainly seem to. If his mother was fair, than nothing of her seems to have touched him.

“Do you still get to see her?”

Gendry sucks in a long breath, before answering.

“Not in a while.”

Arya can’t imagine that. She already misses her mother and her brothers and they’ve only been gone a few weeks.

“That sounds awful.”

Gendry shrugs.

“I was born in a gutter, and now I live in a castle. I get good food and clean clothes and an education no one born in Flea Bottom could ever hope for. It’s strange though. All of us know we’re at court, but we don’t belong. We’re the King’s children, but we will never inherit, and none of us really know where our futures will lead. Sometimes I think I would be better off if went back to that gutter.”

“That’s stupid,” Arya blurts out. She sympathizes, and she certainly knows what it’s like to feel like she doesn’t fit in. She remembers years ago, when she had asked Jon if it was possible she was also a bastard like him. But still, it’s a stupid thing to say.

“So you got lucky. Not everyone does. I say enjoy what you can. At least you get sword fighting lessons. If you ever end up back in that gutter, at least no one will pick fights with you after that.”

That actually makes Gendry laugh and Arya feels a rush of pride seeing the laugh reach his eyes.

She stands, hearing the bell for dinner. She’s on her best behavior for Father, and Sansa’s still not speaking to her. She spends her time trying to imagine what the Red Keep, what all of King’s Landing must be like.

And at night, she feels Needle where she has it packed, and tries not to imagine slicing Joffrey's pretty neck with it.

Chapter 3

Arya resists the pull of the inside of the Red Keep at first. She's still angry, still grieving. She picks fights with Sansa and slips out of her lessons. She resists the urge to explore the Red Keep, to find all the secrets that no doubt hide in its many hallways and secret passages. Mya and Bella both make efforts to include her, but Arya still feels empty inside.

The anger still gnaws at her insides, with no way out.

She will blame sloppiness this anger causes when Ned catches her with Needle.

"Where did you even get this?"

She hides the truth. Father had always been good to Jon and she doesn't want any ill-will to be laid upon him, even when he is all the way at the wall.

And while she does object verbally she can't bring herself to tell her own father how much his vision of her future isn't hers. As if any high lord would want to marry her, and to spend her life just inside a castle...

"What about Mya and Bella?" she asks him, suddenly curious, "will they marry high lords and rule their castles?"

She knows that most bastards will not have anything like that life, but they're royal bastards. Ned's face shifts, his lips tightening into a thin line, and Arya realizes the question must be a good one.

"Finding them suitable marriages would be more than possible," Ned begins, "Many families would love to be so close to the royal family, if not actually part of it. But the Queen..."

He trails off, and Arya shakes her head. Just like Mother always worried about Jon, absolutely certain that he would try and take one of their places, their birthrights. She can see the queen being even worse. Then why were they even here?

"She has suggested that Bella may be suited to becoming a companion for another Lady. I agree that she might enjoy not being in the limelight here. As for Mya..."

He catches Arya's eye and she looks away.

"Speaking of," Ned changes the subject, "I'm glad you seem to be getting along with both of them. It's good for you to spend more time with girls who aren't your sister."

He hands her back Needle.

"Don't stab her with it."

Arya is willing to agree to that. It's not Sansa she truly wants to stab anyway.

While her and Sansa still have their lessons with Septa Mordane, the other two girls are easy enough to find at other times of the day. Mya especially spends most of her time outside, riding or in the gardens, but they can be found together as often as not.

Bella is usually sewing something, the first time Arya joins them it's a silk shawl.

"I'm making it for Myrcella, I could make you one too if you want."

Arya fingers the fine silk, then demurs.

"Oh- no, I would just get it dirty."

Bella shrugs.

"The Queen sometimes gets funny about it, but Myrcella seems to like me dressing her up."

Arya frowns.

"I don't ever seem to see the Queen here, what does she do all day?"

Mya responds.

"Nothing we've been made privy too. I suppose she must find some way to occupy her time. Suits us well enough that she mostly ignores us."

Arya always thought being a queen would be more exciting.

Mya and Bella don't seem like on the surface like they have much in common, but unlike her and Sansa, they seem completely fine spending their time together doing completely opposite things. And they both have large ears that hear all the current castle gossip. Arya's not much for gossip herself, but she does enjoy hearing about things that most people wouldn't say in front of her.

"Uncle Renly's coming back in a few moons," Mya mentions to Bella, "He's bringing Edric."

"Who's Edric?" Arya asks. Renly had seemed okay from what little she'd seen of him, and she can clearly remember him laughing at her having hit Joffrey during the trial.

"One of our other half-brothers," Mya explains.

"Another one?" Arya's astonished. She knows of Robert's reputation, that at one point he was irresistible to women, but she can't see it at all now. And at least four bastards seems like a lot.

Mya nods.

"His mum's fancy- highborn, not like ours'- so he grew up with Uncle Renly in Storm's End from birth. He's nice enough but a little..."

Snobby, Arya suspects is the word she's looking for. She has enough snobs to deal with as is, so she's not terribly excited to meet Edric. And of course, she thinks, that a bastard born to a highborn could expect a better life than one born in a tavern. She wonders if Jon had ever realized that, but she imagines someone must have rubbed that in his face, maybe even Mother.

"But it is nice to have another one of us around," Mya finishes. "I was always jealous of the other children in our village who had big families."

Arya sympathizes. Some days, she misses Jon and Robb and Bran and Rickon so much it hurts. She might have been able to fight off the despair of losing Mycah more easily if they were here.

A bit of levity is brought into her life, with Syrio Forrel and his water dancing lessons. Finally, there's a lesson that Arya is not only entranced by, but good at as well. And the movement, which makes her skin sweat and her muscles burn is a great way for the anger to try and leave her body. She suspects it will never leave her fully, unless she gets to fight Joffrey. But she knows that will never happen, so she does what she can.

And the lessons and exercises that Syrio gives her out of his training also do their job distracting her. Mya catches her standing on her hands outside the stables one day, but to her credit, only giggles. Mya always giggled, she never snickered, and Arya appreciates that. She's been snickered at too much before.

She obviously can't carry Needle around with her in the halls of course, but imaging doing so helps out when Sansa insists on becoming even more obnoxious than she'd been before.

So Arya works even harder at avoiding her.

Today, it's during needlework and Sansa and the Septa are discussion the line of succession,

"But what if I only have girls?"

"Gods be good, you'll have boys and girls and plenty of them."

Arya rolled her eyes so hard they threatened to roll out of her skull. Sansa's not even twelve years old, what does she know about having children? Arya never understood why only boys could inherit, why it was so important to have a boy, especially first. It wasn't like that in Dorne. Arya thinks maybe Dorne would be better than here, but they also say it's incredibly hot.

Sansa's still yammering, and the Septa's starting to talk about wifely duties and it's all Arya can do not to throw down her embroidery and walk out. Aside from it all sounding disgusting, she imagines she'll be as bad at it as she is at this.

No one ever wanted a wife who could swing a sword.

Once lessons are over, she doesn't even spare Sansa a glance before bursting out of the room. There are cats that need chasing, and she's so wound up, maybe she'll catch a few.

She spots a white one with black paws that she recognizes as belonging to Tommen. She creeps up behind it, about to pounce, when it darts and makes a break for the outside of the training yard.

Which Arya never needs a reason to stop and watch.

She hasn't learned the Master-at-arms name yet, but he's in full gear. Gendry's training, so Arya understands why. Even if he didn't hit dead on Gendry's big enough that he could hit as hard as a full grown man. She's not sure Joffrey could hit the broadside of a castle, much less a man in armor.

Gendry seems to be having a fair bit of trouble with it too. The broadsword looks like it belongs in his hands, but it seems almost like he doesn't know how it ended up there, like it just materialized in his grip. The master-at-arms tries to guide him, but his swings are clumsy, with too much force too early or too late, and he misses.

Finally, the master-at-arms steps back and removes his helmet.

"We'll try again tomorrow".

Gendry's shining with sweat and his hands are shaking when he steps out. It reminds Arya of her first lesson with Syrio, when afterwards she had been so tired that her hands had quivered. Gendry's face says otherwise.

"Thought you said you were going to try an axe or a hammer?" she asks when he passes.

Gendry jumps.

"Aren't you supposed to be somewhere?"

No, she is not supposed to be somewhere.

"Still looks like you're using a sword and you don't know how."

"Whats it any of your-fine," he sighs and removes his gloves. "The King is hosting a tourney to honor your father becoming his hand. Apparently I have to put on a good show or it will shame him. Or at least that's what all the guards say."

Arya had heard about the tourney from Mya and Bella, and she had been a little excited to see the fighters.

"Why? It's not like Joffrey will be competing. Might ruin his pretty face."

That gets a laugh. She thinks they would both like to ruin Joffrey's pretty face. He's the crown prince too, he's the one who should be upholding the king's reputation if it's built on one of his children doing well in a tourney.

"And you don't have to use a sword to fight in a tourney. There's archery and a melee too."

In her more fanciful moments, she imagined disguising herself and sneaking in with the archers. She's not big enough for the other events, but she thinks she could handle an arrow. Maybe. She might need boots to make herself taller.

Gendry's shoulders stiffen even more. The posture reminds Arya of how she feels when being lectured, like he's getting ready to defend himself stoutly.

"I'm no better with a bow than I am with a sword. And the King will be competing in the melee-"

Arya snorts out loud. She can't imagine fat King Robert winning anything in his current state, drunk as well as fat. How many years has it been since he fought anyone, Kings had people to do that for them.

"And who in their right mind would fight the King, much less beat him?"

Well he has a point. Arya doesn't see the point of entering a competition if it's not fair. And why would King Robert enter, knowing no one would try and beat him for real? Was his head really that swelled?

"Well you won't win anything if you hold the lance the way you swung that sword," she insists. "So I suggest working extra hard on making sure you can stay on your horse."

Gendry turns and cocks his head.

"Are you seriously giving me advice?"

It's not an accusatory statement though.

"Of course! I know how jousts work! Everyone says half of it is-"

They're interrupted when Ned turns the corner of the hallway. Arya feels her back shoot straight even though she knows she's not doing anything wrong, this time anyway.

"Isn't that right Father? Everyone says that half of winning a joust is being a good horseman?"

Ned's face freezes, and gets faraway. He looks like that sometimes when talking about his father or brothers, the Stark family that Arya never got to meet.

"It's true that poise and the ability to control your horse can be a great boon to a rider in a joust...however,"

His gaze turns to Arya, who manages to stand up even straighter.

"Is Septa Mordane looking for you?"

"No," Arya insists, defensively. She's not. This time. "I stayed the whole lesson, you can even ask Sansa."

Not that Sansa probably even noticed.

Ned's eyes stay on her and she locks her knees.

"Go on now to the Tower, it's almost suppertime."

And so, Arya listens. She pauses at the end of the hall when she spots the same cat as before. Father's still standing in the hall, talking to Gendry. She can be a little late to supper, she thinks, before following the cat again.

She doesn't hear Ned tell Gendry,

"Have a seat for a moment please."

Gendry's movements are uncertain, Ned notes, like he's still not sure how to act around highborns.

"Working hard to get ready for the tourney?" Ned asks. Gendry nods, slightly.

"Waste of money the crown doesn't seem to have, I say," Ned mutters. Gendry's eyes go wide, not having expected that response. Ned reaches out and pats him on the shoulder.

"You're a good strong lad, work hard and I'm sure you'll do well."

"I'm going to make a fool out of myself," Gendry mutters, his head slumping, "Ser Allard says I have too much anger to ever make a competent swordsman unless I learn to stop it. But I just can't."

People already talked about him behind his back and now they would have even more fuel to that fire.

Ned's face grows concerned.

"What is it that's making you so angry all the time?"

Gendry stands suddenly. Sometimes it doesn't seem like he's angry all the time, but then things like this come along and it all bubbles out of him again. He thinks that's why he can't do well in training, because the bubbles just boil over without his input.

"All of this! I'm just a kid and one day Jon Arryn just shows up and tells me I'm secretly a royal bastard instead of a regular one? I never asked for that, I never asked to be brought here to be taught all these highborn things that I'm no good at...and everyone looks at me like I'm going to be just like the King, and I don't know if I even want to be, and I don't know why I'm here and..."

He sees the sympathy on Ned's face and the ire dies down a bit. Ned isn't the reason any of this happened.

"It's been nearly ten years since I've seen my mum....and I still don't know what all of this was for."

She wonders if she would see him perform. Probably not. Tourneys were a bit of entertainment for the smallfolk too, but down in Flea Bottom it never seemed like people took much notice. Maybe she wouldn't want to see him, maybe she'd rather forget she ever had a child.

Ned scoots a bit closer.

"You must have heard you resemble King Robert quite a lot," he tells him quietly. Gendry nods. It was all anyone ever seemed to say when they met him.

"I can say with certainty that you are his spitting image at this age...but you just showed more thoughtfulness than I believe he ever has. As a young man, he was gregarious, but he was not thoughtful. He very rarely considered himself or his station."

Gendry looks rather surprised by that.

"You do belong here," Ned insists, "Even if you feel like you don't. There are disadvantages to being a royal bastard, it's true, but there are fewer than if you were still a bastard in Flea Bottom."

Gendry raises his eyes.

"Like a betrothal to a highborn girl I just met."

Ned exhales. They had only briefly mentioned the discussion between him and King Robert to Gendry, but it had made an impression.

"I take it you've had some time to think it over."

Gendry looks at him, his eyes pleading.

"My lord," he starts carefully, "She's just a child. And not a child who seems at all interested in anything of the sort."

Ned snorts softly. If asked, he wouldn't think most ten year old girls would be interested in getting married, but his older daughter and friends clearly showed he was wrong.

"I might remind you lad, you are a just a boy as well still. Besides, there's no call for a wedding right away, it would be years off. I would ask that you not say anything about this to Arya yet- I'll break it to her when the time comes, doing it now might just make her decide to hate you."

He squeezes Gendry's shoulder.

"Actually you might want to listen to her a bit. Use your head of course, but she does know a thing or two."

Gendry's face turns confused, eyebrows furrowed.

"So you're saying I should listen to her and focus on my riding."

“It is not bad advice.”

Gendry grunts.

“...I sort of hate riding.”

Ned lets out a loud chuckle.

“Want to know a secret? If you’re out riding, you aren’t in here with the others.”

Gendry looks dubious.

“Mya does like riding a lot.”

“Arya does as well. Perhaps you should go out with the two of them sometime.”

He pats Gendry’s shoulder again before letting go and stepping back.

“Think about the things I’ve said. And please-”

Ned swallows roughly his voice turning thick.

“She is my daughter, be kind to her. She won’t ever admit that she needs it. And remember, that if she decides she likes you, she will be by your side to the ends of the earth.”

Arya hears none of this conversation. She’s trailed off following the cat and has ended up down in the cellars, where she’s never been before. She looks to her sides, wondering if she’s getting close to the Black Cells. Her stomach growls, and she supposes she really should go and join the others for supper. She bears the room a second glance, wondering what it could be opening up to.

Chapter 4

It stands to say that Gendry does not make a fool of himself at the tourney. Even if he had, it would have been overshadowed by what had come after.

During the feast afterwards, Mya explains to Arya what Ser Loras had done.

“Since his mount was in heat, the Mountain’s horse was distracted and was less likely to obey him-”

Arya snorts. Horses could be as stupid as men it seemed.

“Isn’t that cheating though?”

Mya shrugs, but Arya keeps wondering. It would matter to her if her opponent cheated, even if it wasn’t against her. Not enough to stab someone’s horse over it, but still.

But it seems at the feast, that it mostly matters to men who had money put on one of them, at least that’s what Arya gets from the grousing she hears from Tyrion Lannister, recently returned from his journey to the wall.

She doesn’t get to hear anything else from him though, soon she’s sent off to bed, walking along with Bella, who still has marks on her face from where she’d clutched at it during the last tilt.

Bella had screamed when the Mountain had done what he did. Even Sansa hadn’t, having kept the perfectly composed bored face as expected of a lady. And even though Arya had been more fascinated than anything, she likes Bella a little more for having screamed.

(She wondered briefly if Mycah had looked like that horse when the Hound had rode him down...)

The tourney doesn’t stay the talk of the keep for very long, for less than two moons after, more guests begin arriving.

Just like Bella and Mya had said, shortly after Arya’s tenth nameday, Renly returns from Storm’s End, with Edric, Robert’s only acknowledged highborn bastard.

He definitely has the same look as the others, dark hair and blue eyes. Strong and tall, though he’s only Sansa’s age.

Sansa frowned upon meeting him, and in a rare civil moment with Arya tells her.

“Well maybe if Robert looked like that when he was young, maybe that’s why people said he used to be a maiden’s dream.”

Arya doesn’t understand. Sure, Edric’s decent looking, but when they’d greeted him, he didn’t seem to have much of a personality. He was just a cut out of nearly every other young,

highborn she'd ever met. He wore the clothes and stood correctly, unlike Mya and Gendry, just like he'd been raised to, because he had been.

"Who cares? He's just a boy," is her take on it.

It doesn't end up mattering much in the end. Edric's proper, so he would never play with girls.

So Edric doesn't alter anyone's routines that much. Another moon passes by, and then another, and there's whispers of another visitor.

"Your uncle Stannis?" Arya asks Gendry, while he holds his sword awkwardly. She's taken to haunting his practice hours like a ghost. There's always something new for her to pick up, and on rare occasions, he lets her show him what Syrio's been teaching her.

Gendry nods.

"He's been here before, but the rumour is that he's bringing his daughter this time. He's never brought her to court before, none of us have ever met her."

Arya frowns again. He doesn't sound exactly excited.

"Don't you want to meet her?"

Gendry shrugs. Arya's noticed that he's hardly the friendliest person, but she would have been excited to meet a new family member.

"I don't know, really. And being around Stannis...he has a way of making you feel that everything you're doing is wrong even when it's not."

Arya makes a face.

"I already feel like that all the time."

Gendry's face softens. Arya's slightly surprised. She knows she's sort of forced her friendship upon him, and she never really expected him to reciprocate. It feels nice though, since he doesn't seem to like anyone really, not just her.

"That sounds awful."

Arya shrugs.

"It's always been that way. Mother would chide me because I would play and get dirty. The Septa would scold me because I can't sew or dance or sing like Sansa can. I watch Robb and Bran and Theon with their swords, and I try to be like them, and I get scolded by everyone because I'm not supposed to do that. Father's the only one who doesn't treat me like everything I do is wrong, even though..." Arya's voice trails. She's never spoken the words that come out next, "Sometimes I think he agrees with the others."

Gendry's eyes are still soft.

“I’ve felt that way since I came here,” He tells her quietly. “Even when I’m with Mya and Bella, who understand...I see other people watching me like they’re expecting me to be someone...and I see their faces when I’m not. Sometimes they’re disappointed...and sometimes they’re not, and it’s almost like they’re wondering why they expected anything from me at all, since I’m just a bastard.”

Arya feels odd when he says this. She can sort of understand that people must expect him to be just like King Robert, even if she thinks the fact that he’s not should be seen as a good thing. She sometimes wonders if people expect her to be more northern, more wild, because she has the Stark looks. She hoped that it meant she was more like Father. But still, these thoughts are a bit too much for her.

And so she changes the subject by bonking Gendry with her practice sword, and they don’t return to the subject for some time. Avoiding it is easy enough when there are swords.

It comes up at strange times though, on still very rare occasion. She and Mya goad Gendry into riding with them some days. On one of these days, they pass Renly talking with Ser Loras.

“I think Renly understands a bit,” Gendry says out of nowhere, “Sometimes I hear him saying things about how his brothers seem to wish he was different, but he was never sure how to please them, to be what they wanted him to be.”

“That might just be a brother thing,” Arya replies, “I know for sure that Sansa wishes I were different.”

And Renly is definitely not King Robert, Arya thought, even if they were brothers, and looked so much alike, they did not act alike at all. Even though she still stung, remembering how Renly had laughed at her when she was brought before the King and Queen, she can’t hate him, he’s even stopped to share a joke with his nieces and nephews from time to time.

But nevertheless.

She watches him butt heads with Stannis, and with Robert. Sometimes he takes on the look of the petulant youngest child, to Stannis shaking his head and wondering if he would ever grow up. It makes Arya nearly ill, she doesn’t want to still be fighting with Sansa like that when she’s grown.

Though, when they’re grown, Sansa will be married to Joffrey, and soon to be Queen. Arya may just need to find other people to be around, to avoid fighting with Sansa. She certainly doesn’t want to think that when she’s grown, she’ll be married too. Mya and Bella and Gendry have done well enough so far.

And soon to be more, she hopes.

Shireen arriving is miles more interesting than Edric.

Arya’s standing with Ned and Sansa when Stannis’s party is being welcomed to the Red Keep. Arya’s seen Stannis before, tall and blue of eye and oh-so-upright. She tilts her head to

get a look at his daughter, Shireen. She wears a hood, but when Stannis introduces her, she lets it fall back.

Arya hears an “oh” leave her mouth involuntarily, and even Sansa can’t school her face. Arya sees just a hint of the horror on her sister’s face, and despite her own curiosity, she feels the indignation rise in her chest, even when she sees Sansa swallow and regain her composure.

And it’s because of this indignation that when the group moves to go their separate ways that Arya approaches Shireen.

“Would you like to go for a ride with us?”

Shireen’s eyes are shy, but bright when she nods and answers.

“We have a bit of time before Father and I are supposed to have our supper.”

Mya and Gendry are both in the stables getting ready when Arya leads Shireen there, still talking and trying to ignore the guards trailing them, as they always did.

Gendry nods to Shireen and takes off in front of the others as they mount. He still bounces in the saddle. Mya rolls her eyes.

“One of my half-brothers, Gendry. Ignore him. He doesn’t mean to- well, I think he does mean to be rude-”

“It’s not personal,” Arya interrupts and Mya nods, “He just...well he really doesn’t like most other people that much and prefers avoiding them.”

Shireen chuckles, very lightly.

“Father said King Robert kept many of his bastards living at court with him,” she says, voice not lingering on ‘bastard’ unkindly at all, “Father always grumbled about it, but from the way you talk Gendry’s probably more like my father than his.”

That’s both accurate, and Arya thinks, a bit sad.

Shireen’s pretty quiet during most of their ride, and Arya pulls back alongside her when they approach a log.

“Watch,” she whispers when Mya kicks her mount and the bay rises to a gallop. She clears the fallen log with ease.

Shireen stays quiet, though Arya can’t stop the cheer.

“You can ask,” she tells Arya. “Everyone always wants to.”

Well, it hadn’t been the main thing on Arya’s mind, but if Shireen’s offered.

“What happened to your face?”

Mya returns to them, and listens quietly as Shireen explains about having grayscale and having recovered, but the scars having stayed.

“That’s pretty amazing though,” Arya tells her. While Shireen was talking, she noticed Gendry pulling his horse up beside them, without saying a word to either of them. “I thought everyone who had grayscale died.”

“Is that why your father never brought you to court?” Gendry asks, speaking for the first time in a while. “Is he...ashamed that you look like that?”

Shireen shakes her, slowly.

“I don’t think Father has ever cared...Mother was the one who kept me at home. I hardly had any time to spend any time with. I think that’s why I’ve always been so good at my lessons. The only playmate I had was Patchface.”

Mya asks about Patchface, and the conversation turns. It saddens Arya though. She can’t imagine not having any friends, even if she does have a tiny bit of understanding of the possibility of a parent being ashamed of you, even if only for a minute, but never because of something like how your face looked.

That’s what she’s thinking about when she returns to the Tower of the Hand, where Sansa’s waiting, and pouting at her.

Oh what now.

“If you were going to monopolize a guest’s time, you should at least invite us too,” she tells Arya as she crosses her arms.

That’s what?

“All we did was go on a ride, it’s not like we kidnapped her,” Arya insists, “Besides, why do you suddenly-”

She remembers Sansa’s face upon meeting Shireen.

“She did tell us what happened to her,” Arya says, “She’ll probably tell you too, if you ask.”

“Honestly, it’s not polite to ask things like that,” Sansa replies, dithering, “I just wanted to welcome her to the Red Keep.”

Arya shrugs.

“You can do that tomorrow, you’ll have the whole day.”

Shireen was nice, she’d probably be nice to Sansa too, even if all she wanted to do was sew, or sing in the sept, or talk endlessly about Joff-

“Sansa,” Arya continues, voice feeling very small, “Don’t...don’t take her around Joffrey. He’ll be mean to her.”

Sansa’s face flickers, both through the face Arya had seen on her earlier that day, through several others, though it settles back again on haughty.

She doesn’t answer though. Later, she starts going on about how she can’t wait until Mother comes to stay with them, so she can show her how perfect Joffrey is and she’ll be able to tell her how happy they’ll be.

She’s lying, Arya realizes.

It doesn’t end up being an issue. Though Shireen is perfectly courteous to all of them, she ends up spending much of her time with Princess Myrcella, reading a book while the princess tends the little garden she has. And while Myrcella never seemed an especially bright girl to Arya, she steers completely clear of her older brother every chance she has, avoiding the very problem Arya feared.

Sansa’s unofficial betrothal has been weighing on Arya too. They’ve been in the Red Keep for more than a year. She’s gotten taller, and Sansa’s shot up. She still wants to marry Joffrey, and Father and the Queen still talk like it’s definite. When Mother comes to stay with them, it will start happening even faster.

It’s two months before her eleventh name day when she’s practicing following one of Syrio’s lessons, that she finally says something.

She’s upside down when she says it, which makes her words sound funny.

“I wonder if Mother will get mad when she finds out Syrio’s teaching me,” she blurts out to Gendry. They hadn’t even been talking before, he’s off to one side, practicing with the sword and scowling.

Even from across the yard, and upside down, she can see him raise an eyebrow. She flips back onto her feet. That parts getting quite easy actually.

“I mean- Father did hire Syrio to teach me, but Mother wasn’t here, and I can’t imagine her ever allowing him to do that before...”

She thinks on Shireen, and her words about her mother always wanting her to stay unseen.

Gendry’s come up closer to her, still letting his practice sword hang to his side. There’s a crate full of mismatched armor pieces that he pulls himself up to sit on it.

“It’s been a year and a half since she’s seen you. I don’t think what you’ve been learning will be the first thing on her mind.”

Maybe he’s right about that. Arya thinks on how much has happened in this year and a half. She’s only grown an inch or two, and Sansa a whole lot more. She wonders what Bran looks like now, and can’t even imagine Rickon...

But every time she thinks of telling Mother about her year, her mind goes to Syrio, and Gendry, and finding the dragon skulls and all sorts of other things she wouldn't approve of. She wouldn't be impressed by learning that Arya could now walk a whole hallway on her hands, or sneak into the small council chambers without being heard, or spar an entire match with Gendry without him once scowling or sulking off.

"Maybe..." Arya agrees, but isn't certain. She remembers hearing Mother say once or twice that no one would ever want to marry anyone who acted like she did, but she pushes that distressing thought even further away.

"Be happy you get to see her now," Gendry tells her, "I haven't seen my mum in years, I would give anything to see her again."

That gets Arya's attention, even when Gendry stands back up, brushes himself off, and resumes what he was doing. He seems almost grown to her, he's turning sixteen not long after she turns eleven, and it never would have occurred to her that he missed his mother.

With the weeks before Catelyn is set to arrive in the Red Keep, Ned starts keeping a closer eye on Arya and Sansa, and reminding them to keep their heads high, to dress properly, and keep up with their lessons.

"She'll be here soon after your name-day Arya," Ned reminds her, "Let her see how grown up you've become."

Arya's mind is consumed by other things though. She's still wondering at Gendry wanting to see his mum. He's not even sure where they would find her.

"He was from Flea Bottom," Mya tells her after she goes to her for advice. "Jon Arryn took Bella and me both when he went to get him. It...was hard to argue that we weren't related when we were all together. I kind of remember what she looked like. Yellow hair,"

So not at all like them, Arya thinks.

"I think I could find the tavern again," Bella cuts in, "It sort of reminded me of where my own mum worked. And I think his mother's name was Gemma, I think that's what Jon Arryn said."

And, it turns out Mya's left the Red Keep before, she admits to them.

"It's not easy...but the guards don't always pay the closest attention, it will have to be during the middle of the day, and we'll have to dress down."

Well, Arya knows how to do that.

Mya says they'll have to go on foot, the horses will be too conspicuous.

"But I don't know how we're going to get out of the keep, when I left before I just slipped out through the wood."

Arya thinks she can find a way, and between the three of them, a plan begins to form.

Some of Syrio's lessons are odd, to be true. Arya isn't sure how chasing cats will help her learn to sword fight. But she's done it still, and the cats make it into every single crevice of the castle, even the ones where she isn't supposed to go. Even the ones where no one has been in years.

Even the ones that continue down and down, into the darkness and open up down below the hill. She'll wear her oldest boots. She thinks she can get past the one that ends with wading through waist deep water this time.

Mya and Bella both agree to go with them, it will be safer if they're in a group. Besides, Bella tells her, Gendry's their brother, they should do this for him too.

They choose the day before Gendry's name-day. It's easy enough. There's more buzz going around the keep, but it's not about them. Joffrey's name day is after theirs, and there's going to be a tourney again.

Arya corners him outside of the training yard. Impulsively, she reaches up and grabs him by the hand.

"Come on," she stage-whispers, tugging at him, "We've got a surprise for you."

Gendry looks at her long and hard, looking like he thinks listening to her is a very bad idea indeed, but he follows her into the castle dungeons to where Mya and Bella are waiting for them without another word.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!