We Share the Same Skies [Revised Edition]

by UnspokenDefinities

Summary

Arya Stark already loved her independent life in Braavos. But when she was hired by Robert Baratheon on a project she couldn't decline, she had no choice but to temporarily come back to King's Landing for the offer. The moment she landed back on Westerosi soil, she knew that she was going to be in so much trouble, especially when she would eventually have to come face to face with her ex-bestfriend Gendry Waters Baratheon, whom she was still head over heels for.

Notes

This is a revised and improved version of the original fic, We Share the Same Skies from the link below:

http://archiveofourown.org/works/3391784/chapters/7421813

If you have not read this story yet, I suggest you go with this improved one because I did a major revision in terms of grammar, sentence construction, etc., and a little bit of the plot. But basically this is still the same story, more or less. :)

Those who have already read the original WSTSS fic are still welcome to read this while I'm
making the Epilogue for the original WSTSS piece.

I've been on hiatus for almost two years and I've been doing my best to work on my grammar, sentence construction and everything by reading all sorts of literature, so I hope this revision would give justice to the years that I've been away. I've also been working on an original story to practice on my writing skills. :)

I hope you all enjoy this newly-improved WSTSS.

Thank you to the old and new readers alike!
Prologue

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Arya

Present Day

The morning sun rose high in the skies of Braavos as twenty-four-year-old Arya Stark basked under its rays for the last time before leaving for King's Landing after years of university studies abroad.

She was clad in her favorite black neoprene bikini that emphasized her toned body and her now sun-kissed glowing skin.

She had her circular mandala-designed beach blanket splayed on the shore as she laid there for some time while enjoying the summer-like heat. It was the tropical weather Arya loved most about this wonderful country, along with its pristine white-sand beaches.

As she was relaxing under the lazy azure skies, she also took time contemplating on the things that had happened in the past years. She'd already considered Braavos her personal paradise and second home. It was here where she'd learned to become more independent, especially after she broke up with her first boyfriend.

When she ended things between them, she vowed to become stronger and more independent, never needing any man to make her life complete. She kept herself busy by investing her time in improving her mental and physical health. She also broadened her perspective of life by reading more books, or going on solo backpack travels to other remote coastal islands surrounding Braavos. She also frequented the beach, either by lounging under the eternal summer sun or surfing the waves with her friends.

She was already so used to this kind of laid-back lifestyle that the thought of departing her second home made her desolate. She would be going back to King's Landing the following day, which meant that she was getting back to the real world. Back to where she'd eventually have to face the reality she'd been avoiding.

It was her parents who insisted she came back because she was offered something she couldn't very well refuse: a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be the head interior designer to Robert Baratheon's newest hotel in King's Landing, and she'd been Uncle Robert's first choice so backing out was not an option.

Having to establish a name in the world of design meant gaining every experience she could find, so she grabbed this opportunity for her first exposure, along with the resolve of someday coming home to Braavos for good after all of this was done.

She'd be willing to come back to King's Landing just once for this project, despite the inevitable fact
that she would also have to face everything and everyone, eventually.

The thought of the Baratheon family name clouded her mind with all the flashbacks of a particular Baratheon she knew too well.

Her thoughts drifted back to him unwillingly. Of how he’d always made her heart flutter whenever random thoughts of him would cross her mind. His piercing blue eyes and those sensual lips hungrily devouring hers for what seemed like a lifetime ago led her to an unending state of trance filled with raw, pulsating desire.

He was the sole reason why Arya realized how deeply her heart was capable of loving after she finally acknowledged her true feelings for him.

He was still, and always had been, her heart’s true desire.

Right before she could delve into the deepest memories of him, her silent reverie was interrupted when her friends, Brea, Cara and Mycah, crowded before her, blocking her from the sunlight.

"There you are! We've been looking all over for you!" Mycah exclaimed as he threw himself beside her on the blanket while Cara and Brea snuggled onto her other side. They were all clad in their swimsuits and board shorts, ready to join her in what would be her last moments at the beach.

Over the years that they’d become close friends, it had become a routine for the four of them to spend long hours of their mornings or afternoons at the beach.

Arya removed her aviator sunglasses and gave them a playful glare.

"Where else do you think I'd be? You know I'm always here at this time of the day." She feigned innocence, shrugging her shoulders casually.

"Oh, you know, we thought you'd be somewhere inside that own world of yours again thinking about hi—" Mycah told her with teasing sarcasm before Arya interrupted him.

“’It’s a good day to go out there and surf the waves, don’t you think, guys?’” She interjected with the intent of changing the topic.

Brea only rolled her eyes, looking at her with that knowing smirk. After all, she’d been the only one who had first-hand knowledge of her history with him.

"Then you should definitely catch the waves one last time before you go back to that personal hellhole that is King's Landing. What are you still doing here on land, love?” Cara winked playfully, bumping her shoulder with hers.

Arya released a sigh as reality crashed her hyped-up mood.

Right. King’s Landing.

"On second thought, maybe I should savor first all the fresh salty air for the last time. I'm afraid something like this is going to be nonexistent in King's Landing."

"But you'll be back, right? You're going to really make me miss you so bad, you know." Cara told her sadly.

"I'll be back, I promise. I just need to finish this project and then I'll be back. For good." She assured her.
Arya had been friends with them for quite some time now. Mycah and Brea, she’d met back at King’s Landing during their high school years, while she met Cara during her first year at the university.

"I know, it's just that, I can't believe that you're finally going back to King's Landing after all these years." Said Cara. She slumped her shoulders as she met her eyes, "What if you're going to bump into each other there? Which, I reckon, is a great possibility, given how close your families are."

There’s no need for second guessing to know who exactly Cara meant with her statement.

It was a huge probability indeed, what with her soon-to-be project with his famous father.

A long sigh escaped her lips as she shook her head, "Then I just hope I'm strong enough to finally face him. After all these years of running and hiding away from him."

She honestly didn't know what to do if that ever happened.

It was more than two years ago when she'd learned of his official relationship with Jeyne Heddle. Brea had stumbled upon it online and feeling the need to let Arya know, she'd let her read the entire news article.

The moment she knew the truth, she couldn't help but cry herself to sleep that night despite feeling so stupid at the fact that he'd never really been hers to begin with. Not when she'd left him after saying what she thought was her goodbye.

Her friends were most especially aware of the history revolving between the two of them. They all knew how strongly she felt about him even and what he truly meant to her.

"Hey!" Mycah snapped his fingers before Arya's face as she found herself lost in her thoughts again. "Are you sure you're going to be alright?" Came his worried question.

Arya looked up at him and flashed a faint, defeated smile.

"I'll be fine. I'm all grown up now. I can handle this." She affirmed, albeit dryly, shifting her gaze at the sparkling blue sea as she squinted her eyes to focus her blurry vision.

Finally answering to the invisible call of the waves, she slowly stood up and stretched her arms, allowing the cool sea breeze to caress her bronzed skin and run through her waist-length beach hair for the last time.

Turning back to look at them, she said invitingly, "Alright. It’s time. Come on, guys, the ocean awaits!"

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The day of Arya’s departure from Braavos finally came.

The picturesque view from the window of the train carriage was so overwhelming that it left her painstakingly breathless. She’d always marveled at the wide stretch of the lavender fields whenever the train would pass by this part of the countryside on the way back to the capital.
She preferred travelling through train instead of taking the plane because there was just something about the lavender fields and in nature itself that calmed her down. She badly needed this kind of visual therapy because she had a lot of feelings to process at the moment.

If anything, she already felt like a complete stranger to the very city she grew up in the moment she stepped foot on Westerosi soil, especially because she'd already found her comfort zone in Braavos.

Arya had been sitting in the train for a good four hours already, contemplating yet again. She didn't quite mind, however, the long journey back as long as it afforded her a lot more time to think back on the reasons why she'd gone away in the first place.

She wanted a permanent distraction to the growing feelings she'd been feeling for her best friend. They had met and known each other in the middle of her high school junior term, and even before they got closer, she already found herself attracted to him. He had been very striking in all means – both physically and intellectually.

The old, immature Arya Stark never would've admitted to these strong feelings, thinking that it'd make her weaker if she'd soften up and acknowledge them. But now that she was older and wiser, she'd long since learned how to keep these feelings and nurture them until the time was right for her to show them to the person who was deserving.

Never mind if it wouldn't be with him.

Although she learned never to settle for anyone less, she also wouldn't want to waste her time hoping for a sliver of possibility between them, not when she knew that he was already stuck in another relationship with someone else. She didn't want to put herself in between him and his current lover.

She'd give the justice her heart deserved, and would be willing to open up if someone was also willing to try. Only, it might take longer since she wanted to be more careful with whom she'd give her heart to this time.

Apart from running away from that one person who'd taken a large chunk of her heart with him, Arya had also been avoiding the limelight and the attention that came with being a part of one of the country's most prominent families. The media had been nothing but relentless when it came to comparing her to some of King's Landing's socialites. The elite upper-class who knew nothing but glorify themselves in their fame.

Arya was sick of it all so she decided to stay away and live the life she'd longed for. She'd long since known that life didn't always revolve around being famous. The socialites and the social climbers could have all the attention and the limelight they like. As for her, she just wanted to live a quiet and normal life away from the inevitable drama that came with the luxury and glamour.

In the middle of her silent reverie, a familiar song from her playlist suddenly started playing as she listened to the music with her earphones. It was played by one of her favorite bands. And unfortunately for her, she was reminded of him yet again.

It reminded her of the first time they met serendipitously inside a subway train they were both boarding many years ago, and how she immediately found herself drawn to the most beautiful blue eyes she had ever seen.

Blue eyes.

Black hair.

Massive frame.
Strong hands.

She bit her lip as though it might help with the increasing beat of her heart before she let those thoughts drift away. It was not the time to get hung up on him again. Not when she'd be working with his father on a project anytime soon.

Heaving a deep sigh, she continued to stare blankly outside the window. The train was now passing by the crystal blue seas that surrounded the capital, an indication that she was closer to her destination.

She didn't really tell her family that she was coming home today, save for her two older brothers. She'd told her parents that she would be home the following week as she didn't exactly want them to prepare something grand for her homecoming.

Robb and Jon disapproved of her idea at first but eventually agreed to her decision after guilt-tripping them.

Much to her dismay, however, it just so happened that the same day she was arriving in King's Landing was also the same day her family was having a charity luncheon back at their penthouse apartment.

She cringed at the idea of having to face those guests in their private residence. She'd rather go straight to Jon's apartment where she would be temporarily staying while she was looking for a smaller place to rent, instead of stopping by to meet her parents at the party but Jon had heavily insisted.

"It's been a long time since you've been gone, Arya. The whole family would want to see you first. Just do it for them." Jon had told her over the phone earlier. "I can't wait to see you myself. So, you better be there." He'd added which made her smile despite herself, lifting her sullen mood.

She was about to say something back to him when he'd continued, "You know I'm not the only one who's been looking forward to seeing you." There was a serious air in his tone. "Why didn't you tell him you'd be back?"

Arya couldn't help but scoff on the other line. "It's not like he cares." Came her cold, stubborn statement, the smile instantly sliding off from her face.

"He is still your best friend." Her brother had stated matter-of-factly.

"Was." She'd corrected, bitterness evident in her tone.

"He still cares for you; did you know that?" Jon had confessed.

"Just give it a rest, Jon." There was finality in her statement that made Jon finally shut up. She hadn't been expecting this conversation, not especially from him. Yes, he was her closest brother, but when it came to matters of the heart, she usually kept to herself.

It became apparent that Jon had gotten close to him right after she left for Braavos with the way that he was always talking about him.

The train finally stopped, pulling her away from her thoughts.

Stuffing her earphones inside her leather black satchel, she finally prepared to get off the train. She was only carrying a satchel and an overnight bag during her travel since she already had most of her luggage sent to Jon's apartment days prior to her arrival. She badly wanted her homecoming to be as
inconspicuous as possible to avoid the prying eyes of the media.

The train station was milling about with people from all walks of life as Arya took some time to stop at the balcony that overlooked the entire stretch of the grand lobby. It was the same lobby with intricate white marble columns, designed with Roman leaf patterns, a sight to behold even until now.

A sigh of relief slipped from her lips. At least she didn't bump into a familiar face this time. She doubted if anyone would recognize her as a Stark highborn, especially when she chose to wear something simple and inconsequential.

She was wearing a soft white sheer button-down underneath her black pinstripe jacket with a gray scarf around her neck and tight blue skinny jeans. For her shoes, she opted to wear pointed black flats. She then had her hair tied up in a messy bun.

She'd been wearing her black-rimmed nerdy glasses during the train ride—a new addition to her daily ensemble after being diagnosed with vision problems, but she'd taken them off the moment the train halted in favor of clear contacts. She didn't really want her family to know she already had four eyes after being away for too long.

She took the taxi on the way to their apartment which was at the heart of the capital.

When she set foot near the entrance of the building, she wasn’t expecting the large group of the media and paparazzi trying to sneak inside to probably get some scoop about her family’s on-going charity luncheon.

Knowing full well the impertinent inquisitions of the media, she motioned to make a quick detour at the back entrance of their apartment building. But when she was finally about to make a turn at the corner, someone from the crowd had unfortunately recognized her. There was a mixture of surprise and confusion in their faces.

With the rate of the camera flashes coming her way, she was certain that she’d surely make it to the tabloids the next day. One even tried to grab her physically just to bombard her with the most ridiculous of questions, but she was lucky enough to be saved by the lobby attendant who spotted her and immediately ushered her inside toward the elevators.

The sight of the unknown sea of people made her slightly wince the moment she entered their enormous penthouse apartment, which was actually the entire top floor of the building.

"I thought parties were your cup of tea?" Was Jon’s way of greeting her.

Arya gave him a pained look as her brother sauntered toward her direction. "I used to think all parties are cool. But then I see these pretentious hypocrites and I suddenly want to spend the rest of my days in an island devoid of people." She finally gave him a smile, bringing herself closer for a warm hug.

It had been a while since she'd seen Jon.

"I miss you too, Arya." Jon told her, tightening his hug.

Pulling away from him, she looked around him. "Where's Ygritte?"

"She won't be able to make it. There was an emergency at the hospital and she's the only surgeon around." He retorted.

Ygritte was Jon's long-time girlfriend who lived with him in his apartment.
Jon kept Arya company as they stood in a quiet corner of the apartment as if they were two kindred outsiders who’d met each other while attending some lavish, formal gathering. They spent their time talking just about anything—from her life in Braavos, to her journey back to King's Landing.

A few minutes after catching up with Jon, she was finally spotted by her parents as they passed by their direction.

Bringing her to a tight embrace, her mother said with an air of surprise, "Arya, it's good to see you! You didn't tell us you'd be arriving today."

Arya could see her father smiling at her, too.

"This is indeed a surprise, sweetling." He said warmly as he hugged her.

They hadn't seen each other since her graduation, but nevertheless, she was happy that she was finally reconciled with her mother after she disappeared on them years ago to live in a faraway country and fend for herself.

Catching up with the rest of her family made her immediately exhausted, so she had to excuse herself to carefully make her way to her childhood room. She also wanted to avoid anyone else outside her family from trying to talk her into telling them about where she'd been all these years. She wasn't really in the mood for small talk and apart from the socializing, she was now feeling the weight of her long travel.

Slowly after slipping inside her room, she slid her back on the door before she released a deep sigh of relief.

"Shit." She cursed under her breath.

Her eyes scanned all over the room that was dimmed by the draped curtains and found that it was as how she had left it before.

She finally straightened herself and put her bags on the chaise longue, also taking the moment to remove the layers of her clothing little by little, starting with the scarf around her neck down to her jacket and then her shoes, when she noticed a tall figure standing by the window and looking through the view outside.

Not trusting her vision despite her contacts, she squinted her eyes to make sure that what she was seeing was real. His broad back was to her and she noted the stark-raven hair tied up in a man-bun.

She was blinded by the small amount of light gleaming through the slightly open curtains that she couldn't immediately distinguish to whom that face belonged to. He looked like an apparition to her as his entire body glowed under the blinding rays of the sunlight.

Finally, he turned around to face her and she was immediately engulfed by his searing stare. Those luring cerulean orbs were entrancing. Familiar. As if she'd seen those eyes lifetimes ago. If only she could adjust her vision that easily.

But then, her frantic heart did a somersault when his gaze penetrated through her soul as recognition finally sank in.

She was paper-white as she felt the blood drain from her face.

"Gendry?" Came her surprised question, sounding as if she was choking. "W-What are you doing here?"
Gendry never left his gaze on her. A familiar, dangerous look. One that she'd never forgotten even after all these years.

"I had to comply attending this event. I'm a Baratheon after all." His voice was cold and devoid of any other emotion other than his stolid gracefulness.

"I thought this was a charity luncheon hosted by my family." She said stupidly. Even Arya found herself uncertain of the words coming out from her mouth.

"Our families have the closest ties, so it's a given that we ought to be in this event after all. Or have you already forgotten?" He cocked his head to the side, his lip quirking up, albeit humorlessly.

"Oh…" Was all the response her suddenly dry mouth could utter.

"Yes. Oh…" He said, his raspy voice becoming more glacial.

As if he was an animal lurking its prey, he slowly sauntered toward her. A glass of something bubbly occupied the space on his right hand while his other hand was tucked inside his pocket.

"I've also been waiting for you to arrive, you know." He confessed, his voice steadily honest. "It's been awhile since I've seen you, or heard from you." He continued, closing what's left of the small distance between them.

Arya was altogether deemed speechless at the way he was handling the situation. He was dangerously calm. A side of him she'd always found intimidating.

"You were suddenly gone." He finally added.

She swallowed the lump on her throat as she felt the weight of her guilt for walking away from him five years ago.

Clearing her throat, she finally deigned to ask, "How did you know I was coming home today? I never told anyone else but Jon and Robb."

A dangerous and seductive low cackle escaped his lips. If anything, it was humorless. Just like the taunting smile he gave her.

"I didn't." Came his retort.

"Liar." Arya hissed. Aggravated at the thought of having her cover blown.

He finally put the glass of champagne on the corner table beside them and carefully pulled himself closer to her face with the promise of leaving her even more breathless.

Arya noted how much he'd improved. Physically. Because apart from his shoulder length hair tied in a top knot, he had also grown a full beard, from his jaw down to his entire chin.

He looked broader.

More massive.

Hulking.

Rippling.

As if the non-existent gods proved their existence by benevolently gifting him to her as a mocking
challenge. One that could compromise the main reason why she’d come back to King’s Landing.

He was wearing a tailored suit fit for a Baratheon heir, the color as dark as his very expression. So much different from the Gendry she’d known when she was but a teenager having a huge crush on him.

"You changed." He noted, his eyes scanning her gray ones before they traveled all over her face until his azure gaze was fixated on the lips that she was now biting out of habit.

"I haven't. I'm still the same." A lie, she knew. She'd changed more than she would allow herself to let on. And perhaps, it would be a mercy not to let him know how much she changed over the years.

"Liar." It was his turn to say that word, wrapped in a sensual whisper penetrating through her ear as he drew closer, already sharing the same breath as his as she felt his warmth ghosting over her lips. Inviting.

Tempting.

Arya made the mistake of taking a huge intake of air as his scent infiltrated through her nostrils. He had the same invigorating scent of man, musk and Old Spice. A nostalgic scent that awakened her non-gastronomic appetites.

He always smelled so heavenly.

"You have a lot of explaining to do. After you practically disappeared on me years ago." He spoke again, his tone sounded berating, but in a seductive way. Probably for what she'd done to him.

She had to tell herself internally that the decision she'd made was all for the best.

Pushing away all thoughts of him out of her head, she finally reigned herself in and stood up straight. She blinked back to reality and moved a step away from him, allowing herself that cold distance once again.

"You should go back to her now. She's waiting for you outside." Arya coldly told him, changing the subject. She didn't really see his girlfriend at the luncheon, but that was the fastest excuse she could find.

Gendry held her gaze for a few more seconds before finally blinking back to his own reality.

"You're right. I should go." His words sounded like bitter pill in his mouth. She could tell. She wasn’t sure whether to be happy or not that he finally gave up the urge to argue with her.

He motioned to move away from her, sauntering toward the door before he stopped, “Nice to see you again, too, Stark.” Came his almost sarcastic headshot prior to finally closing the door, leaving her utterly breathless and wanting.

She knew she was bound to be fucked up the moment she set foot on the capital.
Subways and Encounters

Arya

October

Eight Years Ago

It was the first term of her junior year in high school when Arya was enrolled by her parents to Constance Strandford, an exclusive private all-girls’ high school in the hopes of sending their daughter to the capital’s most well-renowned formation schools to tame her.

It’s not that she was a wild, spoiled child who displayed all forms of attention deficit by bullying others at school that gave her a reputation. No, Arya Stark was the opposite of wild when it came to her behavior. She was always the calm, reserved and cultured kind. But when self-righteous people would begin to question her radical convictions, she’d become that provoked intellectual feral beast that would spurt all the valid logical arguments in their faces.

That certain kind of wildness ran deeper than what most people credit her for. And that was what’s more dangerous than being an untamed, self-entitled brat who bullied everyone for their own pleasure.

She was a threat because of her ideas.

Her dangerous mind was her greatest weapon.

She was profound for her age and her thoughts might as well be the very ammunition she could use to question everything, even the highest authorities from her previous school. Case in point: her decision to transfer to another school after she questioned her previous school’s archaic ideologies such as slut-shaming women just because their thoughts and actions were deemed more liberated.

Being conservative in every means, her previous school came as far as suspending her for her constant violations of their so-called dress codes and regarding her fashion as “inappropriate” –for showing the slightest of her skin in what was considered to be mere weather-appropriate clothing, considering the sweltering heat of the capital during summers. But her previous school wouldn’t so much as listen to her justifications and immediately branded her as a slut who had the potential to corrupt the young, innocent minds of all the other students enrolled there.

It wasn’t enough that they’d called her a slut for her libertarian way of defending the kind of clothing she chose to wear and for standing up to how the school was slut-shaming her and the other kids who dressed up like her. They even went as far as threatening to expel her for expressing the kind of belief she stood up for.
But she wasn’t so much as threatened by it.

She even turned the tables by constructing her own valid arguments using reason and logic, and then ended it up with deciding to ultimately withdraw her enrollment and transfer to another school instead.

Her father didn’t oppose to her decision in the act of mutual respect for her own belief, but her mother was not very happy to hear about the issue she’d stirred in school because it was only staining their family name. But reputation be damned, Arya went with her decision to disassociate herself from that school and even pressed libel charges for branding her as a slut just because of her choice of clothes. The scandal itself paved way for other self-righteous students, parents and teachers to look down on her for her own convictions.

The issue even reached the tabloids of King’s Landing, but since her family was one of the richest, most influential families of the country, the tabloids were also immediately shut down due to their strong connections.

But the damage had been done and there was no turning back.

The news had reached Arya’s new school where she was now the subject of all forms of bullying and ridicule. But being the strong person that she was, she wanted to let them see that she wasn’t shaken by their intimidation because after all, she was the only one who knew what really happened more than anyone else in her new school.

The girls who’d been antagonizing her only heard the gossip and foul rumors about Arya’s reputation, even to the extent where she was already called a sex addict, but never the truth of how she’d defended herself. And despite being humiliated on a daily basis, it took all of her inner strength to keep everything to herself.

Not even Jon, her closest brother, knew anything about how she was being bullied every single day.

Studying at Constance Strandford had been a mercy after Arya's parents considered sending her to a private boarding school. But Arya strongly justified the reasons why boarding school wasn’t at all necessary when she could just attend a private school in the city.

Much to her relief, her parents bought her argument and were finally convinced.

It’s not that she hated boarding schools, but being stuck in an institution for the duration of the school term would only make her want to go out more and do some exploring that might lead her to her eventual expulsion for breaking the school rules.

The smarter option would be to choose a private school in the city that would allow her to sneak out and explore the city by herself. Not that she told anyone in her family about what she'd been doing, but her sneaking out was how she'd made close friends of Brea, Pandora, Mycah and Ned.

Brea and Pandora were her closest friends from her previous school. They practically grew up together and they’d been supportive of her all throughout her school trial and even substantiated her justifications. But being as rigid as the Spanish Inquisition, her prior school only junked all their defenses in favor of their medieval policies.

Like Arya, Brea and Pandora were not really the super academic types who always followed the rules and studied all the time. They were rather the inquisitive, street-smart sort who did not necessarily follow every rule out of blind obedience, but abide by them because of reason and common sense. She’d definitely found a kindred spirit in them.
Arya only had a small circle. Aside from Brea and Pandora, her only other close friends were Mycah and Ned from Brown School for Boys just across the street of her previous high school.

Ned came from a noble family down south whose father was also a close family friend of the Starks, while Mycah was the party animal extraordinaire who lived for weekly raves and pretty boys. He was the one who always kept the group alive and jovial.

Brea was the daughter of a wealthy business tycoon. She preferred girls over boys when it came to relationships, and she had this strong passion for music and the arts. Every time there was a house or rave party being held, she'd always be one of the featured DJs.

Pandora, on the other hand, was as feminine as Arya’s older sister, Sansa, but she had a more radical mind than anyone Arya ever knew. She used to be one of the editors of their school paper, but because she was always misunderstood as a rebellious miscreant rather than a feminist freethinker, she was kicked out of the school paper by the school committee after a unanimous decision.

They'd been her party buddies ever since and she'd never been happier for having the coolest friends on the planet. They may now be in different private schools now, but they still shared the same objective of wanting to challenge and question their schools’ strict, rigid constructs by proving to themselves how they can party harder during weekends and still be intellectual students by day.

And although they'd been doing underage drinking every now and then during their weekly rave parties, they still proved their strong friendship by taking care of each other even in their inebriated states.

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It was a Tuesday afternoon when Arya decided to wander into the city again.

She’d been wanting to hang out at Blackwater Bay on the other side of King’s Landing, but knowing its distance from the heart of the capital, the only way to reach her destination was by taking the subway train. So she texted their family driver who usually picked her up from school every day and told him she’d be having a group study with her friends.

It was a lie, of course, because she never had any real friends from her new school considering her reputation.

Hanging out in Blackwater Bay by herself was a temporary diversion to calm the rage growing inside her—that inner, silent rage for keeping her mouth shut in favor of avoiding expulsion from her new school if she fought back, and holding on to that strength every time someone bullied her. Her bullies had even gotten to the point of trashing her locker with condoms, sex toys and any other shit that would associate her to being a sex addict and a slut.

They were mostly the junior and senior girls who walked the school halls with their entitled heads held up high and knew nothing but gratify themselves by trampling on someone else’s dignity, all while feeling self-righteous and prudent. They always excused their bullying as a justification to condemn sluts in their sanctimonious school.

She knew how being petty they were, but little did Arya know that their bullying was already taking a toll on her. The worst part was, she had no one to talk to about it because she refused to share what was going on to her friends.
She’d rather keep it to herself than have someone else worry about her.

She kept telling herself that she was strong. That this will all just pass.

Sometimes, however, it was just too much.

She even began having nightmares about being bullied, only in her dreams, they were intensified to the highest exponential level and for the first time in her life, she felt afraid.

Two and a half hours had passed when she was ready to head home after spending her time sketching Blackwater Bay on the handy doodle notebook she always brought along with her.

The sun had just set and the streets were already growing dark as she made her way to the subway station to take the train back to their apartment in uptown King’s Landing.

As she was sitting comfortably on her seat while listening to her music playlist with her earphones, she noticed most of the people staring at her, if not, at the uniform she’s wearing.

She immediately got the idea why; because schoolgirls with expensive-looking uniforms like her, who went to posh private schools, were rarely seen riding public transportation. Or never at all.

People always had the impression that kids who went to private schools were spoiled brats. Well, she couldn’t really blame them because most kids from her school were indeed spoiled rich kids –the type who’d go as far as feel entitled to everything just because they came from a wealthy family.

That’s why she got along with her friends in the first place, because they were like the anti-heroes of each of the high school they represented that was full of spoiled rich daddy’s little girls and entitled little man-boys.

Disregarding the furtive glances of the other train passengers, she flipped through the playlist on her phone until she came across Rage Against’s entire album. They're one of her favorite bands and listening to them always made her relaxed despite the band’s heavy drum and bass riffs.

In the middle of the first song, her eyes began to wander aimlessly at the other passengers in the train until they landed on the bluest pair of eyes she had ever seen.

It belonged to the guy with a hulking frame seated on the far end of the train, a few feet across from her seat. He was so attractive that she began to question why she didn’t even notice him right away as soon as she boarded. But then she remembered that she’d been busy untangling the cord of her earphones earlier.

His raven hair was a contrast to his deep blue eyes and he had a days' old stubble on his jaw that made him even more attractive. He seemed to be only a few years older than her. Perhaps as old as Jon or Robb.

And he was the most good-looking guy she'd ever seen so far.

His black shirt hugged his body of rippling muscles, his arms long and bulky. His faded jeans complimented the classic boots he was wearing. He might have looked rugged to most people, but he was still so handsome, nonetheless.

It was as though he just freshly popped out of a fashion magazine.

With the way he looked, he could be a model for all she cared.
Before she knew it, they were already gazing at each other as the guy caught her furtive eyes looking at him.

He had a very scalding gaze, she realized. And it made her stomach flip and her heart beat faster for no reason.

She was completely caught off-guard by those beautiful, beautiful blue eyes that were as blue as the seas of King's Landing.

Within a few seconds, she noticed a side of his sensual lip suddenly quirking up a little the moment she felt herself squirming under his gaze, teasing her as if to tell her that she could go ahead and gawk at him as much as she wanted.

It was as though he was reveling at her squirming state because of the effect his searing cobalt eyes did to her.

She might not have liked it, but she also couldn't deny how much he already had that effect on her despite only meeting him for the first time.

It’s as if something deep inside had clicked.

She finally looked away from him, feeling the after effects of her defeat from their staring contest. But like her expertise at masking her true self, she acted nonchalant as she allowed her eyes to wander anywhere else.

She didn't want to give the impression that she was in any way interested in him.

A few minutes had passed but she could still feel his eyes on her. As if those blue orbs were now penetrating the darkness that was her very soul.

She felt the blush creep through her face but she managed to keep herself calm and composed as if he wasn't already killing her with his intimidating stare.

Thankfully, she felt her phone vibrating on her hands. But when she checked to see who was calling, her lips formed an ugly scowl.

"Yes?" She answered, making sure to keep her voice low and neutral.

"The driver told me you didn’t need to be picked up from school." Her mother said on the other line, her voice stern as always.

"Yes, Mother. I told him I'd be out, studying. I'm on my way home now." She replied.

"Where are you right now? I'll have the driver pick you up. And stay where you are."

She wanted to bark her protest but she might as well have told her mother everything about her little rebellions because she knew she'd never see the light of day in King's Landing again if she'd told her mother the truth of her current location.

"Can Jon pick me up, instead?" She tried to ask, trying to be hopeful deep inside.

She heard her mother sigh on the other line.

"Fine."

"I'll text him the details of where I am right now."
You can stop worrying now, she wanted to tell her mother. Not that she was ungrateful for the concern, but sometimes it was already suffocating. She learned at an early age how to take care of herself but her mother still seemed to think that she was still that fragile little girl from years ago. Her mother might as well have been a fortified institution of discipline herself that even the toughest boarding schools shied away from her authority.

A frustrated sigh passed through her lips, temporarily forgetting about the stare off that just transpired a while ago.

The train finally stopped at the station where she was supposed to get off. She found herself surprised to see the attractive guy get off the train with her.

For a moment she thought he was trying to stalk her what with the way he ogled at her inside the train earlier, but then she felt relieved when she saw him head to the central district where Baratheon Tower was located. She knew that building by heart because her father's best friend, Robert Baratheon, owned that building.

Much to her utmost surprise, that's also where the guy was headed.

Why the hell would he get inside Uncle Robert's building when business hours had already been over hours ago?

She didn't want to give any implication whatsoever as to what that meant but her gut-feeling told her it wouldn't be the last time they'd see each other.

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Not long after, she finally spotted Jon's car parked in a nearby lot.

He was leaning on the driver’s door, a cigarette tucked between his lips.

"What trouble did you get yourself into this time?" Jon asked her, albeit playfully, as he finally straightened himself.

"I never said I was in trouble." She retorted defensively.

Jon only shook his head incredulously. "The fact that you're asking me to pick you up instead of the driver already spelled like trouble to me."

He was right. Always.

With the way her mother called her earlier, it did look like she was in trouble. Arya only ever received calls from her mother if there was something important, life-threatening, or if she’s really in trouble for what she’d done. Someone might have seen her strolling along Blackwater Bay by herself and reported it to her mother.

Coming from an elite family, her mother always had eyes everywhere. She ought to be careful the next time she’d sneak out, especially during her weekly raves because it would mean saying farewell to her friends and hello to boarding school. Her justifications for studying in the city would have been for naught.
Arya finally sighed in defeat. “Fine. I might be in trouble.” She confessed.

Jon arched an eyebrow at her, goading her to elaborate as he crossed his arms.

“I was just out on a little adventure. But I told the driver I’d be on a group study.”

“Where have you gone to?” Jon didn’t sound intimidating like her mother, which was part of the reason why he was her favorite brother. He was never prejudiced about her for her choices. In fact, he was the only one the family who knew of her double life during the weekends, save for her underage drinking. But she’d bet her whole life that he already had the idea that she indulged in alcohol like every other average teenager.

She bit her lip before replying, “Blackwater Bay.” She saw Jon’s eyes widen in shock. “I was just checking out the place, Jon. I was making my sketches there. Nothing terrible happened. And it’s not like I can’t take care of myself.”

Jon took one last drag of his cigarette before dumping it on the ground.

“That’s almost an hour’s train ride away from King’s Landing, Arya. You could have been kidnapped or something.”

Arya snorted dismissively at his statement. “That’s bullshit, and you know that. We both know that no one could even take me for a Stark, except only when I’m with the rest of the family. They could hardly recognize me at my new school, how much more if I go out and explore the city by myself. So, you don’t have to worry about me getting kidnapped, Jon. Really, I can definitely take care of myself.” She assured him.

He only shook his head as he pulled her to him with his arm looping around her shoulders. “Fine. Whatever you say, badass. Come on, let’s get you home.” He said, playfully ruffling her hair this time. “I’ll cover for you. Again.” He added, rolling his eyes playfully.

Before they could get inside Jon’s old school sportscar, he suddenly stopped her midway. “Wait. Are you sure you went to Blackwater Bay or were you really meeting up with some guy I don’t know about?” It sounded like his usual jape but the look on his face was serious. Suspicious.

Well, she did meet that cute guy in the train earlier, but it’s not like they were really interacting explicitly except for their staring feat. So, that didn’t really count.

She finally broke into gales of mocking laughter. “Why are you suddenly being so protective? You never questioned me when I go to those rave parties with my guy friends…”

Jon shrugged, finally letting her inside his car. “That’s because you’re going out with Mycah and Ned, with Brea and Pandora tagging along in those parties. And although they seem high with all that teen spirit and shit, I know they’d never let you be in trouble, much less introduce you to dickheads who only want to get into your pants. Do you get what I mean?”

Arya only nodded.

“But this is different this time, with you heading to Blackwater Bay all by yourself. Anything could have happened, Arya.” He spoke with concern dancing in his eyes.

“I’m sorry.” She said. “Next time, I’ll tell you where I’ll go, if that makes you feel better.”

“It would. At least I’d know you’re safe. Just because I’ve moved out of the house doesn’t mean that I no longer worry, you know? I’m worried even more because I’m no longer around to check on
you.”

“I know.”

There was silence for a few short seconds, before he continued, "To be honest with you, I'm not quite sure how I can handle seeing you with some guy, Arya. You're still my little sister after all."

"Well, you have to accept that I'm not so little anymore, Jon. You’ll have to face the fact that I’ll meet some other guys out there eventually.”

“I know, but you’ll be careful, yeah?” He asked, placing his hand atop her head.

She flipped the tiny wisps of her hair from her face exaggeratedly as she shrugged with confident nonchalance, “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

She’d been careful ever since she started being independent, that was why she’d been turning down those guys she met at rave parties who wanted to ask her out only to get into her pants.

Arya Stark might be wild, but she was always careful, and that was something she was proud of.
Conquests and Surprises

Gendry

October

Eight Years Ago

Gendry Waters had been through the toughest in life after the death of his mother. He'd lost her to a terminal illness when he was just eight years old.

With no immediate family left, and no sliver of information about the whereabouts of his biological father, he was left to live the rest of this childhood at the orphanage, where all kinds of abuse were rampant among foster parents and social workers alike.

But with his will to survive, just as he'd promised his mother on her deathbed, Gendry had endured it all and thrived.

Before he entered middle school, he'd been lucky enough to be adopted by foster parents who showed him nothing but unconditional love and support and treated him like their own. And ever since his new life with them, he'd been repaying their kindness with high grades and scholarships.

Apart from that, he began helping his foster father at the auto shop at a young age. It was there that he first started learning everything about cars and how to fix them. This eventually led him to his true passion for cars and drag racing.

By the time he reached the age of eighteen, he decided to move out of his foster parents' home to live in a small apartment near the university where he received a full-time scholarship grant as a mechanical engineering student. But despite having his tuition already taken care of, he still had other obligations outside school like paying for his rent, his bills and all other expenses, which could be a handful for a college student like him who came from nothing.

Having these other obligations in mind, he decided to do part-time work at an inconsequential auto shop just a few blocks away from the university, some of the money he saved coming from joining underground drag races in the outskirts of the city.

He also posed as a model for several fashion brands during his freshman year at college, which eventually paved way for him to discover who he truly was. And as much as he didn't want to believe it, it turned out that he actually was the son of one of the wealthiest men in the country.
He was hotel mogul, Robert Baratheon's eldest son.

He'd never expected his life to change in the snap of a finger, but the moment it did, everything just fell into place. Of course he never asked for all of this to happen, but he couldn't also complain, because despite the absence of his biological father for more than half of his life, he still would have wanted to know him eventually.

If his uncle Renly was to be believed, his father had been looking for him and his mother the moment he knew that his mother was carrying him in her womb. It turned out that his mother had been elusive all those years that she was still alive, as she did her best to stay away from Robert which eventually prevented Gendry from knowing anything about the hotel tycoon that was his father in the first place.

It had been Renly who initially discovered him one time during a fashion photo shoot. He'd asked him whether he had a family or if he knew his father. With Gendry's strong resemblance to a young Robert notwithstanding, it was through Gendry's sheer lack of knowledge about his father that led Renly to speculate that he might indeed be his brother's love child from another woman. Everything was finally confirmed after several DNA tests.

The process of legitimizing him had been quick, but formally introducing Gendry to society involved a slow, gradual process that he was thankful for. In fact, he'd been the one to suggest delaying his formal introduction to the world of wealthy, influential and powerful families in the excuse of wanting to focus on his studies first.

But in reality, Gendry only wanted just a little more extended time of his peace and quiet before everything eventually fell into chaos following his official introduction to society. He'd been content living under a low profile despite his legitimization and he'd rather be as far from the microscopic lenses of the media as possible, despite its inevitability.

He'd learned his lesson the hard way after he allowed just one interview to be featured in a magazine. After gaining a small cult following of girls and fans, as well as a growing number of media people trying to get to him, he'd been lying low from the limelight.

He continued to live in his humble apartment until the end of the spring of his second year at the university. After that, he had to comply with his father's wishes to stay in the upscale penthouse apartment he'd bought for Gendry. On the brighter side, it was nearer to his school than the old apartment. And at least he wouldn't have to pay for rent anymore, considering the skyrocketing rates of renting even the smallest of apartments in the capital.

Even after his father's suggestions to live with them indefinitely at the family estate, Gendry had made up his mind and declined his father's offer. He actually lived there as a guest for the duration of two weeks, in respect to his father's generous invitation, but then he'd seen his step mother looking at him with nothing but loathing in her eyes, and knew in that moment that there was no place for him in that pretentious manor.

It was better that way, he concluded. To stay away from his father's family and children. He had no problem with his two younger half siblings. They'd been nothing but kind to him. It was the older half brother he had issues with for he was nothing but a grade one asshole with high regard for his bloated ego and self-entitlement. But just like how he didn't give a shit about bullies his entire life, he'd been successful in ignoring Joffrey's taunting in the duration of his stay.

His foster parents, on the other hand, were overjoyed after learning about Gendry's real father. In fact, they were more than hospitable when Robert decided to meet them one time to personally thank them for taking care of his son during his absence in all those years.
It had been a miracle, his foster mother had said, to be reunited with family you thought you never had.

They’d never been more happy for him.

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The afternoon sun was about to set as Gendry bid farewell to his foster parents after visiting them that day. He was supposed to stay the night as planned, but he got a call from his father urging him to come to his office before the end of the day because of some important matters he wished to discuss personally. So he dutifully obliged and made his way back to the capital from Blackwater Bay via the subway train.

He initially planned on driving to Blackwater using the car he'd owned since high school, which was also used for drag racing, but he eventually decided against it in the resolve to save fuel and avoid spending more money to gas it up.

Not to discredit everything that his father had done or given to him, including his trust fund worth millions as well as the penthouse apartment bought for him, but there’s still that sense of pride with having to work hard for your own money in order to pay for your basic needs. It's like a constant reminder for Gendry to never rely on others for his own survival and that he still needed to strive harder to establish himself instead of using his father's name for his own sense of entitlement.

He was comfortably seated on the corner seat of the train, silently observing the other passengers when he suddenly felt a pair of lingering eyes watching him.

Blue met grey as he finally locked his gaze on eyes as grey as the tempestuous storm.

It belonged to the girl sitting a few seats across from him, wearing a cute schoolgirl uniform with a skirt so short, it rode up her to her creamy thighs. She looked nubile and innocent but wild at the same time.

More like a contradiction. A deviation to the norm of girls he'd been with.

Although he'd been used to the female species, young and MILFs alike, ogling at him from afar, and even openly flirting and fucking him with their eyes, he'd never met someone looking at him like that, with eyes as mysterious as the ambiguous darkness.

She looked like innocence wrapped in a ray of sunshine, yet her eyes were as wild as the squalls of a thunderstorm. Like no other.

Even Gendry found himself transfixed.

With her being a surprising contrast to the sea of blonde girls he'd hooked up with, she was exceptionally beautiful, nonetheless. Her dark brown hair was tied in a messy bun, with small wisps framing her small face.

What's more was the fact that she wasn't even looking at him with palpable lustful desire. Instead, there was a blend of innocent curiosity as she continued to study him from afar.

For some unknown reason, the thought sort of irked him but at the same time challenged him,
perhaps because he was already so used to girls swooning at his feet and willingly laying their cards at the table. And for a moment, he was hoping that she was one of them, too. In that way, it would be easier for him to take her out and spend one hell of an unforgettable night under the sheets.

But this girl in front of him was clearly not looking for a good lay. He suddenly didn't know what to make of it, especially because he honestly wanted that possibility with her.

But a guy like him could hope.

And out of his sheer compulsion of badly wanting to know if he would affect her in any way, he suddenly thought of something.

A wicked smile formed on the corner of his lips, smiling more to himself than he'd let on, and continued to hold her gaze. His eyes this time were penetrating, as if telling her non-verbally how strong his need was building up.

She was beautiful, he couldn't just let that pass, never mind that she was still a high school student wearing an equally seductive uniform. He had his fair share of hooking up with wild high school girls. After all, his age gap with them wasn't that far. Give or take, he could only be three or four years older.

After a few seconds of holding her gaze, he finally noticed her squirming under the weight of his searing eyes. Triumph bloomed in his chest at the effect he had inflicted on her.

His charm over girls still never failed.

Indeed, he was Robert's son, no doubt.

He used to wonder where he got his voracious carnal appetites from, the raging hormones of being a twenty-one-year old male, notwithstanding. But when he knew who his father was, he finally got that mystery solved. Because apparently, these appetites ran in the Baratheon blood.

He got off the train with content. Although he might not have acted upon his impulse of approaching her to at least ask for her number, the knowledge that he had that effect on her was more than enough. For now.

Because, in some way or another, he was positive that they'd be seeing each other again. He didn't know how, or when, but he just had a strong gut-feeling.

It wouldn't be the last time, he promised himself.

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It turned out that Gendry was to be finally introduced to society as Robert's legitimate son after a year and a half of trying to keep a low profile. So much for his hopes of staying away from the attention of the prying press people for a longer time.

That was the sole reason why his father had called him to his office that evening. Robert told him it could no longer be delayed. Only, the problem was that Gendry was still not ready, after all this time. But he couldn't well confess that to his father, not when he'd already been given ample time to adjust to his new lifestyle.
So he begrudgingly agreed to his father's wishes as they were solemnly talking about it over dinner and a bottle of whiskey—another common vice they both shared: their guilty pleasure for alcohol. Not that Gendry was an alcoholic. He'd only drink occasionally, though, and he preferred craft beer over expensive whiskey unlike his father who had a taste for the finer things and treated his alcohol like fucking vital water.

Robert had already been well in his cups when he suddenly opened up about how he'd met Gendry's mother.

She'd been one of those summer flings, Robert had said. Pretty much accurate, actually. It's what his mother also told him. At least she wasn't lying about that, except for the fact that she'd kept from him that his father was actually the Robert Baratheon.

They were in the middle of finishing the dinner that's been prepared by his father's best chef when something suddenly caught Gendry's attention.

He squinted his eyes in confusion at a weathered picture frame sitting behind his father's desk. It was a picture of a familiar-looking woman beside a man who was no doubt his father in his early twenties.

His uncle was right. He indeed looked very much like his father.

Robert followed Gendry's trail of vision.

"Who's in that picture with you?" Gendry finally had the voice to ask. He couldn't help but stare at the woman's striking image. He'd seen the same grey eyes earlier in the train and he couldn't help but wonder if it had been a ghost he'd seen.

That woman in the picture couldn't possibly look the same. Not when his own father had aged into someone barely recognizable.

"Ah. It seems that you're also smitten by her. She's beautiful, isn't she?" There was a trace of sadness in his father's eyes as he spoke about her with reverence.

Gendry swallowed the lump on his throat, indeed haunted by her devastating beauty.

"She is. And she was taking the same train as I was a couple of hours ago. Or am I just hallucinating?" Gendry trailed off as if he found himself in a state of trance.

"That might have just been someone who closely resembles her. Because you see, she's been dead even before you were born." Robert finally supplied. "She used to be my fiancée."

Gendry finally blinked back to reality. "I'm sorry for your loss."

His father waved a hand dismissively as he plastered an assuring smile on his face. "It's been a long time, son. Don't worry about it." There was sincerity in his face when he added, "I may have lost a few people I love, but what's more important is living for the present and the future. And that includes being grateful for finally having found you. I thought you should know. Apart from your uncles, your step mother and half siblings, you're the only one I have."

For some reason, Gendry was moved by his father's words. He smiled back at him as he retorted, "Thank you for that, father. I am also glad that I found you."
For some irrational, unexplainable reason, he couldn't get her out of his head.

So, he found himself a momentary diversion in the form of two sexy blondes he’d met when he drag raced at their unofficial race track the other night. And what better way to forget about that girl from the train than to fuck the brains out of both hot blonde girls in a sensual threesome, engaging them in positions far better than the forgotten porn he’d saved from his laptop many years ago.

They’d barely gotten any sleep the entire night, and Gendry somehow finally felt the overflowing gratitude of having sound proof walls all over his penthouse, or else his other neighbors would hear the debauchery from the corners of his room as he made the girls scream in pleasure while he fucked them with his skillful mouth and cock. And like any other senseless hookup, he made sure to make his girls come more than thrice just to give them the satisfaction they’d been craving from him.

He took a long drag of his emergency cigarette as he stood facing the ceiling-to-floor clear glass windows of his apartment, witnessing the first rays of the sun that morning. He’d already quit smoking a year ago, but he needed all the diversion he could find just to get her out of his head.

To no avail.

Because even with the great yet mindless task of bringing those two hot girls to more than one climax last night, all he could think of was doing it instead with that girl in the train. In her uniform and short pleated skirt.

*Stop being such a fucking pervert, Waters.* He berated himself, but he couldn't help it.

He was so used to getting any girl of his liking that forgetting about them was such an easy thing to do after getting what he wanted from them.

Except for her. And it bothered him to a great extent.

He took one final drag of his cigarette before walking back inside his room. Toward those two girls who were still soundly sleeping naked on his huge king-sized bed. They’d been a good lay, he had to admit.

And apart from the fact that he couldn't get someone off his mind, he also needed sex to help him release the other tension he'd been feeling because tonight would be the night that he would finally be introduced to society.

The formal party would be held at The Palace, one of the country's most luxurious hotels, which was of course owned by no other than his father.

This time, there was really no turning back and Gendry Waters would officially be a Baratheon.

He contemplated leaving in the middle of the party so that he could instead escape to Tiffany's. He decided it was too formal for his liking regardless of what his father and uncle had said about
keeping it simple. The luxurious ambiance was too much for him compared to the rustic space at Tiffany's, a small inconsequential café he'd frequented ever since he started his freshman year at the university which was located on the other side of the city.

It was owned by his close friend, HP, who majored in culinary arts at the same university he went to. HP's mother owned it originally, but ever since he turned eighteen, he inherited the entire place. Apart from it being his go-to place for studying or just taking out the tension off his life as a working student, they also served one of the best breakfast meals he'd ever tasted.

Gendry realized that it had been a while since he last visited and he badly missed the pastries made by his friend. HP was one of the first people who knew about Gendry's identity but never made a fuss about it, which was what Gendry liked about him. If anything, nothing changed between their friendship as their bond only grew stronger.

Gendry was about to send HP a text telling him that he'd drop by, when he suddenly felt a presence behind him. He'd been lounging at the deserted balcony outside the grand ballroom of his father's five-star hotel while smoking another stick of cigarette from the pack he kept in his pockets.

He turned to look at the person intruding his solace and in an instant, his eyes grew wide in shock. He couldn't believe what his eyes were seeing.

It was definitely her.

The girl from the train. Who also looked like his father's deceased lover.

Her eyes were two round saucers as she held his gaze. If anything, she managed to hide her surprise well.

Gendry swallowed the lump on his throat as he intently stared at her beautiful grey eyes.

"You're that guy from the train." The girl stated a matter-of-factly.

He felt a sense of triumph in his chest at the recognition before a lazy smirk formed on his lips.

"You remembered." He said, his smile growing too wide for his liking, the cigarette from his hand suddenly forgotten.

She only shrugged with casual nonchalance. "I have a sharp memory." Was her confident yet dismissive response. For some reason, he didn't like the fact that she wasn't being playful with him, and for what it's worth, he badly needed this kind of distraction right now.

"A sharp memory?" He feigned incredulity, raising an eyebrow. She was so short that he had to look down in order to keep that eye to eye contact with her. "Or you weren't just able to get me out of your head after our intense stare-fest?" He continued haughtily.

She rolled her eyes this time. "Are you always so full of yourself?"

"Hey, I wasn't the one who had her eyes glued to mine for the entire duration of the trip." He countered smoothly.

"Do me a favor and get over yourself, will you?" Her snarky comeback was adorable, he realized.

He managed a short laugh before he said, "Well, of all the places where I'd been wanting to see you again, I never expected it to be here." There. He finally said it.
There was a flash of something in the girl's face before a flush crept to her cheeks.

She managed to clear her throat as she looked away from him and instead set her eyes on the spectacular view of the garden below. "Trust me, this is the last place I'd ever want anyone to see me." Her voice was neutral. Bored. "But my parents forced me to attend this pretentious party, so I had no choice but to be here. I can't even remember why Uncle Robert held this party in the first place. And I don't even give a shit."

His eyebrow raised in confusion. "Uncle Robert? You must be close to him, then?" He badly wanted to know, because he might be hitting on a close relative all this time and that would have been so fucked up.

He'd been careful all his life that was why he'd only been hooking up with blonde girls instead of the dark-haired ones in the fear that it might turn out to be his long lost sister or cousin, which would be grossest thing in all levels.

"Family friends." The girl replied casually.

Gendry gave one last drag of his stick before disposing it.

"Interesting." He stated, his wicked smile was back.

"Nothing interesting about this place full of fake people who only care about who you're wearing or how much money you have in the bank, or how popular you are in the tabloids."

He gave her a once over, his eyes trailing from her nicely made up face to the black cocktail dress she was wearing. She looked older for her age tonight, but in a good way.

"With interesting, I meant you. Everyone should be able to notice you, then. Because you look so stunning tonight." He winked.

She snorted at his remark. "You must either be blind or have a poor taste in girls if you think that's the case."

"I'm only stating the truth." He shrugged. And he was being honest about it. She was indeed gorgeous in his eyes.

"Well, good luck with your honesty, then." She told him before reading a text from her phone.

"Shit." She cussed. Releasing an annoyed sigh, she continued, "Well, I guess this is the part where I disappear and avoid the highlight of tonight's party, whatever that is. I got more interesting places to be…"

With highlight, that might have meant that his father was finally going to introduce him in front of everyone at the party. His suspicions were only proven correct when he felt his phone vibrating. It was Renly calling him. A feeling of panic rose in his chest, but he managed to keep to himself.

The girl was already motioning to turn away from him and walk back inside the ballroom when he held her back, his free hand clutching at her wrist gently.

"Wait. At least tell me who you are…" He sounded desperate but he didn't care.

It was her turn to give him a wicked smirk, which only made his blood boil with desire. "I am your greatest fantasy, and your worst nightmare rolled in one." She retorted, her voice a sultry rasp. Then he noticed her eyes glaring at him viciously. "Never ever try to hit on me when you still bear
someone else's mark on your neck. Or anywhere else on your body." Her eyes trailed from his face down to a certain spot on his neck that still felt a little tender.

Fuck. He internally cursed. She had a sharp eye, he noted. Because he’d been doing his very best to hide that mark given by the girls he had a threesome with when they were rutting like animals last night.

She finally freed her hand from his hold and went back inside the ballroom without another word, leaving Gendry utterly speechless for the first time in many years.

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He was casually sitting at the bar right after all the formal introductions were done, lost in his thoughts, a glass of strong whiskey on one hand. It was already his third glass and he was more than thankful for the welcome diversion.

It's not that he was the type of person to shy away from everyone. No, in fact, he'd been confident when his father had introduced him to his business partners and to everyone deemed important. It's just that, he wasn't really comfortable being in a crowd of pretentious people. He wanted real, actual human interactions and not the ones that involved ass-kissing for the sake of business ventures.

But just as his father had said, he had to keep up with this façade every now and then as this was how real businesses were done. And apparently, Gendry would be helping out in the family business in the near future. A big pressure on his part, but to hell with it. He'd take it one step at a time, he promised himself. Anyway, he wasn't the type of person to back out on a challenge.

And speaking of challenges, he'd never been more challenged when he surprisingly came face to face with the mysterious girl he met at the train. He knew she came from money, given the uniform she'd worn from one of those posh expensive schools the first time he met her, but he never for once thought that he'd be seeing her tonight at his party. More so knowing that she'd called his father on a first-name basis.

He'd been wanting to ask his father the entire evening if he knew the girl but he figured that he'd be too preoccupied to bother with answering his petty question.

Gendry also tried to look for her in the sea of rich people inside the ballroom but she left without a trace. Just like that.

As he continued to brood and contemplate whether to text HP or not, another guy in a neat black suit suddenly joined him, asking for a glass of Jack and Coke from the bartender. He looked just about his age, with dark brown locks and grey eyes. The same stormy eyes as hers, he noted.

Misery indeed loved company because he looked as miserable as Gendry, a misfit in this entire crowd of filthy rich people.

"Alright there, mate?" Gendry asked good-naturedly.

The guy gave him a faint smile, his eyes looking weary. "Yeah, a bit tired, is all." He took a sip from his glass before he asked him, "Bout you, mate? Enjoying the party, are you?" It was meant to be a sarcastic jape, Gendry knew.
He flashed the guy a wide boyish grin before shaking his head. "Yeah, enjoying like hell, mate. You have no idea." He drained all the contents of whiskey from his glass and asked for another round from the bartender who was more than happy to oblige.

They both laughed in unspoken understanding and for the first time that night, Gendry finally found a kindred spirit.

Once Gendry got another refill of his whiskey, the guy raised his glass for a cheer. "Here's to one hell of a fantastic party, then."

They drank their own drinks together before sharing another laugh.

"I'm Jon, by the way." He introduced himself, extending a hand, "And it's an honor to meet the Baratheon star of tonight's party."

Gendry took his hand eagerly and they shook hands like brothers. "Nice to meet you, Jon. And it's just Gendry Waters please. I'm still getting the hang of being a Baratheon. With all this pressure and shit. If you know what I mean."

"Alright, Waters. Then you can also call me Snow."

"A bastard of the North," Stated Gendry. "Looks like we'll be getting along just fine, mate. After all, we both got a lot of things in common."

"Aye. That and our flare for fucking parties, yeah?"

Gendry laughed at his retort before taking another swig of his whiskey.

As they were both soaked up in their own conversations, they were interrupted by two more guys his age wearing the same pristine suits as him and Jon.

"Hey, don't leave us out in the fun! What's up?" The guy with the auburn hair said, putting an arm around Jon.

"Met a new friend here." Jon replied, pointing his half-empty glass at Gendry. "Waters, meet my half-brother, Robb Stark and this fucker here is Theon Greyjoy." Jon said before facing the other two guys. "Robb, Theon, this is Gendry Baratheon."

Robb and Theon extended their hands at him.

"Ah, the man of the hour." Robb remarked.

Gendry shook both Robb then Theon's hand without hesitation. "Pleased to meet you, mates."

He thought that Robb's family name sounded so familiar, so he tried to ask, "Stark? So you mean—"

"Our fathers are best mates. Heard so much about you myself. Father's been frequently talking about good ol' Uncle Robert's long lost son, so it's really a pleasure to finally meet you." Robb said, clapping Gendry's back. "It's nice to know you're not some self-entitled asshole like your half-brother Joffrey, mate. No offense."

Gendry smiled at the compliment. "None taken. And I met your parents earlier, too. My father has been speaking so fondly of your dad as if he was his own brother." He told them. "Looks like you lot are going to be the coolest bunch in this boring party then."

"Wait till you meet my younger brothers and sisters," Jon added.
"You mean how Sansa and Arya will drool themselves once they get to see how pleasing he is to the ladies' eyes?" Came Theon's statement before putting an arm around Gendry.

"Shut up, T. Leave my sisters out of this." Robb chided protectively.

Theon shrugged. "Hey, we just heard the pretty ladies talking about the hunk that is Robert Baratheon's son, didn't we? What’s to say your sisters aren’t immune to his charms as well?"

"Yeah, but they're still my sisters, you moron."

Gendry noticed Jon laughing silently as they were witnessing Robb and Theon's playful banter.

"Fine. Stop being so overprotective, mate. Your sisters are smart girls. If anything, it was the three of us who taught them how to be smart when it comes to guys trying to get in their pants, remember?" Theon assured before he turned back to Gendry, his impish grin back on his face. "But you're still one lucky bastard, mate. All the ladies in this party practically want to spread their legs right in front of you." Then Theon looked at Robb pointedly, "Except your sisters, of course."

At this, Robb burst out in gales of laughter, followed by Jon, Theon then Gendry.

He'd never felt more alive at this party, and he had to admit, it actually turned out for the best with his newfound acquaintances.

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November

Seven Years Ago

It was another typical Friday night of working late at the car shop. Gendry had one more car to fix before meeting HP at Tiffany's for this week. He ought to make it up to his friend for not having visited the other month because of the party, so Gendry was more than eager to finally finish his work that night so that he could hang out with him. He knew that HP would also be working late tonight because customers usually flocked his café on weekends.

It was already a few minutes past midnight when he finally finished fixing the old car that was due to be returned the following day.

He was about to wash off the grease all over his hands and arms when he noticed the door to the garage opening. Grabbing the first tool he could find, he sauntered toward the entrance to check on the intruder, ready to fight if needed – only to find a girl who was just about to lock the door from the inside as if she was running away from someone from the street outside.

He squinted his eyes under the dim lights for a clearer look and realized that she was wearing a short rosy-pinkish-creamy dress with thin straps (whatever that color was). Its top fabric was somewhat translucent that it barely concealed the lacy black lingerie peeking from underneath. Despite her heels, here arms were still trying to reach for the lock above her head, her dress hiking up to reveal
the garter straps holding the silky black stockings on her legs.

Her dark hair was all over her back, its wavy locks giving volume to her entire ensemble. She was hot as hell and seductive as sin with that sexy dress, and even sexier heels.

And when she finally turned around to face him, it was the train scene all over again as he came face to face with the same mysterious girl haunting his waking thoughts.

The same spitting image of his father's deceased fiancée.

The same girl he'd been secretly wanting to see for no reason at all.

"Seven fucking hells." The curse was out of his mouth before he could even think of holding it back.
Parties and Late Night Breakfasts

The time on her black digital wristwatch read 22:58.

Arya was sitting on her bed, her foot tapping impatiently on the carpeted floor as she waited for her watch to strike eleven-thirty.

Her hair was already tied in a messy high bun and she was wearing her teal satin robe and bedroom slippers as if she was preparing for bedtime.

But sixteen-year-old Arya Stark was far from getting ready to sleep.

When her watch beeped at eleven o'clock, she finally bolted up from her bed with excitement dancing in her eyes. Carefully, she tiptoed to open her door and take a peek outside her room.

After finally deciding that the coast was clear, she grabbed the huge black garbage bag sitting behind the closet door and trudged into the darkened hallways of their penthouse apartment as if she was a ghost. Her parents and her other siblings had already retired inside their respective bedrooms so she took this opportunity to sneak out undetected.

She successfully found her way out of their apartment through the large glass window that served as the fire exit instead of going the usual route via the elevator, because doing so would only complicate things and she didn't want her parents notified by the building security about why a minor like her was going out of their apartment complex unattended at this time of the night.

Not that she still needed to be attended to. She wasn't a toddler anymore, for crying out loud.

As soon as she was one floor below, she took off her teal satin robe to reveal a huge grey hooded jacket and baggy pajamas before stuffing the robe inside the black garbage bag.

Bringing the hood up to conceal her face, she used the emergency stairs to make it look like she was
just taking the trash outside.

She finally reached the back of their apartment building after a few minutes. When she was certain that she was well hidden from anyone passing by the street, she finally removed her hooded jacket, then her pajamas and stuffed them inside the black garbage bag, revealing the actual clothes she'd been wearing all this time.

She wore a dusty rose silk dress so short, it barely covered her thighs. Although the neckline was almost plunging down to her navel, she loved the way it emphasized the black lacy bralette underneath her semi-translucent top so that it looked like she was just wearing a sexy lingerie instead of an actual dress.

Arya was aware that her outfit might have looked a little bit slutty to most people, but she loved the way it complimented her body. It's not like she even cared what most shallow people thought of her clothes. They could judge her all they want and it still wouldn't affect her in any way.

She finally changed the slippers into black heels to give justice to the black silky stockings she'd been wearing, and when her ensemble for tonight's rave party was finally complete, she then untied her messy bun to let down the wavy hair she'd curled for extra volume.

This –sneaking out to party and pretending to sleep early had been her routine every Friday night ever since she started high school. Her friends had been diligent enough to cover for her. Jon would have been a smart accomplice in her adventures, too, but he'd already moved out years ago.

She was already walking calmly a few blocks away from their apartment, holding her black clutch with her life, when Brea's shiny grey car stopped right beside the sidewalk. A heavily tinted window slid down, revealing a smirking Pandora on the passenger seat.

"The coast is clear. Hop on!" Brea shouted from the driver's seat, beaming widely at her.

Arya immediately hopped inside the backseat before Brea hit on the accelerator. She'd been multi-tasking with putting on a heavy smoky-eye makeup while holding on to her seat as Brea drove them toward their destination for tonight which was at some old abandoned warehouse in the city.

It was another rave party organized by the students from Brown, Arya was told, which meant that they'd be seeing Mycah and Ned that night.

Brea left her car at some covert parking area a few meters outside the old warehouse to make it look like her car just belonged to one of the homeowners living nearby. They had to walk all the way to the party, but they all agreed that it was the safer choice than the possibility of getting the car traced in the event of any police intrusions. After all, the rave party was in all means an illegal affair. Most especially if it involved underage drinking and drugs.

Most of Arya's family, save for Jon, hadn't really been aware of her sneaking out to party almost every Friday night. Sure they'd all thought of her as a wild, free-spirited and opinionated individual, especially when her different views almost had her expelled from her previous school for trying to protest about some of their medieval policies, but other than that, her family still saw her as a decent girl who knew her manners and wore proper dresses in formal gatherings.

She'd been one to internally complain about the rigid traditions of the prejudiced elite society but never did she voice them out in the open to avoid useless judgment from people who do not even know her that much. And in fear of being sent to boarding school, she had to wear a mask in front of everyone else, except for her friends and those people she partied with.
As soon as they arrived at the warehouse, they were met by Mycah and Ned.

Mycah gave them all a tight hug as he squealed in excitement.

"Have you already met any cute guys, Myc?" Pandora asked him after pulling away.

At Pandora's question, Mycah only squealed louder. "Ohmygod! Yes! You have to come with me, I'm going to introduce you to some of them!" He told Pandora, grabbing her hand. He was also about to grab Arya's hand but she politely declined.

"Come on, girl. I'm only introducing you to some cute guys. I'm not handing you off for marriage or anything!" Mycah japed in which they all laughed in unison.

Arya gave Mycah another hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Aww, you're so sweet, Myc. But I'm going to have to pass tonight. I'm only here for the booze, anyway. It's been a while since I had one." She winked.

"Whatever you say, sweet pea. But I'm still introducing you to some of them later. Count on that, love." He winked back.

After Pandora and Mycah headed off somewhere inside the huge warehouse, Brea followed by telling Arya that she'd be stopping by the DJ's booth, leaving her with Ned.

Ned smiled earnestly at her before giving her a friendly hug.

"Still looking the best as ever, Arya." Came his compliment as he put an arm around her shoulders. 
"And you look swell tonight, Ned. Care to take me to where the booze is at?" She retorted happily.

"Always my pleasure, babe." He whispered seductively in her ear before giving her a kiss on the temple. The gesture, however, did not affect her in any way, knowing in her heart that her friendship with Ned was nothing but platonic.

Even with his subtle advances and flirtations, she knew that it wasn't anything serious and it was just his nature to be smooth with the ladies. She reckoned it was easier seeing her this close to Ned, in that way, no guy would ever dare come near her, knowing Ned's reputation for being protective. He'd beat the shit out of anyone who would try to touch his friends without consent, just like what he did to some douchebag who tried to grope Pandora and force her to make out with him. The asshole got what he deserved after Ned beat him to a bloody pulp.

He led her to the center of the rave as the people parted to make way for them, which had only gone to show how popular he was in this party.

As they reached the makeshift bar with all the booze and cocktails, he then handed her a small shot glass of green liquid after making sure that it was deemed safe for her to drink and raised his own glass for a toast.

"Bottoms up!" He told her as they drank their shots together.

If anything, she wasn't worried about being roofied or drugged when Ned was with her because even at the start of their friendship, he'd always been there to take care of her during rave parties, and making sure that no one put something else into her drink. The same goes for Mycah, who had also been religiously taking care of the three of them, making sure that they're not being date-raped somewhere else.

Arya swore to herself that she would do the same for her friends, even to Mycah and Ned.
An hour of drinking, partying and dancing had passed when Arya suddenly heard sirens outside the warehouse.

"Shit!" She cursed as her eyes scanned her proximity to look for her friends. It had been a while since she'd been separated from them after she headed back to the makeshift bar for another refill of her drink and then took a detour to the bathroom for a long, glorious piss. And considering the vast expanse of the warehouse, it would be impossible to leave the vicinity together, especially when the police were already getting inside to stop the party and arrest anyone they could get a hold of.

Everybody ran in all directions as the warehouse was in total chaos.

As for her, she tried to remain calm but quick-minded as she fished out her phone from her clutch to call Brea while she temporarily hid herself.

"Brei! You all have to run now! The cops are here!" She warned them over the phone, feeling her heart trying to summersault out of her ribcage.

"Yeah, we had no choice but to get out after we saw the cops! We tried looking for you inside, Arya. Where were you? We're not leaving without you!" Came Brea's panicked voice.

"Just go! I'm still inside but I can manage. I'll text you when I'm safe. I promise. Stay safe, too. All of you." Came her hurried response as she ended the call before Brea could even protest.

At least all her friends were already outside, safe and away from the cops. She regretted being separated from them in the first place but she really had to go to the bathroom to take a piss after all the shots she'd taken.

She ran away from the warehouse and the meddling cops as fast as she could. She mustn't get caught, no matter what, or her parents would ground her for the rest of her life and leave her to rot in the confines of boarding school. The depressing thought only motivated her to run faster despite the heels she's wearing.

When she was already at a good distance away from the scene, she took as short stop to catch her breath. As she doubled over with her hands on her knees, she noticed the only open light from a small car shop across the street. Knowing that the cops were about to find her in a few seconds, she hurriedly ran toward the shop in the hope of hiding away from the authorities.

She no longer had the time to check if there was someone inside. She just let herself in without any thought the moment she heard the sirens getting louder. Catching her breath with her heavy panting, she fumbled for the lock that she couldn't really reach above her head and held the door as she waited for the police cars to pass by.

A few short seconds passed when she suddenly heard a deep male voice behind her. She finally turned around, only to find familiar blue eyes looking at her.

"Shit. She thought, a sudden blush creeping through her cheeks.

It's him –the guy from the train, and the same guy she saw at Uncle Robert's party the other week.
He looked rugged this time, his hands and arms greased, including the white shirt peeking through his grey overalls. His black hair was a ruffled mess, his outfit a contrast to the sleek black suit wore at the party. It didn't make him any less handsome, however. In fact, for some reason, she liked seeing him all rugged and dirty.

Her heart began to race again, but this time for a whole new different reason.

"You…” He started to speak, albeit fumbling for the right words. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, uhm…” Arya was also speechless as she found herself lost in those cerulean orbs once again.

The guy dropped the long metal wrench he was holding as he slowly sauntered toward her direction. "Well?” He goaded, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, I just need to hide for some time until—"

Before she could even continue, she heard footsteps and voices from outside.

"Help me, please. Pretend that I've been with you inside this garage the whole time… please." Came her almost desperate plea.

The guy peeked through the clear glass from the entrance door before he muttered another curse, "Fuck. Why are there cops here?"

"I'll explain later," she whispered, "but for now, you have to hide me."

"There's no time to hide, they'd see you either way." He whispered back before he drew closer to her personal space. He was looking at her seriously, obviously trying to think of a better plan until she finally saw it in his face.

"Just go with it, okay?" He told her.

"What—" Before she could finish her question, he was already scooping the small of her back in one smooth motion and pinning her to the wall next to the unlocked door. He then lifted both her legs so that she could wrap them around his waist, a warm hand securing one of her thighs as he moved the other to cup the back of her head.

"I want you to moan loudly." He whispered in a raspy voice, his breath hot on her ear before he moved his lips to her jaw then to her neck, sucking and licking on her sensitive pulse points.

He was kissing her neck insatiably.

The feeling of his mouth on her neck was pleasurable enough that she didn't even need to fake the moan that escaped from her lips at that moment. Her body immediately heated at the contact, the hand on her thigh leaving a trail of wildfire on its wake as he hiked up her skirt a little higher to reveal the gap between her silk stockings and her bare skin.

She moaned and moaned as he continued to suck and bite her neck to make it look like they were just two couples with raging hormones fooling around inside a car shop garage.

The guy made sure that the cops saw what they were doing through the slightly open door before he paused, his lips still lingering on her neck while breathing heavily as if he was inhaling her scent. Her weight was left at the mercy of his hands. She was breathless and hot, and she could feel her cheeks blushing beet red as his breath warmed her sensitive skin.
"How can I help you, officers?" The guy asked, unmoving on her neck. His voice was calm but it sounded like it was filled with the promise of wicked desire.

Everything else was obliterated, except for the warmth emanating from their contact.

Arya was certain that the cops were already talking to him but she could no longer comprehend what they were saying because all she could focus on at the moment was his scent and the feeling of those lips on her neck. He smelled so good. Like Old Spice, cigarettes and musk. She'd know he'd been smoking because she could scent the cigarette on him.

She was taken back to reality when she heard him heave a deep sigh of relief and felt her feet on the floor again. Blinking away her surge of unbidden desire, she looked at the retreating form of the cops outside. An indication that their charade was over.

The guy huffed another sigh before pulling out a stick of cigarette from his pack. He took a long drag before finally talking to her. "Are you in some sort of trouble?" He was glaring at her suspiciously.

She shook her head defensively. "I'm not really in trouble, trouble."

He raised a confused eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Arya tried to wrack her brain to find the right words to explain herself. "I was at this rave party at some old warehouse, okay? But it's not like I was doing illegal drugs or anything, I mean there were drugs and booze but I wasn't really snorting drugs. And then the cops just showed up and busted the party, so I had to run away to avoid getting caught. Obviously." Came her jumbled explanation.

"That illegal party happening every Friday at the old Barnes warehouse, you mean?"

"Well, yeah…" It was all that she could say.

He shook his head in disbelief. "Jesus Christ. Did you not know that that party is run by a notorious drug syndicate?"

She stilled at his statement, her eyes wide in shock at the realization that sank in. Of course. The drugs she'd seen being circulated at the rave party must have come from somewhere. And it obviously wasn't from some petty high school student from Brown. It must have been from some big-time drug supplier who sold them to rich kids who love to party.

She really didn't know what to feel. Anger at herself for not having known all this time? Indignation for being berated? She felt stupid and ashamed. Naïve at its best.

Swallowing an invisible lump on her throat, she said, "I didn't know. I was told that some guys from Brown Academy organized it… it didn't occur to me that they're a syndicate now."

The guy hinted her subtle sarcasm as he drew closer, "Well, now you know. And that syndicate uses kids from posh schools like yours as front for their illegal business. You're lucky you didn't get caught."

Arya finally slumped her back on the wall, feeling all kinds of relief. She was that close to being caught. If not for this guy who helped her. "Then I guess I should thank you for saving my ass. So, thank you, really."

All the adrenaline was draining out of her system and was replaced by a surge of sudden weakness. Her feet also hurt, and she was hungry. Her stomach was a growling lion.
"Are you alright?" Asked the guy after he took another drag.

Her eyes found his again as she nodded, "Yeah. I just need a minute more. My legs hurt from running."

"Have a seat for a moment." Came his offer, putting off his cigarette. "I'm just going to change into some clean clothes and close the shop, then I'll get you some food and take you home."

"You don't have to…"

"I just heard your stomach making that sound. You must be hungry." He noted noncommittally.

She straightened up, feeling embarrassed. "I can just go, really… it's not like I can't find my way back home or something."

"It's too dangerous to be out alone in a place like this. Trust me."

There was no use arguing with him. He looked like he knew the place better and seemed like the kind of guy who was decent, anyway. "Alright." Arya finally conceded.

She took the time waiting for him to call Brea back and tell her that she's covered for the night. Several interrogations later, her friend finally let her go and made Arya promise to text her after she’d get home safe.

The lights in the garage were finally put out and the shop securely locked.

He led her to the back of the building where he’d parked his car. Much to her surprise, it was a car she was already a bit familiar with, thanks to her brothers’ love for cars and speed.

"This is some neat 2.0 Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution, 5-speed manual transmission you got here.” She remarked, her eyes trailing over the shiny obsidian paint as she waited for him to unlock the passenger door with his key.

A wicked smile curved on his lips. Obviously impressed by her knowledge of cars.

“You know your cars well.” He winked, finally opening the door to let her in before moving to his side to hop in.

Arya only shrugged confidently before getting inside.

"Is it not a bad idea for you that this car still has manual transmission?” He suddenly asked, perhaps to test her further.

"There's nothing wrong with driving stick, if you'd ask me."

"Good point." He said, a satisfied half-grin on his face.

Before he started the car, she noticed him taking off the black leather jacket he’d been wearing after he changed to clean clothes. And much to her surprise, he handed the jacket to her.

"By the way, it's going to get chilly, so take this." Came his offer, looking at her then at the skimpy outfit she was wearing. She had to admit, it was indeed getting cold what with the dress already riding up her thighs the moment she sat down.

But Arya had always been a proud person by nature so as expected, she initially declined his offer.
"I'm fine, really. I'm used to the cold weather." Came her excuse, trying her best to control herself from shivering as the night breeze trickled through her bare skin.

But just like her, he was just as bullheaded when he refused to see through her excuses.

"Trust me. This is also for our own safety along the road… to prevent any visual distractions. Because someone once told me that she was going to be my greatest fantasy and my worst nightmare, rolled in one." His eyes twinkled devilishly at the suggestion before they travelled back to her dress.

She melted under his hungry gaze, her legs feeling like jelly. She literally wanted to explode. And she regretted ever saying those words to him because after all, she was only half sober that time.

She wanted to comment about the mark she'd found on his neck that night she met him at the party but she didn't want to make things even more complicated by saying something awkward, so she instead resorted to finally taking his jacket and wearing it.

It was so warm and big that she could literally sleep on it. It also smelled like him.

At least she wasn't the one driving because wearing something he owned might have become more than a driving hazard to her.

_Shut up, Arya. Don't make a fool of yourself. He's just a guy._ Came her motivational words as she channeled her inner Pandora.

"So what do you feel like eating right now?" He asked as he finally pulled out of the parking area.

Her eyes temporarily landed on the bulging biceps peeking out of his black shirt as he leaned his right arm at the back of her seat.

They were large. And muscled. Just like the rest of him, she noted.

Shit.

Blinking back to the here and now, she blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. Or at least what her subconscious had dictated. After all, she wanted to make it look like it was her stomach that's feeling ravenous right now.

"Bacon."

He gave her a sidelong glance of approval before looking back at the road. "Nice choice. Anything else?"

He was hiding a shit-eating grin, perhaps at how predictable she'd reacted upon seeing those biceps, maybe because a million other girls had also seen his arms and almost drooled at the sight of his glorious, glorious massive frame. She wasn't even an exception to those girls, no matter how much her rational mind wanted to deny it.

She wasn't immune to hot guys after all, and that was okay because she had a pair of working eyes and it’s not like it was a sin to admire a wonderful piece of art like him, considering her keen eye for the aesthetics. At least she could admire him from a distance, just like what she'd done at the train when she absent-mindedly stared at him from across her seat. And—

"Well?" Her thoughts were cut off by his voice.
Oh, god. She must have looked so ridiculous now that he’d caught her off-guard once again. She always found herself in that state around him, she noticed.

"Anything breakfast-ish, I guess. I'm also craving for some hot chocolate." She almost stuttered as she finally retorted, more to herself than she could let on.

Whether he noticed her absent-mindedness or not, he didn't let on.

"Alright. I know just the perfect place for that."

She only nodded and kept her mouth shut. She even controlled herself from staring at him or at the black shirt he was wearing that was a perfect fit for his chiseled form. And contrary to what she'd thought earlier, looking at him did feel like committing a mortal sin because she couldn't help but think of all the wicked ways she could do to that body and that face.

Oh, dear god. Please deliver me from evil. She said to herself, never mind how blasphemous that sounded coming from someone like her who had been a skeptic her entire life.

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The guy was leading Arya toward a cozy-looking café called Tiffany's, situated in a narrow cobblestoned alleyway.

Finally feeling the effects of the chilly night air permeating through her skin as they were walking along the streets, she held on to the jacket as if to draw more warmth to herself. The jacket itself looked much too oversized for her petite frame but she couldn't really complain not when its welcoming warmth was what kept herself from freezing to death.

As they entered the cafe together, they were instantly greeted by a chubby guy whom she presumed was the owner.

"Hey, mate! Glad of you to finally stop by!" The guy greeted her companion with obvious sarcasm in his tone as he clapped her companion's shoulder playfully. His brown eyes landed on her knowingly as if to ask the guy who she was.

"Yeah, sorry about that, mate. You know how much I'm swamped with work and school stuff right now." The guy replied apologetically before leading her toward a small corner near the window with the nice view of the cobblestone streets, his large hand at the small of her back to guide her.

"Yeah, I can see that. School stuff, eh?" His friend asked, sarcasm still coating his words as he gave her another furtive look.

"Shut up, mate."

"Well, are you not going to tell me who she is? Or at least introduce me to her? She's the first girl you brought here to my shop, after all." He finally asked the guy before giving Arya a wink.

She noticed the guy's ears turning red at his friend's behest. And for some reason, she felt a satisfied feeling of something like victory inside her chest.

"Fine. I was going to introduce you to her, anyway." The guy finally said in defeat, huffing an
exasperated sigh before turning to her. "Anyway, meet my good friend and the owner of this café, HP… HP meet…" The guy stopped abruptly as he finally realized what he'd forgotten to ask her all this time.

"Shit. I never asked for your name…" He told her sheepishly, scratching the back of his neck.

Arya bit her lip to control herself from bursting into gales of mocking laughter. "Neither did I." She told him. "That makes us even." She added.

"I'm Gendry, by the way." He finally introduced himself, offering his hand out to her.

"And my name's Ary—Arry." She told him, deciding to keep her real name to herself. She didn't want them to associate her for her influential family, now that she'd found potential decent friends she could talk with. It was nice having to interact with someone without them standing on tiptoes just because she came from an elite family.

Arya finally shook Gendry's hand before turning back to HP. "Nice to meet you, HP. I'm Arry." she finally said, giving him the same gesture before they all took their seats, with Arya sitting across them.

"I thought I'd seen you from somewhere, Arry… you kind of look familiar to me." HP said, squinting his eyes at her in contemplation.

Before he could figure out who she was, she tried to change the topic by speaking again.

"What does HP stand for? Harry Potter or something?" She asked jokingly.

HP and Gendry only laughed. "It's Hot Pie." HP retorted.

"It that because you love to bake and cook, and you own this place?" Arya surmised.

"Yeah, something like that." HP said before he finally asked, "Anyway, what can I get you guys?"

"Arry here wants some bacon and hot chocolate, mate. So, could you get her the breakfast special number two, if you'd be so kind?" Gendry said to his friend, his thumb pointing at Arya's direction. "And I'll have the usual order." He added.

"With the usual, you mean the one with that strong black coffee and everything, mate? Don't you have plans of sleeping after a long day? It's the weekend after all." Came HP's shocked reaction.

"You know that I still have papers to finish." Was Gendry's only response, crossing his arms as he leaned back on his seat, which only made his muscles bulge, while Arya tried her very best not to let eyes bulge at the sight.

"Always the hardworking student, are we?" HP japed as he motioned to stand up.

"You do know that I ought to be working my ass off or else I'd lose my scholarship, don’t you?"

"Whatever, mate. You know for yourself that there’s really no need to keep that scholarship…” HP said, sighing, as if he meant something else with his statement. With the way that Gendry was looking pointedly at him, Arya knew that he didn't really want to talk about it in front of her.

So she just opted to ask for, "What's your major?" when HP finally set off to the kitchens to prepare their meals.

"Mechanical Engineering." Figured why he looked like he was into cars and all. Only a true car
enthusiast like him and Jon would opt to drive stick these days.

"Third year?" She asked. If anything, she wanted to sound as curt as possible or else he might have
the impression that she was interested, which she really was. But he didn't need to know that. Not in
a million years.

"I'm actually an irregular student since I'm still taking a few third-year minor classes and some
fourth-year major subjects."

"And you're on full scholarship?"

"Yup." He replied, his blue eyes gazing at her carefully. They looked so mesmerizing that for some
reason, his eyes reminded her of the blueness of Uncle Robert's eyes. If anything, that's just about the
only thing she liked about her father's best friend. She hated his almost eternal state of inebriation,
and more importantly, his knack for sleeping around with random women even at his age.

As for this guy, how was it even legal for him to exist? How could he be so awesome in all levels?
Because if he's on full scholarship, then it only meant one thing—he's smart. And maybe the only
reason why he's an irregular student was because he's working at the same time. Sadly, qualities like
that were a rarity for a guy as handsome as him at this time and age. Not to stereotype or anything,
but that's just her common observation.

"How about you? I figured you're still in high school because of the uniform you were wearing…
are you already on your final year?" He asked her.

"Junior year, actually."

"A junior doing underage drinking. I presume? With the state that you were in earlier and with the
cops busting your rich-kid party." Came his noncommittal remark.

Arya only snorted in dismissal. "Just because I do 'underage drinking' doesn't mean that I'm wasting
my life away by getting piss drunk. For the record, I've never been drunk my whole life. I can
control myself. Trust me."

He raised an eyebrow incredulously. "Oh yeah? Because you ought to know, the first stage in
alcoholism is denial, did you know that?"

"Oh, wow. I didn't know that you're also a psychologist now." She responded sardonically.

"Defensive much? Do your parents know what you've been doing? Fifty bucks says you just snuck
out to party." He smirked at her tauntingly.

She crossed her arms before her chest as she raised an eyebrow at him. "Well, you sound like my
mother yourself, what with the litany of berating you're giving me. I'm really sorry for sneaking out,
Mom."

"Well, I'm sorry for sounding so concerned. A slight thing like you—"

Before he could continue, their playful banter was interrupted by a cheerful HP carrying a tray of
their drinks.

"Here's your hot chocolate, Arry. And your black coffee, mate."

Both Arya and Gendry said their thanks in unison.
Arya took a sip from her cup, the glorious scent of the hot chocolate wafting through her nose.

Without taking her eyes off Gendry, she suddenly stated, "Studies show that people who prefer black coffee tend to be more straightforward, straight up and no-nonsense… And more likely to be psychopaths."

At this, Gendry almost choked on the coffee he was sipping. "Oh really? So I'm a psychopath now?"

"I didn't say you were. But then again, it's based on a study I've read, so..." She shrugged, feigning innocence.

"Wow, you are a huge pain in my ass." He playfully said, shaking his head in emphasis.

"Your greatest fantasy and your worst nightmare rolled in one, remember?" She reminded, winking at him mischievously before flashing a devilish smirk.

"I've only been gone for a couple of minutes and you're already having a lover's tiff?" HP joked.

"Shut up, mate." Gendry chided, his voice low and deep.

"I'm just saying..." HP defended before he started to walk back toward the kitchens to get their meal, his voice fading as he added, "Your food is almost done, guys. I'll bring them over in a few."

After HP disappeared, Gendry looked at her again, his eyes were a blazing blue even under the dim night lights.

"Enjoying our company so far? I know this isn't much, but it's one of my favorite places in this congested city." He asked her, smiling earnestly.

"Are you kidding me? I love every inch about this place. And I am definitely enjoying the company – yours and HP’s. Maybe I should reevaluate my priorities and spend my Friday nights hanging out with you guys rather than go to some rave party filled with wild, raging teenage hormones." She told him honestly.

He held his cup to his lips, pausing as a smile slid up on his handsome face, "That sounds like a great idea." Finally putting down his cup after a short sip, he added, "Glad to know that this place fits your upper-class tastes."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, for one, you obviously belong to the upper-class, therefore, you must be used to luxurious tastes. You don't have to deny it because I can definitely tell, but it doesn't also mean that there's something wrong about it. I'm just plainly stating my observation." He sounded calm, composed.

He always sounded so sure of himself. And she liked guys who were as blunt as him.

"You're keen, I'd give you that. But just to get things straight, I'm nothing like the stereotypical spoiled brat that most people come to associate to those kids studying in posh exclusive schools."

His seductive chortle was like sultry music to her ears as he laughed at her defensive statement. "Oh, I don't doubt that, Arry. Trust me. If you were one of those brats, you wouldn't even be hanging out with us here in the first place. And I wouldn't also be seeing you in that train as well." His smile grew wider as he looked at her knowingly.

"You also sneaked out that day, didn't you?" He asked her again with an accusatory but playful tone.
"Of course I did." She told him as though she was so proud of herself for what she'd done.

HP finally came back with their food and they all but stopped their conversation to devour the delicious meal prepared for them. It was by far one of the best breakfast meals Arya had ever tasted in her life. And their bacon was so divine, she'd want to smother herself with a ton of it for the rest of her existence.

That right there was pure, perfect bliss.

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As promised, Gendry drove Arya home after they finished eating.

She requested him to drop her off at the back lot of the apartment complex to avoid getting caught.

"You're a sneaky little thing, aren't you?" He teased her, his body slightly turning to the side to face her.

"Isn't that obvious yet?" She countered, making him shake his head in disbelief. "Well, this has been a fun night after all. And I thank you for the company… And for making sure that I get home in one piece. Kindly extend my gratitude to HP as well."

“Noted.” He grinned. “And I thank you for trusting me enough to feed you before sending you home in one piece.”

She returned his statement with a laugh to mask the flush creeping back to her face at the intensity of his gaze before finally opening the car door. “Alrighty then. I’ll see you when I see you, Gendry.”

“See you, Arry.”
Omissions and Fundamental Truths

Arya

November

Eight Years Ago

It was another monotonous week at school for Arya following another unexpected encounter with the guy she first met at the train whose name was Gendry.

With the same old shit she'd been facing every single day, thinking about the most amazing thing that happened last weekend was her only consolation for having to endure another week of junior girls trash-talking her. Per usual, she kept her mouth shut about their bullying and resorted instead to avoiding them by hanging out at the school's rooftop garden during her free periods.

It was the only place where she could see the view of the rest of the busy and overcrowded city since her new school was surrounded by other buildings.

Her resentment for the city life often brought her to an imagined coexistence with nature by living somewhere in a tropical island while enjoying the beach and relaxing under the sun. She had been wanting to do that someday—to start over and build her own life without the prying society's rigid dictates of unattainable expectations just because her family was of importance to the entire upper class.

Lounging on one of the wooden benches on the rooftop garden under the grey mid-morning skies lightened up her mood and made her forget about the shit storm that was her entire new school. There was something about the cold winter breeze that day that kept her in a state of tranquil contemplation.

That little piece of the quiet calm was enough for her to let go of all the negative vibes she'd been feeling at the start of her day.

She was only broken from the random play of her thoughts when she heard her phone beeping inside her pockets.

It was a Messenger notification from Pandora bombarding their group conversation with swooning GIFs.
Arya raised an eyebrow curiously.

*Interesting*, she thought. Because this was very unusual coming from Pandora who rarely swooned online about anything, much less resort to sending mushy, senseless GIFs to their group.

**Arya: What's up with those GIFs?**

But before Arya could type another line in their conversation, her phone pinged again.

**Pandora: So I asked Brea for the details of your sudden disappearance after the party was busted last Friday night...**

**Pandora: and she'd said you met someone and that you were with him the entire time until dawn.**

**Pandora: Since he was such a gentleman for taking care of you and for sending you home in one piece, Mycah and I went to do some research the entire day yesterday about said mystery hot guy, and guess what?**

God, that's so typical Pandora –doing her research before getting close to a person, or in this case, before giving her approval for her friends' potential prospects. Not that Arya was looking for one right now, but for sure that's what Pandora had been doing. Even Arya wouldn't waste her time stalking Gendry in social media knowing how unattainable he was in real life. He might as well be given that godlike celebrity status for being so... *everything*.

**Arya: What now? Is he one of those undercover celebrities trying to trick ordinary people into thinking they're one of us, too?**

Even if he indeed was some celebrity, she still wouldn't have a clue about who he really was because she rarely spent her time indulging in mainstream media in the first place. The only time she was ever near a television was when their housekeeper Dorota would watch the morning news while she would prepare breakfast for them before going to school. She wouldn't even bother reading the newspapers or the magazines for that matter.

She much preferred foreign independent films and underrated TV shows to mainstream media.

She'd had enough of the mainstream bullshit after all her siblings became popular in their own respective ways. Her eldest brother Robb and older sister Sansa got into modelling a few years ago and then guested in popular TV shows for interviews, paving way for their popularity among the masses.

Her younger brothers, Bran and Rickon, on the other hand, were prodigies in their own talents, with Bran being a music prodigy and one hell of the smartest pupils in his year, while Rickon was undeniably a promising athlete with the makings of a professional soccer player. Even her half-brother Jon couldn't escape the tons of proposals he'd received from designers of high-end brands to model for their fashion lines.

The attention of her family from mainstream media was too much, it was already ridiculous.

At least she gauged the status of her siblings as a means to justify her need to stay away from the limelight because at some point in their popularity, even she was close to losing her own privacy because of some gossip reporters trying to reach out to her just for them to get to one of her siblings.

It only worsened when she herself became the star of the tabloids after being libelously branded as a slut. And being called one was already a scandal in itself within the elite upper class.
The ping from her phone brought her back to the here and now.

_Pandora: Even better, love. ;)_

_Arya: Then what is it? Come on, I'm running out of time. My next class is about to start._

In just about a few seconds, Pandora bombarded her with several links in their conversation thread.

_Pandora: Feast your eyes, love. Oh, and Mycah said that you need to get it on with Gendry. He's absolutely hot. ;)_

_Arya: Oh, please. He's way out of my league. If you've done your research about him, then you should've already seen how much of a god he is. He's way above the highest pedestal in the heavens while I'm just a mere mortal leading a simple, inconsequential life._

_Pandora: Trust us, you both have closer ties than any other "mere mortals" who walk this earth. He's definitely a keeper and we all approve, BTW. ;)_

_Arya: Wait. Eew. So, you mean we're relatives? Because you said "closer ties."_

_Pandora: Even you know it's nothing like that, or else we wouldn't even have this conversation to begin with. Just check the links I gave, will you?_

_Arya: Fine. Thanks for being my jolly sunshine in this gloomy weather._

That last line was meant as sarcasm.

After their online conversation was over, she took the time to click on the links Pandora just gave her. And she couldn't believe what her eyes were seeing.

_Holy mother of god_, she cursed.

It was a legit site of some high-end fashion brand and modeling for their line was a super-hot guy in a neat grey sweater and faded blue jeans, wearing nerdy but equally hot glasses and brown leather combat boots. His black hair was a familiar mess.

It was no other than Gendry.

Actually, Gendry Sebastian Waters _Baratheon._

Her heart stopped. Because it just occurred to her that he's actually a fucking Baratheon.

Which could only mean one thing: he was the son Uncle Robert was looking for these past years.

She also hadn't realized until now that that's the same guy her father had been talking about. The same rugged but kind Gendry at the auto shop who more than helped her with her circumstance after escaping from the cops.

And why had she not remembered any of what her father had been telling her then? Because she really didn't quite listen to everything. Her auto-pilot mode on selective listening would usually activate whenever her father talked about anything that involved Uncle Robert.

And she never really cared. She didn't even know the true reason why Uncle Robert held that party in the first place. Turned out that it was the very party that formally introduced Gendry to the elite society as a Baratheon.
Now that the truth was out, everything just seemed to fall into place: the stark raven hair, those beautiful blue eyes that reminded her so much of Uncle Robert's azure eyes. His massive built, and maybe even his flair for sleeping around with women, what with the hickey he sported on his neck on the night she met him at his party.

She honestly didn't know if she should be devastated for that sliver of possibility of him being like his father for sleeping around, or be exhilarated because she knew how experienced he was in that aspect; therefore, he knew how to please women.

Her mind was telling her to positively focus on the latter as she remembered how he'd pinned her to the wall and devoured her neck like a feast. She hadn't really gotten over it even until now, and she still relished at the sensation of his soft, warm lips on her sensitive spots.

Her heart sped up at the afterthought.

_Fuck._ She cursed.

Clearing her already parched throat, she continued to scroll through the rest of the site and found more photos of Gendry in different outfits and suits.

He might as well be the very vitamins for her almost myopic eyes because he was undoubtedly a fine work of art sculpted by the hands of the most talented artists.

Ridding herself of any more lecherous thoughts inside that dangerous mind of hers, she finally proceeded with clicking on the second link. It was the digital version of a magazine interview with Gendry that was dated more than a year ago, just right after it had been confirmed that he was a trueborn Baratheon.

It contained the most basic details about him from his birthday, his major at the university, and his interests to the most minute pieces of information that made him who he was.

He was four years older than her, she surmised upon seeing the year of his birth. He's also studying in the country's best university under full scholarship (that she was already aware of). And apart from working at the auto shop where she'd found him last weekend, he also worked as a part-time model to help pay for his rent and bills.

She found herself attracted to his independence because it meant that he only relied on himself to get through with life instead of living off his trust fund money. He was a rare find in the sea of entitled rich kids swimming in their parents' fortune. But then again, it was also stated in the interview that he grew up with nothing.

As for his interests, it was already an obvious given that he had a thing for cars considering that he was happy to be working in an auto shop. It was also evidenced by his curated choice of driving a Mitsubishi Evo. But what made her more astounded was the fact that he was also into drag racing. And he didn't just merely do drag races, he also won them most of the time.

And when asked about how he keeps his body fit and in shape, he smirked and simply replied with, _"I fuck a lot."_

She felt all the hairs of her body standing up in attention.

_Holy shit._ Whether it was meant as a jape or the truth was already beyond her.

Lastly, they'd asked him if he was in a relationship. He'd said he wasn't and that he was single after he broke up with an unnamed girlfriend months before that interview. She wondered if that was still
applicable until now, considering the date of the interview. But then again, judging from the way he
acted around her last weekend, it didn't look like he was in a relationship with someone.

She took a moment to breathe deeply as she tried to process all these pieces of information about
him. He really wasn't just some hot random guy from the city.

Pandora was right. They indeed had a common ground, and that was their families.

She looked at the time on her wristwatch. Cursing, she finally rose from the bench and headed back
inside.

As she was trudging down the old marble staircase on her way to her next class, she clicked on the
other links sent by Pandora.

They were Gendry's social media accounts.

Since she obviously could not add him on Facebook without looking like a creepy stalker, she
instead went through his Instagram account since his profile was set as public.

She scrolled through his pictures and noticed that he barely had any pictures of himself, maybe
except for one or two shots showing only half of his face while taking a picture of his background.
His profile wasn't pretentious like most of the Instagram accounts she'd seen where the pictures were
always perfect, curated and filtered. She doubted if he even knew how to use filters for his photos
because they always looked so raw, so real. And she honestly liked that about him.

His photos were just random, really. From simple shots of his work space at the auto shop, to
pictures of the sunrise from what she assumed was the balcony of his apartment. There were also
several pictures of HP either putting icing on a delicious-looking cake or making funny faces at the
camera. There was also a picture of what looked like a page from a notebook with mathematical
formulas and equations in his neat handwriting with the caption: My idea of fun #Calculus.

Looking at these pictures, she could tell that he was just a simple guy, but despite the simplicity of his
Instagram profile, he still garnered around 80 thousand plus followers, mostly from the young female
population. Just a few thousand shy of Jon's Instagram followers.

What's more interesting was the fact that he only had less than a hundred photos on his profile.

She smiled despite herself. It was too impossible not to have a crush on this guy.

The bell finally rang when she was only a few meters away from the classroom of her next class. Before she could put her phone back inside her pockets, she sent a message in their group
conversation:

Arya: I never realized that my friends are also detectives now…

Arya: And I'm not going to question as to how you guys found out about him because you clearly
have an A in channeling your inner Watson and Sherlock, but I'm not really so sure why you're still
giving me all this information about how great a guy he is.

Arya: Because as you all can see from his interview to his amazing profile, he's too impossible.
That's the problem.

He's just too everything, Arya thought sadly.

Arya: But either way, thanks for distracting me from the bleakness that is this doomsday weather.
That was so sweet of you. ;) Came her last message. She set her phone to silent mode before finally tucking it inside her pocket.

Being grateful to her friends for extending such tremendous effort was never an issue for her, in fact, she greatly appreciated the little gestures they'd done. It's just that, the more she knew about who Gendry was, the more she thought about him every single second, and the more she was beginning to think that he was more than just a fragment of her weekend memories.

He was becoming a constant inside her head, even at the start of whatever kind of friendship they were going to build. And she couldn't really avoid inevitably meeting him again because their families would always have get-togethers, especially now that he was officially introduced as a Baratheon. She knew he'd always be present.

Aside from the possibility of seeing Gendry Baratheon again was the threat of him telling her off to her family about her weekend habits. That is, if he'd be a complete asshole, and Arya prayed to the non-existent gods that he wasn't one.

Sighing in resignation, Arya Stark finally admitted to herself begrudgingly how in deep shit she was going to be.

*****

Gendry

December

Eight Years Ago

The gate to the Baratheon estate immediately opened for him the moment he identified himself. He carefully drove his car along the long driveway leading to the huge parking space before finally turning the engine off.

Looking at his reflection on the rearview mirror, he tried to rake the stray strands falling over his eyes back to his brushed-up hair, as well as making sure that he didn't miss a spot on his jaw after he had shaved off his five o'clock shadow earlier that day.

His hands then found their way to the striped silk tie hanging loosely around his neck, making sure to tighten it, reminding himself internally not to untangle it completely or else it would be a struggle for him to tie it back. He had the designer's assistant the other day do the tying and requested him to leave it that way.

Grabbing the tailored black suit that was draped over the passenger seat, he finally got off his car. He carefully wore it over his white button-down shirt as he made his way toward the estate's front door as if he was some protagonist in a B-rated action movie walking in slow motion sans the cigarette and the dramatic explosives in the background.
God, he looked fucking ridiculous in fancy clothes. He looked like a mafia underboss ready to take the role as the new boss in his suit.

*Don Corleone would be so fucking proud,* he thought sardonically.

He didn't really have a choice in this matter because he wasn't just attending the usual family dinner. Tonight, they would be joined by the Starks in their family affair. They'd been doing it for years now, but it was just Gendry's second time attending this gathering. He really had no reason not to join them, especially when it had already been established formally that he was part of the Baratheon family.

It was his Uncle Renly who opened the front door for him. He gave Gendry a warm hug before leading him to the enormous sitting room where the rest of his family were waiting for their guests. They were all dressed in their formal clothes. His half-sister Myrcella looked stunningly dainty while Tom looked proper for someone who loved to skate and play soccer. He greeted them first with a genuine smile before addressing his step mother and Joffrey civilly.

His father clapped him on the back, handing him a glass of expensive whiskey and nodding in approval at his designer ensemble. It had to have cost thousands because it was made by Renly's famous designer who had the suit delivered to his penthouse apartment yesterday.

Gendry was already engaged in a casual conversation with his father about how he had managed to maintain his vintage car when one of the young house helpers notified them of their guests' arrival. As if on cue, the rest of his family members in the sitting room stood up in anticipation, his step mother walking toward his father to link her arm with his as she held her head high like a queen. Gendry didn't wait for his step mother to stare him down with her cold eyes and instead made the first move to slowly walk behind where the heads of their family were standing.

He stood beside Myrcella who looked up at him and flashed him with her widest smile.

"You're looking good tonight." She half-whispered beside him appreciatively.

"Not as good as you, though." He shot back playfully, his voice also hushed.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. Have you seen the way our maids would blush furiously whenever you're around?" She teased, draping her arms around his elbow as she drew closer. "Take Candace for example. She was stuttering earlier when she informed us the guests have arrived. And she never stutters around us, Gendry." Myrcella continued matter-of-factly. "I even overheard one of them in the kitchens one time. They were hoping you'd come live with us because they'd get to see you every day. You practically have admirers everywhere, I tell you. Even at my school. They keep asking me about my super-hot older brother. And they're not even talking about Joff."

At this, Gendry just shook his head, controlling himself from laughing. "Whatever you say, little sis. But I'm flattered to hear that from you."

She shrugged casually. "I'm just telling the truth, you know. Anyway, are you still dating that hot model from Dorne that I met at your apartment two weeks ago? Was that a serious thing between you two?"

He shook his head. "No. You know for a fact that it was just a fling. It's nothing serious, Cella."

Apart from Renly, Myrcella was the only one from his family who knew how much of a serial dater he was. Gendry suspected his father also knew that his son was only doing what most guys his age was doing by default. As for Gendry, he'd been mindlessly dating other girls if only to keep himself
from thinking about that one girl he'd only known for a moment but left quite a remarkable impression on him.

Arry had been a constant in his thoughts after he had saved her from the cops more than a month ago. And he couldn't stop thinking about how soft her skin was as he held her to him and pinned her to the wall. He also couldn't stop thinking about her intoxicating vanilla scent as he trailed his nose along her neck, playing his part well in their charade to keep the cops from suspecting her.

He'd been berating himself for pining over a high school girl. But even HP knew that she was already mature for her age considering the way she'd acted around them.

Myrcella's grip on his arm broke him from this train of thoughts as she whispered, "Here they come." Straightening herself, Myrcella added, "I hope Arya is around this time. You ought to meet her by now, Gendry. She's really cool."

Gendry hadn't really met the other Stark sibling yet because she wasn't always around during the introductions. Bran, Rickon and Sansa, he'd already met. They were as cool as their older brothers, although Sansa could still be a little intimidating sometimes because of her famous socialite status. She may be incredibly beautiful, but she wasn't really Gendry's type.

He was yet to figure out the other Stark sister and he really had no clue who she was because she was unfortunately out with the flu the first time he attended their joint family dinner.

Their families warmly greeted each other, with Gendry turning to Robb, Jon and Theon to give them each a brotherly hug.

"How's it going, you guys?" Jon greeted Gendry and Myrcella, Jon's hand clapping his back before smiling at Myrcella.

"It's all good, mate. Glad you could make it tonight." Gendry greeted back.

"Hi, Jon! Is Arya already around this time?" Myrcella asked rather excitedly before idly scanning the enormous sitting room for a hint of her presence.

Gendry did the same out of sheer curiosity and before anyone else could utter another word, he saw a familiar form emerging from the foyer, walking slowly but obliviously as her eyes were focused on the phone she was holding.

The familiar sight of her knocked the breath out of him.

Holy seven hells. He cursed.

It was Arry.

"Speaking of the devil." Jon muttered comically before beckoning for her to come over.

Tucking the phone behind her back, she approached them tentatively, her eyes pointedly scowling at Jon. She was wearing a white silk button down blouse and a nude pleated knee-length skirt, her brown hair was straight and untied as it fell in cascades on her back. Instead of wearing heels, she was wearing flat pointed shoes.

It was a big contrast to the sexy outfit she was wearing when she hid herself at the car shop.

"Arry?" Gendry asked in complete shock. "Wait, you're Arya?"
Now it finally made sense: how the description of her brothers fit so well to Arry's description. But Gendry had never thought of Arry and Arya as one person. Because he usually didn't think of his potential prospects alongside the thought of his family. It never worked out for him.

One time he introduced this girl he dated for two weeks to his uncle and father and it only turned out for the worst when she suddenly became clingy, paranoid and jealous. Apparently, she didn't want to break up with him because she liked the feeling of dating an eligible Baratheon bachelor, which only boosted her shallow self-esteem to a million times. She'd even gone as far as boasting their relationship in social media just so that she could gain more popularity, when in truth, she only wanted him for his money and the fame apart from the sex.

After that, he stopped introducing his dates to his family.

Everyone exchanged shocked expressions before they all turned their eyes on the both of them.

"Gendry." She greeted stoically. They held each other's gazes silently and it irked him at some point that he couldn't even read her expression at that moment. She was just so unpredictable.

Gendry's father looked at him in surprise. "You already know each other?" He asked.

Gendry nodded. "Yeah. We met at the—"

"We met at Tiffany's when I was studying for a long exam. He was kind enough to share his table with me. The café was packed with students at that time." Arya suddenly cut him off with a smooth lie, narrowing her eyes at him to indicate that he needed to keep his mouth shut.

She obviously didn't want her whole family to know that she'd been sneaking out right under their noses.

"Yes, that's right. At Tiffany's. That place is always loaded." He spoke as he covered for her. But he also needed to let her see that he was better at taunting. "She's really a diligent student, you see. Always studying and making sure to pass all of her subjects with flying colors. I bet she doesn't even know how to party and have fun." A wicked smirk was playing on his lips as he looked straight into her stormy eyes, his very own glinting as if to challenge her.

He couldn't not notice the way her eyes were shooting daggers at him murderously as if to tell him to shut the fuck up.

Before she could fire back a response, his father finally said, "That's good to know then. I've never expected less of Arya here. She's always been the intelligent one." Clapping his hands as if to switch the subject, he then announced, "Alright. Now that my son here is finally acquainted with our brilliant Arya, let's have dinner. I'm famished."

It was as if everyone was seated strategically at the dinner table.

As for Gendry, he made sure that he was seated right across Arya so that he could continue to steal furtive glances at her direction. He couldn't really help it. Getting this rare chance to see her again was just too good to be true. And out of all the plot twists that this story could offer, their close family ties with the Starks was one that he wasn't really expecting. A bonus twist would be the known fact that his father's beloved deceased fiancé was actually Arya's aunt.

No wonder she was her aunt's spitting image. That wild northern beauty indeed ran in their blood. And apparently, that unexplained attraction toward Stark women was also strong in the Baratheon blood.
"You two didn't really have your first meeting the café, did you?" Jon suddenly asked him in a low voice as an introductory to what was about to be their conversation for that evening. Dessert had just been served and they were all in engaged in their own private conversations.

His father was now laughing with the Stark patriarch at the head of the table while his step-mother was casually chatting with Arya's mother and Joff. Robb, Theon, Tom and the younger Stark boys were engaged in their own topic while Myrcella was busy catching up with Arya and Sansa.

Jon, who happened to be seated right beside Gendry poured him another glass of whiskey.

"I don't really know what you're talking about, mate." Gendry lied, if only to save Arya's ass. But Jon only snorted in disbelief.

"Oh, come on, mate. I know my sister better. You think I don't know what she's been up to on weekends?" He said knowingly.

Sighing in resignation, he finally admitted, "Fine. I didn't meet her at Tiffany's. She said she was at this party when the cops busted it and then she hid at the auto shop where I was working. Sort of saved her ass and the rest is history. Did she tell you about that?" For some reason he wished to every benevolent higher being in the heavens that Arya didn't really tell Jon all the details of their encounter inside the auto shop, especially not the part where his face was buried under her neck and savoring her heavenly scent.

Being her older brother Jon would no doubt be furious to hear about his younger sister being almost defiled by the likes of Gendry who "liked to fuck a lot." Especially if he was really sort of lusting over her.

Jon took a sip from his glass before he responded, "Yeah. I never thanked you for that, mate. Don't get me wrong. My sister's really smart but she can be a little careless sometimes. She's always curious and she always wants to try out new things, which can sometimes give me a coronary, do you know what I mean?"

Thinking of his younger half-sister Myrcella on Arya's shoes, he could definitely feel for Jon. "I do know what you mean, mate. You may not share the same mum but she's still your sister, nonetheless. I'd have a coronary too for Cella if she's the one exploring new things like that."

At this, they both ended up laughing and shaking their heads.

"To younger sisters giving us coronaries, then." Jon said in a mock toast.

At some point after their dinner was officially over, Gendry noticed Arya excusing herself while the rest were still busy chitchatting. His eyes followed her until she disappeared beyond the hedges outside the balcony of the dining room that led to the enormous gardens of his father's estate.

He allowed a few minutes to pass before extricating himself from the dining hall and following after her in the gardens.

He found her sitting on the marble bench in the middle of the maze-like garden, her eyes absent-mindedly staring at the huge water fountain in the center. He couldn't help but notice how her face was beautifully illuminated by the glowing white lights emanating from the adorned bushes.

"It's an unexpected twist, don't you think? To be seeing each other again, here of all places, only to find out that there's actually more to being just Arry or just Gendry." He started, placing his hands inside his pockets as he sauntered toward the bench where she was seated.
"Nice to see you too, Baratheon." Came her clipped response as she finally met his eyes. There was obviously something like annoyance or disappointment in her tone when she uttered his last name.

He couldn't help but smile at her current disposition. Maybe because they were treading on the same waters and like her, he'd also been avoiding being associated with his influential family name.

Noticing the way she subtly scooted to give space for him, he sat beside her casually as if they were two old friends meeting up on a regular day.

"Woke up on the wrong side of the bed, didn't we, Stark? You seem awfully moody tonight. Thought you'd be delighted to see me." He told her in feigned smugness.

She snorted, rolling her eyes. "Still so full of yourself, I see."

He jerked his head back in a hearty laugh.

"You never told me you are Uncle Robert's son."

"It's that what's been bothering you?"

Arya huffed a frustrated sigh. "You could've given me a hint when I met you at your party though and saved me from my petty humiliation for attending an event I didn't even have a clue of."

"But then again, you seem like the kind who doesn't give a shit, so why bother?" Gendry shrugged nonchalantly.

"I don't know. Maybe because we've been bumping into each other in rather unexpected places?"

"But does it really matter who I am?"

She nodded in the slightest manner. "In some way, yes. But not so much as you being a Baratheon as the fact that our families are actually close. I guess I never really realized how small this world is and you of all people are one to see my human follies."

"I'd be more surprised if you were a perfect human being, which for one is non-existent, so… I don't see why you should be worried about your inadequacies. Are you concerned that I might rat you to your parents just because our families are close?"

She pulled away from his intense gaze. Her silence indicating an obvious yes to his question.

"Look, I'm more of a misfit in this family than anything else. And I'm not the type who likes to meddle with other people's affairs, so you shouldn't really have to worry about me telling you off to your parents."

Arya finally heaved a sigh of relief. "Sorry, it's just that, aside from the fact that I hate people treating me differently once they realize that I'm a Stark, I'm also tired of living up to society's expectations. But I still have to keep up with this lady-like façade to avoid being scrutinized under their microscopic lenses. If you know what I mean." She explained. "'You have to be a proper little lady, Arya, or else you wouldn't be able to find a suitable husband. A lady does not dress like a slut. A lady should be refined with her words and manners. A lady does not party like a wild animal… blah blah blah…'" She added, mock-mimicking the voice of a strict old spinster.

He continued to look at her, if anything, he sympathized with what she was feeling. "Then don't be a proper lady. Just be yourself."
She shook her head despondently. "I can't. Not in front of the people in our families' circle. I had to keep up with this façade just until I get through with my last year in high school."

Smiling to himself, he finally nodded in kind understanding. "Then your secret's safe with me." He assured her. She met his gaze again, her eyes shining in earnest.

"Really?" The incredulity in her tone told him how hard it was for her to trust others. And that itself challenged him even more.

Beaming confidently, he gave her a short nod. "I mean it, Arya."

"I can't thank you enough, Gendry."

"You don't have to. I'm even glad to have found a kindred spirit in the midst of this pretentious affair. I also hate family gatherings like this, you know, just because it will only remind me how much of an outsider I really am."

"Guess that makes two of us. As you can see, I'm the odd one out."

"Then I'm glad to have met the oddball of the Stark family." He winked.

She was smiling genuinely now and he couldn't begin to explain how much of an accomplishment it was for him to have made her smile like that because he was aware from the start how hard it was to earn her smiles.

This could be the start of something new for them. Of something like genuine friendship other than the bond he'd formed with HP. Never mind that he wouldn't get to consider her as one of his flings or casual hookups, no matter how much he pined for her.

No, she never even belonged to that category, anyway. Not Arya Stark.

She was different. She was special.

There's just something about her that was addicting, and in that moment, Gendry realized that she wasn't even considered an option to begin with. She was a priority.

Now that he was closer to getting to know her better, he knew that he couldn't just destroy the kind of friendship they were about to build by compartmentalizing her into one of those girls. This relationship would be a rarity for him because this one, he knew, was going to be a constant.

She was going to be a constant in his life. He'd had a strong feeling right from the start.

Even if it meant having to be just her platonic friend. He was willing to accept that kind of arrangement because Arya Stark wasn't going to be just a stop along the way, instead, she was going to be a destination.

And he had to work hard for it.

He had to be her friend because he knew that it was all going to be worth it.

She was going to be worth it.
Arya

Present day

She woke up just a few minutes short of her alarm setting off. Just right when she was already at the climax of her sleep, dreaming about—

She groaned. *Not that dream again!*

Arya breathed an exasperated sigh, closing her eyes as if doing so could wash away the remnants of that unwelcome dream. They'd only become more vivid the longer she stayed in King's Landing.

Only three days had passed since she came back and the years in Braavos already felt like a blur.

Arya wished that she wouldn't have to remain for another month. There was nothing left for her here. Sure, she had her family, but she could no longer consider this place her real home.

Not when it was already too much for her heart to take.

Not when her wounds were supposedly almost healed.

She didn't really have any reason to stay, maybe except for fact that she was needed by Uncle Robert for the proposed project.

*Liar. Her subconscious began to hiss. You are a terrible little liar, Arya Stark. That sliver of hope in the depths of your heart is what keeps you going.*

She tried to damper the scorching tongues of her subconscious but it was only getting louder. *You still love him. You have always loved him. And not even the distance can hide what you are truly feeling.*

Her eyes clouded with that sudden surge of emotion, until she finally willed herself to shut those feelings off.

With final resolve, she cancelled her alarm before it could blast all the way down to the kitchen and finally rose from the bed, mumbling a string of colorful expletives in the process. She badly wanted to sleep all throughout the day as she was still adjusting to the time difference in King’s Landing, but she knew too well that she couldn’t just cancel what was already planned. Uncle Robert was already expecting her to join the meeting that morning for the project.
Her weary eyes were still half-closed as she reluctantly paced her way toward the bathroom to prepare. It only took her a few minutes to shower and change into presentable clothes but putting on her contacts was what consumed most of her time. She honestly wasn't used to wearing them, not when she'd been opting glasses back in Braavos. But since her family was still oblivious to her visual condition, she had to make do with clear contacts for the rest of the day. And with the rate of how much her mother would worry for her children, despite them being adults already, Arya decided to keep her mouth shut about her condition.

When she got to the kitchen, she found Jon and Ygritte consuming the last dregs of their morning meal.

"There's my favorite little sister." Jon said as his way of greeting her, his eyes almost disappearing from smiling too widely.

She found her way toward the kitchen counter, hiding her yawn as she slipped beside Ygritte's seat. Ygritte then handed her a cup of her favorite hot chocolate with marshmallows.

"Here. We saved some for you because we know that this has always been your morning favorite." She winked.

"Thanks." Arya said, smiling appreciatively. There was indeed nothing like a cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows in the morning with her favorite brother and his equally awesome girlfriend. She just loved being around happy couples because their joy was contagious.

"You're up early. And dressed like a proper little lady. Is the meeting with Uncle Robert today already?" Jon asked.

She nodded in response, stifling another yawn.

"Want me to drive you there?" Her brother offered. The fact that he'd clearly anticipated that she no longer had a driver's license for King's Landing was beyond astounding. At least she wouldn't have to risk crashing his car if she borrowed it sans driver's license and drove it without her second pair of eyes.

"Yeah, if you don't have anything else to do this morning, then you can drop me off Uncle Robert's office building." Arya replied.

"Alright. Best you hurry up then, or we'd be stuck in the bloody rush hour traffic."

She slouched and groaned. The terrible traffic was also one of the reasons why she didn't want to stay in the capital. The congested condition of the city always precipitated her worst migraines. And the thought of being stuck in one today already made her feel nauseated.

*****

As she arrived at Baratheon Tower clad in her office attire and heels, a snappy blonde woman greeted her at the help desk.

"Hi, good morning! How may I be of assistance?" The name plate on her blazer indicated that her name was Stacy. Such a lovely name for a pretty face that instantly reminded her so much of Gendry's preferences for hooking up with blonde females. Arya wondered if all the receptionists in
Uncle Robert's building were as pretty and as sexy as her, and if Gendry had ever slept with any of them at some point.

*There you go again. Your mind's drifting off to thoughts of him again.* She berated herself.

"Hi, I'm here for the conference with Mr. Baratheon at 9am." Came her response, smiling sheepishly.

Stacy smiled back at her with confidence, flashing her pearly-whites. "Oh, yes. The meeting's starting in thirty minutes. You're just right on time. May I have your name and your ID please? I will log your information here in our guest list and notify Mr. Baratheon's receptionist of your arrival."

Arya fumbled for her ID inside her bag and handed it to her. "Here's my ID and my name is Arya Stark." She replied.

Stacy flashed a look of recognition at the mention of Arya's name as she continued to give her a good-natured smile. "It's nice to see you, Ms. Stark." Stacy said, typing her name on the computer before handing Arya back her ID. "The meeting will be held at the 40th floor just right next to Mr. Baratheon's office. I already informed the floor receptionist to expect for you and she will be assisting you from there on." Stacy instructed.

Arya took note of the floor as she put her ID back in her bag. She wondered when her father's best friend moved his office to another floor. As far as she recalled, Uncle Robert's office had always been on the 45th floor.

"Thank you so much for your kind assistance, Ms. Stacy. It's also a pleasure to meet you." Arya said gratefully.

"You are most welcome, Miss Stark."

She saw her reflection in the mirrors inside the elevator as she made her way to the 40th floor. It was the first time that day that she had the chance to have a closer inspection of herself. At least she was presentable and decent in the eyes of the people. She was wearing a semi-oversized black blazer over a slightly loose white satin camisole with a cute lace design. Her tight black stretchable pants showcased the curves she thought she never had. The black scar-pin heels she was wearing made her look a few inches taller. Her wavy hair was swept in a low chignon bun. To complete her look, she put on a minimal bronzed day makeup.

The elevator finally stopped on the 40th floor and Arya was greeted by another beautiful receptionist named Andrea, with hair as red as Ygritte's.

She led Arya to a spacious room filled with comfortable-looking office chairs surrounding an elegant glass table. Since there was no one inside yet, Arya had the choice to be seated farthest from the front. She already felt intimidated as it was considering her lack of professional experience in her field, how much more if the rest of Uncle Robert's seasoned team would arrive for the meeting.

"Would you like some refreshments while waiting, Miss Stark? We have some fresh lemon juice, coffee or your favorite green tea." Andrea offered. Arya couldn't help but notice how Andrea gave her that knowing smile just like Stacy did. How she even knew she liked green tea was already beyond her.

Arya blinked her surprise away as she finally replied, "I'll have some fresh lemon juice, please. Thank you." There. She'd given her that option as if she had no idea what Andrea was implying, and just so that she wouldn't sound so predictable.

Her lemon juice arrived in less than five minutes. Since she was too nervous to even listen to
music, she just used the remaining time to appreciate the view outside the glass windows. It was still as stunning as how she remembered it from years before. Uncle Robert's building was taller than the other surrounding buildings so it had the splendid overlooking view of the entire city.

As she took a deep breath and closed her eyes, she suddenly found her thoughts drifting back to her first encounter with Gendry following her arrival at the luncheon party three days ago. Just imagining him inside her room, standing before her with that hungry look in his scathing blue eyes, with his scent awakening her senses, made her forget how to breathe.

Because seeing him after all these years made her realize that he was still the same handsome Gendry she'd learned to love and adore. And yet, he was also the same Gendry who broke her heart into a billion pieces.

*Shit. You cannot think of him right now, Arya Stark. Not now when a bloody meeting with his father is about to start.* She chided herself once again.

But sometimes, she couldn't help the unfiltered thoughts that went through her head.

She bit her lip harder as if it could stop her thoughts about him, but doing so only made it worse. Biting her lip only made her remember how much he ravaged hers and how his tongue explored the wonders of her mouth as he torridly kissed her the day before he completely broke her heart.

A blush crept through her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered open, taking all the air she could breathe in, if only to drown in it just to rid herself of his lips and his eyes, and everything about him that consumed her.

A few more minutes had passed when people were already starting to fill the conference room.

Noting how most of them already looked so mature and experienced to her, she couldn't help but feel so little that even what's left of her depleted confidence was slowly slipping away. She'd gotten to the point where she was now beginning to question why she ever took this opportunity in the first place.

She'd been silently observing them as they each took their seats that she didn't immediately notice the person sitting next to hers.

"This seat taken, Miss?" Asked a guy wearing a fine grey suit.

He looked a bit older than her but still younger than the rest, nonetheless.

She blinked and gave him a tentative smile before replying, "No."

"You don't mind if I sit beside you during the meeting, then?" He asked, flashing her his gorgeous smile at which she felt herself flustered. Because he was cute. A cute nerd, actually. He was wearing those thick black-rimmed glasses that screamed gamer slash book nerd, just like the one she had. And despite those glasses, the green in his eyes still stood out.

"No, not at all." Came her response, making sure not to sound too eager.

He looked a bit older than her but still younger than the rest, nonetheless.

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"You don't mind if I sit beside you during the meeting, then?" He asked, flashing her his gorgeous smile at which she felt herself flustered. Because he was cute. A cute nerd, actually. He was wearing those thick black-rimmed glasses that screamed gamer slash book nerd, just like the one she had. And despite those glasses, the green in his eyes still stood out.

"No, not at all." Came her response, making sure not to sound too eager.

He had a sexy pushed-back light brown hair that hinted his rugged undertones beneath that suit, and he had a charming smile that could sweep any girl off her feet.

He was a combination of smart and sexy, and she liked the way he carried himself.

At least the meeting wouldn't be as boring as she expected because Sexy Nerd here was a very
He drew his chair closer to hers as he extended a hand, "I'm Vincent, by the way."

"Arya." She took his hand and noticed how soft it was.

"A pleasure to meet you." He beamed before Arya pulled her hand abruptly. "So, are you also one of the architects in this project?"

"Interior designer, actually." She supplied.

He flashed another mesmerizing smile. "Cool. I'm looking forward to working with you, then." He winked.

As she and Vince were getting to know each other, she suddenly heard voices just outside the conference room. One of those voices sounded quite familiar and Arya knew by heart that it didn't belong to Uncle Robert, nor did the shape of the silhouette she was seeing. The figures were walking along the hallway and nowhere could she see the fat figure of her father's best friend from the translucent glass walls. Instead, she couldn't help but notice a tall, massive figure walking with the rest.

Her eyes stopped at the entrance as two of those figures, which she suspected were female, headed to the opposite direction, away from the conference room.

The door finally flung open to reveal a guy wearing a pristine black suit. The effect of his beard, man-bun and searing blue eyes all made him instantly breathtaking and attractive to Arya. Because he looked just like—wait...

Her heart dropped to the floor the moment she registered who it was.

Holy shit.

"Good morning, Mr. Baratheon." One of the people inside the room greeted.

Everyone fell silent as he sauntered toward the front with raw confidence while they all gave him the kind of respect he deserved.

"Good morning, everyone." He greeted back, his silky dark voice stirring something deep inside her core. "Alright, as you are all already aware by now, my father tasked me to be the head of this particular project, so I will all be working with you for months until everything has been accomplished..."

The rest of his words drowned out in the background as her booming heartbeat overpowered any other sound in her surroundings.

This cannot be happening, she told herself.

No one ever told her that it would be the other Mr. Baratheon who'd be leading this project. Everyone else was telling her Uncle Robert this and Uncle Robert that. Why did no one set her expectations that it would be him of all people who'd be spearheading this project?

Because had she known this was the case, she could have declined this project altogether and went on with living a peaceful life back in Braavos.

She felt utterly infuriated.
It was too impossible to work with him. She could never work with him. She couldn't even bear being in the same room with him, especially when she could feel him looking at her as he gave the floor to someone else to continue the discussion.

His blue eyes spoke volumes of what he couldn't say to her in actual words and he'd never taken his eyes off her even after he took his seat.

Since she refused to meet his gaze, she found herself suddenly interested in the random doodle she was scribbling on her pocket notebook, pretending to take down notes while listening to the person speaking up front. Looking back at him would only spark the fury that was building in her system and she didn't want to unleash her wrath in front of everyone else.

As the meeting progressed with her eyes glued only to the random drawing she was sketching, she suddenly felt a warm, consoling hand on the small of her back. The contact startled her before Vincent's soothing whisper tickled her ear, "Hey, you look tense. Are you alright?" He asked, concern etched on his face.

As if she'd been caught doing something illegal, she flashed a wide smile and looked back at him. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little nervous about this project, is all, seeing that this is going to be my first one." She found the need to explain in order to back up the partial lie that had just slipped from her lips.

She was truly nervous about this project, alright, but at that moment, the very reason for her current tension was just sitting right across the wide glass table, with his elbow propped on the arm rest and his fingers tentatively brushing his lips as if in contemplation, when in fact, he was just staring at her like he wanted to devour her.

"You'll do just fine, I promise you. We'll be working on this project together, anyway, so you really have nothing to worry about." He winked.

"Thanks. Yeah, that sounds good." She replied.

An hour and a half had passed and their meeting finally ended, thankfully, with Arya having consumed two whole pages of her notebook in doodles.

She and Vincent were the last ones to leave the conference room after Arya intentionally stalled their departure to avoid meeting Gendry anywhere outside. She'd been expecting him to be long gone along with the other engineers and architects of the project because she noticed him leaving the room first with them. But it seemed like Gendry was able to read her move because he was already strategically standing a few meters away from the elevators, pretending to be attentive to one of the engineers talking to him as she and Vince were headed in the same direction.

His hands were inside his pockets and he stood there authoritatively. Like a fucking boss.

The moment he saw her emerge from the hallway with Vincent, he immediately excused himself and made his way toward them casually, smiling as if everything wasn't already awkward between her and him.

"Griffins." Gendry greeted Vincent first, giving him a light brotherly pat on the back before facing her, a taunting smile replacing his innocent one. "I see you've already met my best friend Arya Stark here."

Before Arya could even react, Gendry's arms wrapped around her shoulders protectively. But with the way that he was drawing her closer to his chest, it looked like he was showing more than just
protectiveness.

He was plainly being possessive.

It was as if she could feel that silent icy rage vibrating off him with the way he was smiling at them. She knew that kind of smile so well now. It was the smile he wore whenever he was jealous.

So her interaction with Vincent really did affect him. But why? It's not like he still gave a shit about her. It was clear as day years ago that he'd chosen someone else over her.

Vincent looked at Arya in genuine surprise, "Wow, I didn't know you're best friends with Gendry here."

Arya was about to shoot a barbed retort when Gendry cut her off. "Yeah, she's still sort of trying to get the hang around King's Landing again, especially with me. It's been a while since we've seen each other because she just came from Braavos after five long years." There was definitely a certain bite to his response.

"Wow, so you've had your university studies there?" Asked Vincent.

"Yeah…" Arya replied sheepishly, trying her best not to get affected by Gendry's familiar warmth.

"That's good to know, then. I heard their universities produce the most excellent students." Vincent remarked.

Gendry's arm around her only tightened. "Yeah, she's excellent, indeed." He was looking at her when he said it. Whether he'd meant it as sarcasm or not was beyond her.

Arya rolled her eyes. "Shut up, Gendry." She muttered, glaring at him.

His feral smile only grew wider.

"Do you mind if I borrow my best friend today? We still have a lot of catching up to do." Came Gendry's request. Which was actually a direct translation of: Fuck off and stay away from her. Forever.

"Actually, Vincent and I were about to have lunch together, Gendry." Arya stated, feigning a casual tone as she removed herself from his long, rippling arm.

"We are?" Vincent looked at her innocently, raising an eyebrow in slight confusion. The idiot even looked happy, for god's sake, but he still blew her cover either way.

"Well, I was about to ask you." She rolled her eyes again in exasperation. Anything to get rid of stupid Gendry and his stupid, stupid gorgeous smile and searing azure eyes. And his stupid everything.

"That's fine, Arya. We can have lunch together next time. Wouldn't want you to miss catching up with Gendry here." Said Vincent conspiratoringly. If anything, it even looked like he and Gendry were already acquainted before.

"How did you guys know each other, by the way?" Arya asked Vincent, her thumb pointing at Gendry over her shoulder.

"Graduate school." Was Vincent's only reply, his charming smile never fading.

Arya turned to Gendry with a flash of disbelief, probably because knowing him, he wasn't the type
who'd go to graduate school no matter how smart he was. "You went to graduate school?"

It was Vincent who gave a response to her question. "See, that's what I mean, Arya. You really need
to catch up with your best friend here."

"Thank you, man." Gendry told him in mock gratitude before smiling triumphantly at her.

As soon as Vincent left for the elevators, Gendry didn't waste time in literally dragging her toward
his office.

"Come on, I want to show you something." He'd told her.

Since she refused to go with him at first, he had to gently tug her arm and hold her hand as if it was
the most natural thing in the world. She couldn't do anything but follow his lead because she
obviously couldn't fight his ungodly strength.

Arya first thought that he was dragging her toward his office, until she found a drafting table and
some drawing materials inside the room near the glass windows.

"What's this?" Was all she could manage to ask.

"Your office." He plainly stated, his eyes never leaving hers as he gauged for her reaction.

Her mouth was partially opened as her eyes traveled around the room in awe. She couldn't really
deny the temptation that came with the abundance of these art materials right before her very eyes. It
was as though she was being lured to accept this grand gesture and—

No. It's a trap. She said to herself with resolve.

This is obviously a trap.

Shaking her head as if to break free from the hypothetical spell cast onto her, she glared at him and
crossed her arms.

"There's no need. I already have a place where I can work on my designs." She told him stubbornly.
It was partially true. She’d be staying in Jon’s apartment for a week or so, but after that, she’d have
to find a smaller, temporary place of her own while she was staying in King’s Landing as she didn’t
want to invade Jon and Ygritte’s privacy in their own apartment.

She also didn’t want to stay with her parents because she realized that she’d never be able to get
along with her mother if she would live under their roof, not after all that had happened between
them in the past. They may have resolved their conflict altogether, but that was just that. She realized
that in order for her to keep that civil peace, she’d have to avoid living in one space with her.

Gendry raised an incredulous eyebrow as he slowly sauntered toward her.

"Oh yeah? Because considering that you came all the way from Braavos, it's pretty much obvious
that you still do not have a place to do your work." His deep voice was almost raspy. Hypnotizing
even, to the point where she found herself moving backwards just to keep a safe distance from him.

Dangerous territory. She had to remind herself.

But nevertheless, she continued to hold his intense gaze as if to solidify the lie she was weaving.

"Yeah, really. I'm not a charity case. I am used to working in all kinds of conditions, regardless if I
have an office or not. There's no need for all these…” Her eyes scanned the room once again before
making their way back to him. "…gestures."

He made another step forward, which meant another step backward for her.

"I never said you were a charity case. I was just trying to tell you that you ought to do your job well because we cannot afford to fuck this up. And I'm expecting a lot from you. We all are, actually. And what better way to give you that kind of motivation than to give you everything you need."

"Which is another way of saying that I really don't have a fucking choice, isn't it?"

He finally nodded, a faint knowing smile playing on the corner of his lips. "You know that I expect nothing less."

Her back had hit the hard wall until there was literally no way for her to move further as he continued to inch closer to her intimate space. If there was one thing to avoid losing in this silent battle, that was to never look away from his stare. No matter what.

"This is ridiculous." She snorted. But deep inside, her heart was already hammering inside her chest, beating a silent plea to be set free from the intensity of his smoldering eyes.

"Is it?" He challenged her, the blueness from his irises muted as they turned darker with every second.

"Tell me, is that really the reason why you're offering up this entire office for me?" Arya questioned brazenly, badly wanting to know his true intentions. There was really no reason for them to beat around the bush even if she hated having to confront him about this.

Drawing a little bit closer, his eyes transformed into two slits. "Whatever are you talking about?" His pretense was almost believable but she knew better.

"You know what this is all about." She stressed out. "There's clearly a reason why I wasn't told that it will be you I'll be working with, and not your father."

He shrugged nonchalantly.

"I'm just trying to make your work here easier, Arya, so I'm offering this free space beside my office for you to do your thing." His excuse might have been an obvious lie but she couldn't help but notice the flicker of desire from his eyes and the way that they subtly darted back and forth to her lips.

His denial was only making this entire situation even more difficult. It was irritating her.

She gave out a short humorless laugh.

"Beside your office, huh? Why? So that we can get all chummy with each other all over again? Is that it?"

This time, there was nothing but honesty in those eyes. "Truthfully? Yes. Why wouldn't I? You're still my best friend after all." He stated matter-of-factly.

No… she said to herself. Not anymore.

With final resolve in her tone, she finally said, "Let's get things straight, Baratheon… If you want me to give my all for this project, then I'll do it. Ungrudgingly. But only for that purpose, and only because your father was kind enough to consider me, and nothing more. So don't expect me to be all friendly and familiar toward you right in front of everyone because that's not what I'm here for."
She took a huge intake of air and heaved it all out in resignation.

"I didn't come back for you!" She seethed.

Her hands landed on the planes of his chest before slowly shoving him away with what's left of her strength. She still needed the distance to keep her sanity intact. Or else she would break down right in front of him, or worse, do something she would regret such as letting him back into her life again. And that was the last thing she wanted.

She couldn't afford another heartbreak from him, not when she was supposed to be moving on already.

There was a devastated look on his face as he remained quiet, perhaps trying to internalize all the words she just said.

"I don't want to be that person anymore, Gendry." She confessed, looking away from him, her voice close to a whisper.

"Why not?" His choking tone clipped his words short.

But instead of replying, Arya just kept her mouth shut. Only because she knew that she was also lying to herself.

"I refuse to believe you, unless you look me straight in the eyes and tell me that you can no longer be that person for me." He demanded.

Her jaw clenched as she couldn't find it in her to do his bidding. She suddenly found the floor very interesting.

Before both of them could say another word, however, Gendry's phone suddenly rang. He fished it out from his pockets and silently cursed the moment he saw who was calling. As for her, she didn't need to see his phone to know who it was.

"Hey, baby." Gendry greeted, his voice and face masking normalcy.

Thinking that his attention was no longer on her, Arya slowly motioned to move away from his sight. She was so wrong when she found her wrist being captured by his large hand with gentle force as if to tell her to stay. To what reason, she didn't exactly have a clue.

"Yeah, the meeting just ended and I’m about to have lunch with—what? Why? Like right now?" He asked his girlfriend, Jeyne. But as he was talking to her on the other line, his eyes never left Arya's. Something like pain or regret was written all over his features.

_I don't want to be just your best friend anymore. I can't stand being just a friend to you. She finally admitted. Because I'm still madly in love with you. And I can't accept the fact that you're still with her after all these years._

There. The truth finally laid bare by her very consciousness.

She was looking at him like she wanted to verbalize all the things her mind just acknowledged moments ago. But it's too late for that now.

Some things were better left unsaid. Especially things like this.

Besides, she'd already bared herself to him years ago but look where it got her. There was no way in
hell she could compete against the perfect woman that was Jeyne fucking Heddle, who was first and foremost Gendry's ultimate crush in like forever. She couldn't just destroy their ideal relationship all because of her feelings for him.

"—Alright. Yeah, I guess I'll have to cancel my lunch if it's that important… See you later, baby." Gendry's words broke her from her thoughts.

Realizing the hand that had been holding her in place, she finally pulled herself away from him.

“I'm sorry about that, Arya. I was supposed to ask you to have lunch with me, you know, to catch up and all, but something came up. Jeyne sort of needs me right now. I'm really sorry…” He explained despondently.

Understanding flashed in her eyes. He was just being a good boyfriend. Always there whenever she needed him.

“No, it’s fine. I understand.” She was prepared to give him a sarcastic retort but it all drained out when she felt that it just didn't feel like the right thing to say. She also didn’t have a right over him. Because he wasn’t really hers.

He never was.

He smiled at her earnestly.

"But my offer still stands. I had this spare office prepared for you, so you should really make use of it. I won't bother you if you want. Just use this while you're working with us."

She didn't want to argue anymore. She was tired of trying to justify everything. Feigning nonchalance, and as if she was back to being her normal self again, she finally waved her hand in mock dismissal. "Fine. Whatever you want, Gendry."

Because she realized that the best way to avoid confrontations like this was to act like everything was perfectly fine between them. She was so tired and so numb that she could care less about anything anymore.

"Guess I'll see you on Monday, then." She added, albeit half-heartedly, finally walking back toward the door.

"You seem to have forgotten, your family is going to have dinner with mine at my father's estate this weekend, so we'll be seeing each other there." He reminded.

She stopped in her tracks, slowly turning back to find him looking at her expectantly.

"Oh. That. Yeah, I'll see you Sunday."

The lie tasted like ash in her mouth. Because when Sunday came, not even the shadow of Arya Stark was present in their family dinner.

*****

Gendry
Present Day

She never showed up at last night's dinner affair.

He should have known that she was going to do exactly just that. It was so typical of her. Of course, she would avoid him by all means. Why wouldn't she when he'd been nothing but a complete asshole to her?

*I didn't come back for you!*

Those poisoned words echoed inside his head yet for the thousandth time.

If only she knew…

If only she knew that he'd been one of the people responsible for her coming back to the capital. He'd reached the point where he'd exhausted every excuse he could find just to get her to come home. That was how badly he wanted her back. Even if it took all of him to imprint the fact that his offers should only mean nothing but mere friendship. Because he'd rather have her back as a friend than not have her at all. Because he had long since realized that he really couldn't live without her.

She was that one constant he really couldn't get rid of, no matter how much he tried in the past.

He would take the chance of becoming her friend again, just as long as she was back for good. Just as long as he could see her face again.

Even if it meant that there was no end-game for them despite the fact that seeing her materialize right before his very eyes would only make him question his real intentions and awaken the feelings residing in the deepest recesses of his human heart.

When he saw her for the first time at the luncheon party after five long years, he literally couldn't breathe. He even had to hide his surprise by keeping a stolid face or it would give away how much he wanted to drop at her feet and worship her.

She was power and devastation coated in ethereal sparkles, bundled in one lethal package. Powerful for still having that kind of unexplainable effect on him. Devastating for her potential to break the hearts of unworthy men. She exuded self-worth and independence that only made her go a notch higher on the pedestal.

Even her scent was different now, but nevertheless, it was still intoxicating and entrancing that it all but took what's left of his will-power to leash his practiced self-control and be in his best behavior or else he'd devour her raw and savor every inch of her.

Her scent now reminded him of coconuts and the beach –so purely tropical and exotic which only strengthened her invisible power over him. It was even more captivating now that it was already infused with the very essence of her entire being, the very best version of herself, that all he wanted to do was get lost in it.

Although he was aware of how selfish his idea was to keep her as a friend, still it was better than having to be miserable for the rest of his life, especially when he knew too well that there was still that small chance for them to reconcile.
She never really stopped loving you, you know. A friend dearest to both of them secretly admitted. Because I could see it in her eyes and I could read it in her every move. I know Arya too well to know that she's still madly, deeply in love with you. She's just choosing to lie low and keep quiet because she still hates confrontations but I promise you that after all these years, she's still holding on to that sliver of hope deep inside her. It's always been there.

Hope was still there. That's what their friend Brea had assured him.

He truly wanted to believe in it, but seeing Arya being all too comfortable and familiar with Griffins at their meeting last week made him doubt that remaining sliver of hope. He may be his friend, but at that moment, he wanted to punch Griffins in the face when he saw how the fucker had made her smile like that.

He knew it was wrong. He knew that he didn't have a right. Never mind that he was being contradictory and possessive at the same time, but he couldn't help his proprietorial reflexes when it came to her sometimes.

So much for wanting to become her friend again, Waters. He chided himself.

Before his thoughts could further devour his consciousness, he was suddenly taken back to the here and now when he felt the weight on his right arm shifting. Those waves of light brown hair pooling all over the pillows moved together with Jeyne's head as she scooted closer to him, nuzzling his neck as she stirred from her sleep. She may have been oblivious to the treacherous things running inside his head, but she'd become even more keen and too paranoid the moment he asked permission from her that he'd be taking Arya to lunch after their meeting at the office.

Just last night at the family dinner, she'd gone ballistic the moment she read Gendry and Arya's short SMS conversation on his phone. It wasn't like he had something to hide from his girlfriend, anyway, so he willingly let her read their brief text exchange.

It only went something like, 'Where are you? You still coming over for dinner?' And Arya's reply was only a short, 'Can't. Something came up.' Arya, for her part, didn't even question how he'd gotten her new number. Arya had probably figured that having her number was already a given after learning that they'd be working together for the upcoming project.

And it wasn't like they'd been flirting through text. Arya barely even acknowledged him as an acquaintance when she came back, much less openly flirt with him. But Jeyne was too suspicious to care.

They'd been arguing the entire drive back to the apartment that they now shared. They'd been living together for almost two years now but it didn't even lessen the amount of fights they'd been having. In fact, their fights were only getting worse. They fought over the smallest things that Gendry could no longer understand her sometimes.

She was becoming more unstable the longer they stayed together. But he also couldn't just leave and break up with her. Especially not after she threatened to end her own life whenever he tried to open up about going separate ways. He practically feared for her life, which was why it was hard for him to let go.

And although he found himself stuck in their relationship sometimes, he had to admit that he still did care for her a lot.

He could only try to make things work for them. God knew he always tried for both their sakes just to save their relationship.
Jeyne stirred again, causing him to look down at her sleeping frame before planting a soft kiss on the top of her head as though it could solidify the bond they had formed over the years of fighting and making up.

Her eyes finally fluttered open at the gesture.

"Hi." She said sweetly as if she hadn't just been shouting at him last night.

Funny how in just the span of twenty-four hours they'd already been at each other's throats. Not to mention the make-up sex that always followed after every fight.

"Hey..." He greeted back before he tugged her closer and allowed the bitter reality to take over his life.
Here's an improved version of the garage scene from my original piece.

P.S.

I made the entire story a bit more realistic in a sense that Gendry in this version may seem a bit man-whorish at first, with him randomly sleeping around and whatnot, because that's how he really is at his age, instead of keeping himself celibate for the duration of his friendship with Arya. He also has reasons why he initially chose the path to platonic friendship with her, which will eventually be revealed in the next chapters.

Anyway, here's the next one. Been a bit sluggish in editing the other chapters because I'm still wrapped up on reading the last few chapters of Tolkien's The Return of the King, then I still have to follow through with The Hobbit and The Silmarillion (for my reading challenge this year). :)

Thank you.

[6]

"You look like someone punched you in the eyes." Came Gendry's remark as Arya walked inside the auto shop, bringing a paper bag of takeout Dim sum from Red Lantern. He was wearing those blue overalls again which was provided by the shop for its employees, his white t-shirt peeking out from his unbuttoned top. "That, or I'm beginning to think that you suddenly want to turn into a panda so badly." He sardonically added, methodically wiping his grease-stained hands with a damp washcloth.

"I wouldn't mind turning into a panda. Pandas are the most adorable creatures on the planet after all." She retorted, trying to subdue the seriousness of the subject by masking her apprehension.
It was true, though—pandas were indeed the cutest animals. But what’s truer than pandas at that moment were the prominent dark circles underneath her eyes.

Gendry’s keen observations weren’t exactly inaccurate. In fact, those dark circles were evident because she’d been having those nightmares again. And they’re not getting any better either. Whenever she’d wake up in the most unholy hours of dawn, she could no longer find it in her to get back to sleep. It had been an issue to her ever since she started having those dreams last year and she hated it because they were already affecting her daily life and her health.

He raised an eyebrow at her before crossing his arms. "Oh yeah? Why not tell me the truth and get it over with?"

God, he was good at reading her. A year into their friendship and he made it seem like they’d already spent a lifetime with each other.

"Isn’t it obvious already that I wasn’t able to get any sleep?" She countered, plopping herself on the clean side of a bench that had a small clutter of tools and car parts.

"Why the fuck didn’t you get any sleep?"

Fixing her features to emphasize her nonchalance, she answered, "Been studying for finals week."

Gendry snorted incredulously. "You don’t study, Arya." He deadpanned.

"Then what are we doing later? Isn’t tutoring counted as studying? Because I’m obviously here so that you can tutor me for my trigonometry and calculus exams, right?"

He huffed a sigh as he sat beside her on the bench, moving further aside the clutter of random tools.

"Arya, you can always tell me anything, you know. Is there something bothering you?" He looked at her seriously, raking her face for any other emotion she was trying to hide. "And don’t tell me it’s nothing because it’s not just your panda eyes I’m noticing… You’re also losing weight, did you know that? You’re literally wasting away, for fuck’s sakes."

Arya’s eyes widened in real surprise.

"I lost weight? Really? Well, my mother actually thinks otherwise. She said that I need to minimize eating because I’m getting fat."

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" It wasn’t difficult to read the growing irritation on his face.

"No. I’m telling the truth, Gendry. She even hired someone to get me into following a strict diet plan." She replied.

"Your mother clearly needs to take a closer look at you right now, Arya. And why she’s even subjecting her high school daughter to go on a diet is already beyond me." It was pretty much obvious from the start that Gendry had never been a fan of her mother, especially if she meddled with her life like this. Although Gendry hadn’t really been blatant about his outright disagreement to what her mother regarded as proper or not, Arya knew that deep inside Gendry had been simmering with disapproval with regard to how Catelyn would subject Arya into fitting in to their social circle.

Running his hands over his already disheveled hair, Gendry continued, "You know what, screw that ridiculous diet plan. You obviously need to eat more. And since when do you follow your mother’s orders, anyway? You can practically eat anything you want for all I care."
If only Gendry knew that Arya didn't really have a choice in that matter right now because her obedience was her ticket to freedom after high school. She just needed to do a little more sacrifice and that was to follow all her mother's wishes at the moment.

And one of those wishes was to keep herself from getting fat.

*A lady like you should learn how to control. You can't just eat whatever you see at the table just because you like it, or you'll get fat and it won't look good. You don't want to ruin your image in front of everyone in society, do you?* Mother had explained to her one time as they were on their way to some boring ladies' social function along with her socialite sister Sansa.

But that's the problem. She was already losing her appetite as it was mainly because of the nightmares she'd been having almost every night, and yet, her mother still failed to notice that, thinking she's still too fat for her liking.

Narrowing his eyes at her, Gendry felt the need to ask again, "What's really going on, Arya?"

She shook her head, making herself hold his scathing gaze to make it look like everything was alright. "I'm fine, Gendry. I'm just worried about my grades, is all. You know I can't afford to fail or I will have to repeat my senior year, then my parents will never ever allow me to move out for college."

That was her other ticket to freedom: passing all her subjects.

She definitely ought to pass senior year because she could no longer stand staying for another second in her school. Although she got more than satisfactory grades in most of her subjects, she still needed to fix the barely passing grades she received in math, which was why she was seeing Gendry that afternoon.

Failing that subject was not an option. Not when she'd been planning in the past months to move out of their family penthouse and rent a smaller one-bedroom apartment just a floor below Gendry's place. It had already been prepared for her by her parents on the condition that she’d enroll into any pre-med course (and following her mother's wishes to go on a diet).

She really had no choice but to agree with their terms because she didn't want to risk having anyone else at home hear her screaming in her sleep at night.

When Gendry learned of her plans to rent a place on the same apartment building he was staying, he was more than overjoyed, which was why he also offered to help her ace her math exams by tutoring her.

Arya's father didn't have a problem with the arrangement and she wondered if he only ever trusted him because of his instant affiliation to Uncle Robert.

It was her mother who had qualms at first about Gendry tutoring her and Arya wondered if it was because she still looked down on Gendry for being a bastard the way she regarded Jon as one, or if it had something to do with Gendry’s filthy, vulgar mouth. Arya, for one, didn’t give a single fuck about Gendry’s most colorful picks of the foulest words because she herself had a more vivid selection of crisp expletives.

Her mother had just always been so particular about social standing and how to behave in the eyes of the public that it annoyed Arya on a daily basis. But knowing her mother to think like that, Arya also used that to her advantage by letting her mother think that she had already been completely "reformed" by her new school.
The trick to getting around her mother all these years was by learning everything she liked and disliked and playing along those lines just to get her to think that her daughter had been very obedient of her in all means.

If only her mother knew that Arya was just playing along.

She hoped to whatever god there was that her mother wouldn't be able to see through her masks.

"Alright. You promise?" A worried Gendry was endearing, Arya realized.

"Promise." She lied, cementing it with a forced smile.

He finally eyed the paper bag on her lap, a smile escaping his lips. "Do I get first dibs on whatever is inside that takeout bag, then?"

She smiled back at him as she handed him the entire bag. "That's all yours, actually. All your favorites from the Red Lantern." It came as a surprise to her that he also loved Dim sum as much as she did. Well, except for the red bean buns that tasted weird.

He almost stuck his face inside the paper bag as he peeked through its contents.

"Holy shit. You even got me these buns even if you hate them." Taking a huge bite, he added, "Thanks. I'm really hungry." His words were muffled by the food stuffed inside his mouth.

"When was the last time you ate? You look like you haven't eaten in a week." She remarked, noticing his mop of unruly obsidian hair and the greases staining his arms and clothes for the first time.

"This morning? I don't know. I can't even remember because I was busy upgrading the engine of a Skyline from 2.5 to 3.0, which had to be done by the end of the day." He explained before filling his mouth with another huge bite of the red bean buns.

God, she could see the veins on his neck bulging every time he chewed his food which only heightened up her lecherous imagination.

She painted her face with excitement to rid those thoughts away and focused on how she was always amazed by his job as a mechanic at the shop. "Really?" She asked, standing up. "Is it this one?" She pointed at the cobalt blue car in front of them with its hood still open.

He nodded silently as she walked toward the car only a few meters away from the bench.

Bending over to have a closer look at the newly attached 3.0 engine, she carefully observed Gendry's intricate work. He always worked with precision, making sure that everything, even the most minute parts, always had function and relevance.

Every little thing about cars and engines was indeed his very expertise.

She wasn't really a huge fan of it herself but she already had a basic knowledge of cars from her older brothers who loved to race as much as Gendry did.

A few seconds had passed before she felt a soothing warmth on her back as Gendry stood almost directly behind her, his large, rippling arms leaning on the open hood above her.

He was practically towering over her petite frame.

"What do you think?" He rasped almost immediately after she straightened herself. There was
something about the tone in his voice that she couldn't place. What's more was the way his sapphire eyes were looking at her darkly.

If she so ever moved just even an inch backwards, she was aware that her back would already literally be touching his broad chest, enclosing her completely in his warmth.

Swallowing an invisible lump in her throat, she gathered all her strength as if to act calm around his intimidating presence, keeping in mind that her best friend was a sex god first and foremost, hence that unexplainable effect on her.

"I think your work is very neat." She almost stuttered.

He flashed her a feral smile as he moved closer, his lips ghosting over her ear. "Do you want to know what I think?" He whispered tauntingly.

"What?"

She could feel her heart beating a faster rate now that he was positioned directly behind her back, feeling the heat radiating off the rigid planes of his body.

"I think that if I were some other guy out there, I would already have taken you right here, right now with you bent over like that because those sexy black lace panties you are wearing are just so inviting." He paused as she felt the hand leaning on the open hood travelling down from the small of her back to the hem of her short skirt. She thought he was about to touch her inappropriately, but realized that he was only fixing the skirts of her uniform.

"But since I'm not like one of those fucking assholes out there, then I would highly advise you to always watch over your uniform especially if it rides all the way up to your thighs like this because there are sick assholes everywhere trying to get their hands on you just because they think they are entitled to touch you, thinking that you're inviting them to. And trust me when I say that I wouldn’t really hesitate to beat the bloody shit out of them if they for one second touch you without your consent." He explained, the sudden intimate tension between them slowly dissipating.

She'd been so engrossed with the work he'd done on the car that she didn't even notice that her skirt was already riding up to the top her thighs.

Nevertheless, a sense of relief washed over her face as she understood what he meant.

Gendry was right. Those assholes were indeed everywhere and no matter how much she believed that what she was wearing wouldn't really matter, there would always be someone who would try to sexualize every exposed part of her body, be it accidental or not, and blaming her for her choice of clothes and telling her she was asking for it.

With Gendry, she wasn't entirely worried about him harassing her because she could tell that he respected women of all forms and he was well aware of his boundaries. Even if he was a serial dater and slept around casually, he still asked for their consent and he’d never force himself on them.

As for Arya and Gendry in the course of their friendship, they might often be exchanging subtle suggestive innuendos here and there, but never for once did Gendry try to take advantage of her, much less attempt to talk her into sleeping with him.

He was a feminist in his own ways and she liked that he considered women as equals.

"Oh. Sorry." Was all she said as she finally fixed her skirt for good measure, feeling her face turn the brightest shade of crimson the moment it dawned on her that Gendry had just actually seen her
He sauntered back to the bench to grab the rest of his stuff before he informed her, "I'm just going to change and then we'll go." He was already about to walk inside the locker room when he paused, turning back to face her again, "Oh, and before we head to my apartment to study, I'm going to have to feed you first. You'll be needing all your energy for what I have in store for you tonight." He winked.

Somewhere inside her imaginative mind, Arya wished that it would involve taking off their clothes and exchanging body heat.

But so much for wishful thinking.

Because going beyond the line of platonic friendship was already an impossibility, especially when it had been established that he'd only ever seen her as a friend.

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Sweat slowly dribbled from her forehead down to her temples. Aside from that, her dark hair was already a bundled mess on top of her head with small wavy wisps stuck to the sides of her neck. Heat flared off her body as she continued to pant from the on-and-off exertion she'd been doing in the past hour and a half.

Her left hand already felt like falling off and her legs were already shaking from the weight she put on her feet. She might as well be executing those high-intensity physical exercises her sister had been doing to maintain her sculpted runway body because she felt like she'd been doing the exact same thing.

_Fucking Gendry and his fucking teaching strategies_, Arya cursed internally. She badly wanted to strangle the living daylight out of him for putting her in this exhausting position. Her mind was literally drained from answering extra difficult equations here and there, so was her physical strength that she badly wanted to throw herself on the first bed she could find, which would probably be the huge king-sized bed inside his bedroom, anyway.

The alarm that suddenly blared through the rest of the apartment startled the shit out of her.

"Time's up." He informed her from where he was comfortably seated on the couch. But stubborn and frustrated as she was, she continued scribbling the rest of the difficult equation on his blackboard. Yes, her best friend had a fucking blackboard almost the same height as the wall inside his living room. Actually, the board was attached to the rustic brick wall dividing his living room from what he considered was his makeshift study area slash mini-library.

Having an eye for art, she actually loved how the interior of Gendry's apartment was designed. It had a modern yet rustic-industrial feel to it which really suited his personality. And apart from the superb design, it was also pristinely neat. He was always sort of OCD when it came to his stuff, which was what made her like him even more.

She was crushing on her best friend so bad, that sometimes she just wanted to—

"I said, time's up!" His voice cut off whatever lecherous thoughts were beginning to worm their way inside her head. His voice was much louder, more domineering and nearer this time. And before she
even realized what was happening, the chalk on her left hand was suddenly snatched away from her.

Finally resigning in defeat, she moved a step back from the blackboard, only to land snugly on a broad, hard chest.

"Hey, easy..." He told her, tentatively placing his large hands on her hips to steady her.

Blushing furiously at their sudden yet scalding contact, she immediately moved away from his intimate space before she could act on her impulse of jumping at him and do gods know what to that rippling body of muscles she'd been dying to explore.

Instead of muttering an apology, she glared at him murderously to hide her flustered state. "This is fucking ridiculous. I'm already bad at math as it is, how much more if you put me into a time-constrained problem-solving exercise that's even harder than my actual exams! I'm just so tired as fuck, Gendry. Please, just end my suffering." She whined frustratingly, finally plopping herself unceremoniously on the grey plush couch, making her uniform even more crumpled. She was down to wearing just her short, pleated skirt and the white button-down that came with her uniform, and it only made her look like she'd been to the underworld and back.

He stood before the blackboard with his hands on his hips as he started going over her lengthy equations. It was as if he was trying to decipher her impossibly bad handwriting with the way he was squinting his eyes. She couldn't help it, it wasn't her fault that she was born with the worst handwriting that looked entirely like a whole new kind of font. That's how bad it was.

"Some of these are actually correct, Arya." He noted, his eyes never leaving the board.

She ran her hands all over her face before ruffling the already messy bun on top of her head as if she was a mental person. "I don't even know what's wrong or right anymore, Gendry. I'm a fucking hopeless case."

He finally faced her this time, handing out a chalk to her.

"Come over and do the checking yourself. In that way you would know which parts you got wrong and which ones you got right. Looking at your equations the second time actually helps you with realizing your earlier mistakes." He coached.

Arya stood up once again, albeit begrudgingly, and pulled out her hair tie in the process, her wavy tresses falling down the sides of her face.

Looking back at the equations she'd done on the board for a few minutes, she finally understood what Gendry meant. She started making the corrections while Gendry was standing only a few inches behind, coaching her every now and then.

"There. Is everything finally clear to you now?" He asked her after everything had been thoroughly explained and counterchecked, the timbre of his deep voice dangerously making her shiver. The nearness of his lips to her earlobe made her core tingle with need.

She made the mistake of turning away from the blackboard only to meet with his intense, expectant eyes that instantly rendered her speechless.

She only nodded her head in response, her parched throat bobbing up and down.

Raising his hands to the level of her face, he began to brush away the stray strands of her hair. Just when she thought that he was about to kiss her, a mocking frown slid on his face. "You look like you've been to the seven hells and back." Then he sniffed at her.
"Sniffed."

"And you smell—"

"No, I don't!" She defensively said, pushing him away with all of the force she could muster. She could've sworn that a million liters of blood was already pooling at her cheeks that moment.

Gendry tipped his head back in a guffaw.

"Why are you being so defensive? I was only about so tell you that you smell absolutely divine…" He told her mischievously, making sniffing gestures as he sauntered back closer to her. "Your perfume smells like vanilla." He drawled dangerously closer this time. "Delicious."

She crossed her arms, already feeling terribly self-conscious of herself. "I'm sweating. I might as well smell like Satan's armpits right now."

Another laugh from him.

"No, you don't. And you can always borrow a shirt from me, you know. If it makes you more comfortable." He offered, shrugging.

"Yeah, I should've done that before we even started." She mumbled more to herself than she could let on. "We're done for tonight, right?" She added.

Gendry grinned knowingly, "Not quite. I'm still cooking us dinner."

Her eyes widened, and as if on cue, she also felt her stomach rumbling as the word 'dinner' slipped smoothly from his lips.

"Oh my god, that sounds great. Because I'm really starving." She admitted, touching her stomach in emphasis.

"Good. It means that your appetite's still functioning. That way, I could feed you anytime I like." He winked, grabbing her hand and leading her to his now familiar room that smelled just like him. Like musk and Old Spice.

Gendry's bed was the first thing she saw when he turned the lights on, and she badly fought the strong urge to throw herself and fall into a deep, dreamless slumber on its soft covers.

She always loved his room. It might not be as big as the rooms in their penthouse apartment, but it was cozy, and she liked how consistent he was with his neatness. There was barely any clutter in his place since he only kept the most basic things he needed.

"Like, are you an anal person?" She had once word-vomited on that question upon noticing his tidiness the first time he'd brought her inside his room. It wasn’t like they were doing something gravely scandalous at that time because Gendry had only offered to let her use his bathroom when she’d told him she’d wanted to pee so badly in the middle of their first movie marathon a year ago.

Gendry had almost choked on the soda he was sipping when she’d asked him in that manner.

A sly smile had crept on her face at the innuendo he was thinking. "I didn’t mean it that way, Gendry." She’d explained knowingly.

"I know what you mean, Arya." He’d rolled his eyes defensively after his retort.

"Then I don't see why you'd choke on your drink with that question." She’d challenged.
“Whatever. And yeah, I like to keep my stuff in order, so I guess I’m anal.” He’d responded, emphasizing on the last word as he’d equaled her innuendo.

Going back to the here and now, she continued to eye his bed longingly as he rummaged his drawer for a spare shirt he could lend her.

“Here.” He said, finally handing her a black band t-shirt that was a million sizes larger than her. Raising an eyebrow, he added, “You look like you could drown in my bed for eternity with the way you are staring at it. Do you feel tired? Do you want to take a nap while I cook us some dinner?” Came his tempting offer.

She almost succumbed to the temptation of his welcoming bed but she remembered that she couldn’t just sleep anywhere that’s not her room or else someone like Gendry could see her having those nightmares.

Shaking her head and slowly unbuttoning her shirt, she replied, “I’m fine. I’ll just help you with preparing dinner.”

He only shrugged casually before leaving her to change into his comfortable shirt that smelled exactly like him.

If only she could take his shirt home and never return it.

*****

Gendry

April

Six Years Ago

There was definitely something wrong with her. Gendry could just feel it. And it wasn't just because of his gut-feeling, but he also couldn't help but notice how she was slowly fading away. Fading in a manner that her truest identity was being stripped off into pieces little by little.

Although he could factor in the apprehension she was feeling for their upcoming final exams, in addition to her concern for her grades in math, still it wouldn't really sum up to the drastic difference he’d been noticing in her whenever they saw each other.

Those dark circles underneath her eyes and her noticeable weight loss were literally sucking the life out of her system and Gendry was afraid that if it went on, he would eventually be losing her.

And he couldn't afford to lose her.

Not when he'd already found a genuine friend in her.
He was driving back to his apartment after he'd sent her home following their intensive tutorial sessions when all these thoughts suddenly came pouring down like the goddamn rain.

He knew he shouldn't be this affected after he'd taken her word for it but not worrying about her also didn't seem right. And he couldn't even begin to explain why her mother, of all people, would fail to notice these obvious changes in her daughter.

He was honestly livid when Arya told him she was put under a strict diet plan.

Catelyn Stark got her youngest daughter on a diet just to keep a pretentious façade, an “acceptable” image to society. Fucking pathetic.

_Bloody highborns and their bloody standards._ He shook his head, cursing internally.

It's not that he hated Catelyn as a person, but what he couldn't really stand was how she only cared about social standing to the extent that she'd force her daughter to behave in a certain way just to avoid staining their family name. Even if Arya clearly resented behaving like a proper lady. Her mother was practically trying to turn her into a socialite like her sister and Gendry knew that it was only making his best friend lose herself in the process.

Thoughts like these always bothered him. They're slowly eating him to the point where all he could think of was Arya and her welfare. It was already obvious enough that he cared for her. The problem was, he seemed to care for her a lot that sometimes it might even be too much already because he'd always place her on the top of his priority list.

But he couldn't really help it.

She just meant a lot to him.

_Because she's your best friend,_ was the reminder he kept telling himself time and again, and that it had to be the _only_ reason why he cared.

But it's as if it had always been a battle between the justification of pure friendship… and something else entirely that his heart, and his body, was still refusing to admit.

Especially when he saw that scrap of lace she was wearing underneath the skirts of her uniform.

_Fuck._ He cursed, his cock beginning to stir in his jeans at the rate of where his imagination was taking him.

The sight of her bent over the hood of the car caused all of his blood to travel down south, his thoughts jumping to overdrive at the number of things he could possibly do to her in that position – with her legs partly spread, her arms clutching to the hood for support as he stood there behind her back, his straining cock mere inches away from her.

But just like he told her that moment, he wasn’t like one of those assholes who’d feel entitled to touch her just because of her inviting position.

He still valued consent more than anything else.

And just like what he kept telling himself, they were friends.

A long sigh of frustration escaped his lips.

He badly needed a distraction. Just so that he could control these unknown feelings that were only
growing stronger.

With final resolve, he made a short stop on the side of the road. Reaching for his phone in the center console, he punched the numbers he knew so well now.

There was an instant answer after the first ring.

"What's up, Waters?"

"Hook me up with a race tonight. I badly need one." He told an old friend on the other line.

"Come over, then. You're just right on time for the next race."

"Good. Be there in five."

Gripping the wheel tighter, he revved up his car for a couple of times before finally stepping on the accelerator, driving along the solitary highway toward the race area with the speed of one hundred eighty kilometers per hour.

This was the kind of distraction he needed to flush out those unbidden thoughts away –unrelenting speed with a dose of raw adrenaline.

And when it was all over that night, he went home to his humble apartment with a hot blonde girl around his arms. It wasn't anything serious, though. It was just one of those casual, rough hook ups with no commitments and no strings attached. Just for plain pleasure and instant gratification.

Fighting the urge to succumb to sleep, where he knew he'd only be dreaming about another girl with brown hair and stormy eyes, Gendry fucked the girl in his bed to oblivion the entire night with only a single thought inside his head.
Apartments and Engagements

Arya

Present Day

Arya was certain that the news of Robb's engagement to his girlfriend, Romina, would be all over the papers in the following days. No wonder Robb had been insistent that Arya attend their family gathering that evening at Uncle Robert's estate.

But even without Robb's persistence, she still would have been able to figure it out immediately, because aside from the strong feeling that something monumental was about to happen, she could also read the nervous exhilaration written all over her older brother's face.

So here she was obliging him as a mere spectator to the milestone that was about to unfold in their family. Indescribable happiness and surprise filled the room after they finally broke the news while dessert was served. Arya wasn't exempted from that unbridled joy, in fact, she was one of the first persons to low-key give them their congratulations the moment she understood what her brother was implying when he'd requested her to come over.

Finding the need for some fresh night air on her skin, she strategically leaned her almost-bare back on the open glass door pane that led to the balcony while the jubilations ensued inside the dining area.

Uncle Robert's family along with hers were now greeting the newly-engaged couple, giving them well-wishes while most of the ladies, including her sister, were looking at the classic diamond engagement ring on Mina's finger.

They all couldn't contain their happiness, her mother most especially. She even cried happy tears at the announcement because one of her children was finally going to enter the matrimonial life that she long since wished for them all.

It was a dream come true for Catelyn Stark. Good for Robb and Mina to finally fulfill it. As for Arya, no amount of encouragement from her mother could convince her to start finding a potential husband. That was one thing she would never be able to fulfill for her.

It just wasn't the path for someone like her.

The cool night breeze sent satisfying shivers down her spine. She liked the feeling of the wind
caressing her skin because it reminded her of the humble home she longed in Braavos. To add more vindication to that reminder, she even wore a black, backless Bohemian maxi dress for tonight's dinner. Its soft, flowing skirts falling to the floor which partially concealed the brown boho sandals she was wearing.

To avoid the risk of everyone seeing the tattoo on the side of her rib, she had to let her hair down and style it in big beachy waves to give the illusion of volume. At least her mother and her sister approved of her ensemble that night.

Since she'd been contemplating on ditching the dinner even on the last minute, she was the last to arrive after she finally made up her mind. The consequence of her late decision earned the astonished looks of everyone, including Gendry.

Most especially Gendry.

She could never forget the way he looked at her when he saw her emerge in the dining hall in her simple dress. He had looked at her as if she was the only person in the world.

"—oh my god! This is so beautiful!" Jeyne's girlish squeal broke her from her train of thoughts. Like the rest, she was congratulating the couple and appreciating Mina's new diamond ring while Gendry was just standing silently beside his girlfriend, smiling warmly. One of his hands was loosely circling her waist.

Jeyne looked stunning in her tight-fitting blue bodycon dress that hugged all the right curves of her supermodel body. She'd only gotten more beautiful with age, what with her high-maintenance regimen to preserve her angel-like face. She still modelled for Victoria’s Secret even after all these years and she was the same bubbly, outgoing person that everybody loved. She was perfect. Flawless. The epitome of an ideal girlfriend and a more suitable wife.

And someday, she'd be Gendry's wife.

She could have sworn that she felt her heart cracking just a little bit more but she willed her mind to disregard the sudden phantom pain it caused.

Watching her family and the Baratheons with their partners and spouses was like looking at a perfect portrait of a big, happy family. Even her younger brothers brought along their girlfriends. In fact, Arya just realized that she was the only one among them who wasn't currently in a relationship with someone. She was the only one without a partner.

So what? It's not like I can't live without someone else on my side. Came her internal affirmation. She was no longer afraid of ending up single for the rest of her life. In fact, the chances of picturing herself growing old single was more likely than imagining herself being married to someone. Surprisingly, that simple acceptance came as a breeze, as opposed to her fears of getting old alone after she broke up with her first boyfriend.

A quiet chortle escaped her lips despite herself as soon as she realized where this was going. She suddenly imagined herself being the cool, doting aunt whom her future nephews and nieces would look up to, who'd shower them with lavish presents during Christmas and birthdays, and give them the best advices to avoid social suicide as they'd grow up.

Holy shit was she ridiculous.

Shaking her head while the shadows of her silent laughter were fading away, she slowly removed herself from the confines of the dining hall.
"I haven't seen you the last time we had a gathering." Came a sweet, familiar voice. Soft and feminine. Just like its owner.

"Hi Cella." Arya greeted Myrcella with a smile. She'd been staying at her favorite spot in Uncle Robert's vast gardens in the center of his estate, leaning back on the bench and looking up at the stars. "I got busy that day, so I had to cancel." She explained, her eyes still looking at the twinkling skies.

It's not like she was lying because she really had been busy the last time they had their usual family dinner as she took that day as an excuse to finally move out of Jon's place and settle in the small studio apartment she would be renting for the duration of her stay in the capital, which was a mercy considering the ridiculously inflated prices of rents these days.

It's just that she also couldn't discount fact that the underlying reason for her absence was still because of Myrcella's older half-brother.

Despite her plan being like a huge fuck you dangling right in front of her face because she knew that it was doomed from the start, she still followed her stubborn will and ditched that first dinner entirely. Perhaps it had taken quite some time for her to grasp the reality that there really was no escaping him especially when they're working on the same project together.

But now that she could no longer afford to bail another family gathering again without rousing everyone's suspicions, she had to comply with making an appearance.

Cella took a seat beside her on the bench. "I love your dress, by the way. And your whole look." She complimented, eyeing her appreciatively. "Actually, I love the overall transformation you've done to yourself."

Arya finally turned to her, "Thanks, Cella." She sheepishly said.

"Not that I didn't like your style before. In fact, I've always looked up to you… it's just that, now that you're back, you look completely new and I just love every bit of it. You have that kind of otherworldly glow in you that's uniquely your very own..."

"Well, when you live with a fashion design major for half of your college life, then you'd definitely learn a lot about fashion in the process, especially in picking up your own individual style." She meant her close friend Cara. "You'd even become one of their test subjects sometimes." Arya winked, fondly thinking about the time she'd lived with Brea and Cara back in Braavos during her first two years in college.

Cara oftentimes used her as a test model for her collection despite Arya's non-intimidating height, even volunteered to do her makeup on some special events. Her friend believed in diversity in fashion, which was why Cara used a variety of models for her clothes. That was also when Arya learned a thing or two about fashion and making her own style out of it.

Brea being an advertising and photography major, on the other hand, would take pictures of Cara's creations. This included Cara's lingerie collection that Brea featured in her black and white photo exhibit which already served as a part of her thesis before graduating.
The entire opportunity was such an empowering experience for Arya as a woman that she didn’t mind having her photos included in Brea and Cara's collaborations. They were such a dynamic team that they’re even renowned in their little town back in Braavos.

"Wow, Arya. It does sound like you really had the time of your life there. I wish I was as brave as you when you decided to study abroad."

"You can do it, too, you know? Get out and do the things you really love, explore the world, and travel however you like…” Arya trailed off. "…and you’d be surprised how much of yourself you rediscover."

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. And I am meaning to do all of that in due time." Cella replied. "Nevertheless, I still admire your bravery by leaving your old life in pursuit of what truly makes you happy."

Arya only smiled in recollection.

It had been one of the greatest decisions she’d ever made for herself in her entire life: to break free from the social convention and the dictates of her mother by getting out of her shell and fighting for her own freedom and happiness. It was a tough road at the beginning, having to work double jobs just to pay for her tuition and living with her friends to save money, but it was all worth it. She’d learned a lot in those years of hardships.

Looking back into her mesmerizing green eyes, Arya asked, "How about you? How are you doing these days? It's been a while since we got the chance to talk like this."

Cella only beamed wider, and Arya could have sworn that she could see the flush spreading across her cheeks. "Well, I've been dating this someone for quite some time now and he's really amazing, Arya. His name is Trys, by the way and I'm going to introduce you to him later."

Arya's eyes widened in recognition as she remembered seeing Cella's plus one at dinner. "Yeah, I've seen him earlier with you. He does seem like a decent guy. Are you happy with him?" That was the first and most important question she'd always ask whenever a topic like that was brought up.

The genuine look of joy in Cella's face was answer enough. "I can't even begin to explain how much he makes me happy."

"Then I'm glad that you're with him. Where is he right now?" She asked, looking around the vicinity for any signs of Cella's boyfriend.

"He's back inside, having a chat with Gendry."

Arya schooled her features to remain stoic and unaffected at the mention of his name. "I see… Does he approve of Trys, too?"

Cella burst into gales of girlish laughter. "Well, you know my brother. He's kind of the protective one, so naturally, he was frigid at first. It took him months to finally accept the fact that Trys isn't an asshole like the other guys I dated, but he eventually warmed up to him. So, I guess they're good now."

"Yeah, that's so typical of your brother. But he's only being protective because he cares a lot for you." Arya acquiesced but her smile was turning saccharine.

"He cares for you, too, you know? More than he ever could let on. It's also been a while since you've seen each other. He definitely misses you." There. The elephant in the room finally made manifest in
the form of Cella's simple declaration. But whether the statement was the truth or a fallacy was still up for debate.

Arya tried her best to remain as neutral as possible as they further delved into the subject of him.

With a faint smile, she replied, "I honestly don't know how to respond to that. He has a mind of his own, so he is entitled to think that way."

And he's entitled to love someone else either, her thoughts whispered.

"He was miserable when you left." Another arguable statement that only opened up a whole new set of questions that Arya badly wanted to ask. But she fought the strong urge to open her mouth. It was pointless to ask, anyway. Because knowing the answers still wouldn't bring back what had been lost between them.

She released a subtle sigh before looking away from Myrcella's gaze. "At least he no longer feels that way now that he's with Jeyne. They both look happy together and it's all that really matters." Came her honest statement.

If anything, she wasn't wishing for Jeyne and Gendry to break apart because Arya could see that their relationship had thrived, or else they wouldn't have lasted for more than a year. To be fair to Jeyne, Arya didn't really have anything against her. In fact, Jeyne had always been an ideal girlfriend material.

She could feel Cella's emerald eyes boring into her. "That's the good thing about my brother. He is always so selfless. He'd do anything for the person he loves." Cella endearingly said, her voice close to a whisper. The sincere smile never left Cella's lips as Arya shifted her gaze back to her.

And felt her heart creating another fissure.

He'd do anything for the person he loves. The words echoed inside her head as if she was being physically tortured by that undeniable truth.

The truth that he truly loved Jeyne and chose to be with her.

After all, his happiness was what always mattered to her. She had set him free many years ago so that he could be happy with the person he'd chosen over her.

Running her palms along her knees, Arya slowly blinked back the tears that were starting to form behind her eyes.

"I'm thankful for how things turned out tonight, especially when Robb and Mina finally announced their engagement. It's about time, and I'm really happy for them." Arya confessed, but only as a means to divert the topic, trying her best not let her words sound choked.

"I'm happy for Robb and Mina, too. I'm even excited for the actual wedding." Replied Myrcella.

"I hope they get married soon, though… before I leave back for Braavos." Arya added.

Cella raised an eyebrow. "You're not staying here for good then?" There was an alarmed look on her pretty face.

Arya shook her head. "I never really intend to. I only came back because your father offered me a temporary job for the project."
Finally nodding in understanding, Cella told her, "Then I hope I can visit you there someday. I've 
always wanted to visit Braavos. Maybe I'd take Trys with me."

Arya's eyes were trained absent-mindedly at the marble fountain ahead. "You definitely should, 
Cella. Braavos is simply amazing. It feels like… home."

A soft hand touched her knuckles. "I can imagine what a great place Braavos is… just with the way 
you talk about it. I can feel its wonder, too. Don't worry, Arya. You'll be home soon…"

"Soon…" Arya echoed, hope glinting in her eyes.

Before any of them could say another word, Arya suddenly heard approaching footsteps behind the 
tall green hedges.

"Cella?" Came a new male voice.

Cella immediately rose from the bench to meet with the person who owned that voice and gave him 
a hug.

It was Trys.

And right behind him was no other than the very person she'd been trying to avoid the entire time.

Gendry slid his hands inside his pockets as he sauntered toward them with that dark gracefulness. 
And with the effortless black suit he was wearing, he made it seem like he just popped straight out of 
a magazine.

"I've been looking all over for you." She heard Trys telling Cella, cupping the back of her neck 
before planting a soft kiss on top of her head. It was the sweetest gesture she'd seen so far that 
evening.

"I was having a chat with Arya." Myrcella replied before finally introducing them to each other. 
"Arya, this is my boyfriend, Trys. And Trys, this is Arya. In the flesh."

Trys extended his hand for a shake which she willingly took out of compliance. "Nice to finally meet 
you, Arya. I've heard a lot about you from Cella here." He flashed her a wide, knowing grin.

Arya only blinked the surprise away as she smiled back at him.

"Likewise, Trys." Was her only response.

After the short introduction was over, Cella finally managed to ask Trys, "How did you find me?"

Trys jutted his chin toward Gendry, who was now standing behind the bench.

"For some reason, Gendry knew that you'd be here." Was Trys's reply, shrugging innocently. He 
was completely oblivious to the growing air of tension brought about by Gendry's presence.

Myrcella looked like she was about to ask her brother how until she came to a silent realization. Arya 
could read the expression on her face and she somehow understood their clear implication when 
Cella gave her an abrupt but knowing look before facing Trys again.

As for Arya, she didn’t want to know how Gendry indeed knew where to find them.

Only a few minutes had passed when they finally started making their way back to the manor with 
Cella and Trys walking hand-in-hand in front of her and Gendry.
Arya fell in complete silence until Gendry finally spoke to her, "So how's your new place? Jon just told me at dinner that you've moved out of their apartment." It was a casual question, perhaps just to make the atmosphere less awkward than it already was.

"It's fine. Still a bit expensive but I'll manage. At least it's closer to the beach." Was her plain response.

"You could have told me you needed a place to stay. I could have offered you my apartment. I haven't been staying there for almost 2 years now." He explained. She could feel him looking at her intently as if waiting for her to look back.

The revelation itself shocked Arya because she knew how much Gendry treasured that apartment.

"I didn't know. I thought you loved your place." She stated matter-of-factly.

"Well, I still do and I even visit there every few days just to keep the place tidy, but I'm not technically living there right now." He explained.

She raised a confused eyebrow, "So where are you staying now?"

"At Jeyne's place."

Oh.

Why hadn't she thought of that?

It shut her up for a few seconds, leaving her completely off-guard. She wasn't expecting that response from him because he didn't do that kind of shit. He didn't cohabitate with his previous partners before. But then again, she realized that his previous relationships were only casual hookups. What he had with Jeyne right now was something more serious. It was real commitment.

"I see… So why don't you just put it up for sale? I'm pretty sure a lot of buyers are after it, considering its strategic location." She suggested, feigning casualness.

"I didn't want to." His terse reply said it all.

She only nodded her head in understanding.

"I'll have Human Resources coordinate with the Finance Department to include lodging to your benefits while you're working with us first thing tomorrow so that the company can cover for your renting expenses." He stated as if he was just telling her that the sky was blue.

Shaking her head, she finally looked at him, seething. "No. I said I can manage. There's no need for that."

"It should have been part of your benefits in the first place, anyway. Besides, we're the ones who hired you to come here." He reasoned.

"You don't really have to. The terms of my contract were clear to me. I understood everything and that was not part of it." She shot back. It took all of her will to keep her voice lower to avoid Cella and Trys from suspecting that they were in the middle of an argument.

"Fine. Then I'll just have to request Human Resources to increase your pay grade." He bantered, equaling her tone.

"That's basically the same—"
"Baby!" Jeyne's voice broke them from their pseudo-argument when they finally reached the balcony that connected to the dining hall.

Without saying another word, Arya immediately removed herself from his side to give way for Jeyne to approach him. She wasn't sure if she should be thankful for the interruption, thus ending their banter, or annoyed because that short moment between them was over.

"Where were you? I missed you…" She heard Jeyne cooing at Gendry in that high-pitched honeyed voice, her tone thankfully fading as Arya kept a farther distance from them.

Sighing to herself, she fought the urge of turning back around to avoid accidentally seeing what Jeyne was currently doing to him. But she'd already pictured Jeyne's arms clinging around him as if her life depended on it.

"I should head home now." She announced as soon as everyone was back inside the dining hall.

She was pretty much aware that her announcement had been nothing but premature, especially when her siblings and the other Baratheon kids and their partners were still planning on celebrating Robb and Mina's engagement at some high-end club. But she couldn't help it if she was already exhausted because sleep had been beckoning her in the last half-hour or so.

Most of them even tried to persuade her to come, but as much as she wanted to, her body was already craving for the comforts of her bed. She wasn't even making that up as an excuse.

"Let me drive you to your place." Jon volunteered.

Arya declined his offer for the first time. "There's no need. I already called a cab, and it's on its way here."

She bade everyone an informal farewell, with the exception of Jeyne and Gendry who were busy having a chat with Cersei, of all people. It came as a surprise to her that Cersei seemed like she actually approved of Jeyne and Gendry's relationship, despite the fact that she despised her stepson so much. Arya guessed her sudden nice treatment now had something to do with Jeyne as a popular supermodel slash socialite. Growing up to know the real Cersei, Arya knew that she only cared about the social standing of a person.

The cab she was riding had barely even exited Cedar Ridge Heights, where Uncle Robert's estate was situated, when her phone suddenly vibrated with a new message.

*Text me when you get home.* – Gendry

Her eyebrows bunched together, frowning at his message. Why he was still even pretending to care was already beyond her.

*Why?* – Arya

Another message pinged before the backlights in her phone died out.

*I just wanted to make sure that you get home safe.* – Gendry

*I'm always safe. I can take care of myself.* – Arya

Before she could receive another message from him, she composed a new one.

*You don't have to do this.* – Arya
A few seconds of silence before another text came.

_I want to._ – Gendry

To avoid what she could sense was about to be another round of their useless bickering, she finally replied to his text with resignation.

Ok fine. – Arya

She badly wanted to ask him why he even bothered with needing to know if she got home safe, but if she did, she knew that it would just open a Pandora’s Box of unspoken truths. And she had to avoid that as much as possible.

Perhaps she wasn’t really used to Gendry being like this because when they were still close, it was always him who always made sure that she got home in one piece. He always drove her home.

Her phone finally fell silent for the rest of the journey back to her rented apartment.

"Just got home." Was the last text she sent him that night, if only to comply with his request.

_Alright. Thank you. See you tomorrow._ – Gendry

She never sent him a reply. In fact, she’d gone as far as deleting their entire text conversation after that last message.

And she made it to a point that they would never bump into each other at the office the following day. If possible, for the rest of the work week.

It had only been a successful pursuit at first.

*****

_Three Weeks Later_

When Robb told her to come by the gym so that she could get her wedding invitation from him, Arya wasn’t expecting it to be this early. She basically had no choice but to agree with the schedule because it was Robb’s only available time before he was going to be swamped with work, and surprisingly he wanted to be the one to personally hand Arya’s wedding invitation.

It was barely 6 in the morning when she passed by the lobby of The Palace, the luxurious five-star hotel owned by Uncle Robert where Robb was a VIP member. The interior of the hotel still had the same opulent classical design that it even felt as though she was walking back in time. She always marveled at the hotel’s high ceilings and glorious arches. It even housed some of the enormous paintings created by the most prominent artists during the 18th century.

A series of recollections flashed in her thoughts as she continued to make her way to the gym at the far end of the third floor. She had many memories in this hotel before. It was in this very hotel that her family celebrated most of their birthdays. This was also where they usually stayed whenever her mother would have their apartment undergo some renovations, however minor they were.
Sometimes, it even felt like her childhood home was a mixture of this hotel and their apartment, especially since she'd been living inside tall buildings her entire life.

As opposed to Uncle Robert’s vast estate in Cedar Ridge Heights, Arya oftentimes wondered why her parents opted a penthouse apartment in the heart of the city as their main residence. Because of that, she never knew what it’s like to live in a real actual house. Not until Braavos where she was fortunate enough to rent a cozy one-bedroom beach cottage that also cost twice as less as the apartment she was renting right now in King’s Landing.

Finally reaching her destination, she pushed open the huge glass doors of the gym. It took a while for her to spot her brother, until she heard what sounded like boyish cheers and boisterous laughter in one corner.

Robb, Theon and Rickon had their backs to her, still oblivious of her presence and their eyes glued to two guys competitively hanging at arm’s length on separate chin-up bars.

Curious as to who they’re cheering for, she noiselessly wedged herself on one of the gym’s grand pillars for a fuller view, careful not to disrupt them.

She could already make out the familiar build of Jon’s back. He was wearing a charcoal sleeveless shirt and black shorts, and was weaving his way up and down the chin-up bar along with… she squinted her eyes for a clearer look since she neither wore glasses nor contacts. Jon’s opponent clearly had more advantage in height and built than him. Her brother’s muscles couldn’t even compare to the biceps of his opponent, rippling as he pulled his body weight from a serious dead hang.

Shit. Who’s this guy? His upper body strength was warrior-like. As if he was a seasoned demi-god warrior incarnate from one of those ancient epic tales of long ago.

It was when Arya began to study him closely that she could see the familiar raven man-bun at the back of his head. And that familiar white t-shirt and grey drawstring pants trademark she knew so well.

Holy mother of god. She cursed as she found herself unable to look away from the sight of a hot Gendry Baratheon soaked in glorious sweat and concentrating on lifting his weight on the bar. Not to mention the sounds of exertion he was making, almost as if he was…

She could practically picture him out grunting at the great effort, but this time, her thoughts led her to something more lecherous, which was enough for her ovaries to risk sudden rupture.

It took all of her practiced self-control not to drool at the sight of Gendry, the white sweat-soaked t-shirt he was wearing sticking to his body like second skin.

Her fantasies soon popped out like a bubble as she was brought back to the present when the guys cheered for the obvious winner – no other than Gendry and his super strength, of course.

She’d never doubted his strength before but what she just saw right now was uncanny. She barely even saw him working out when they were still best friends since she thought it was all just good genes and the good use of his muscles through his long hours at the garage that made him so fit.

She sighed, shaking those thoughts away.

They still didn’t notice her standing behind them even after Jon and Gendry’s competitive chin-up exercises. But from Arya’s vantage point, she could see everything, albeit blurry. Even as Gendry took off his sweat-soaked shirt without warning and draped it over one of his broad shoulders, trying
to catch his breath.

She couldn’t believe what her poor eyes were seeing, that she already regretted leaving her second pair of eyes at home.

Where Gendry’s t-shirt sleeve was a few seconds ago, was now a full sleeve of black tribal tattoos inked on his upper left arm that continued to the left side of his chest. She’d never taken him as a guy who was into tattoos. But with the intricate designs inked to his body that looked like it had been done for more than one session, she was absolutely wrong.

It looked like she wasn’t the only one who had a major transformation after all.

Gendry was all man and muscle. And she couldn’t find it in her to look away.

She was in so much trouble.

“Arya! You’re here!” Robb finally called.

All the attention was suddenly on her in the span of a few seconds. And then there was that look of mirthful surprise in Gendry’s eyes as they finally landed on her.

She had no choice but to give them all a short, awkward wave.

“Hey, guys!” Then facing Robb, she said, “I’m here as you requested, Robb, so let’s get this over with, shall we?”

“Right. Come on, follow me. The invitation’s inside my gym bag.”

Without another word, she followed her brother and waited for him to emerge from the male locker rooms with his bag.

“You’ll be there, right?” He asked her prior to handing her the invitation, a skeptic look on his face.

Arya feigned hurt, touching her chest for added effect, “You had me stepping out of my apartment so early in the morning to deliver me this invitation personally because you think I’m just going to bail your wedding? What kind of sister do you think I am?”

“Please...” Robb snorted. “You bailed the wedding of Aunt Liz when you ran away to Braavos.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “Because, Robb, if you can remember, she’s one of those nosy relatives of ours who was quick to agree with mother on banishing me from King’s Landing, even to the point of disowning me after I pulled my stint of running away.”

Robb shook his head in resignation. “Fine. You have a point. I guess I just got a bit worried that you’d bail because I’m well aware that you staying here in King’s Landing is only temporary.” He confessed.

Arya was touched at his brother’s honest statement, feeling a bit guilty as she remembered discussing the timeline of her brother’s wedding to Cella, and wishing for it to happen soon enough. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world, Robb, you have my word.” She promised.

A relieved smile spread on his lips as he finally handed her an envelope with a beachy-rustic decoration. She loved it so much that she could hardly even contain her excitement when she opened it to check the rest of the contents.

But then something suddenly caught her eye.
It wasn’t a surprise that her name was already under the “Bridesmaids” section. What struck her attention was the familiar name written right beside hers.

Under the “Groomsmen” section.

Her mood slowly began to darken.

“Wait. Why are you pairing me up with him?”

Robb didn’t need to ask to know who she was referring to.

“Why not?” Arya could’ve sworn that a knowing look flashed in her oldest brother’s eyes.

“Is his girlfriend not coming to your wedding?” Came her blatant question.

“She might be coming. But that’s still tentative. Because according to Mina, his girlfriend had to attend some fancy fashion week abroad the same day of our wedding, so…”

“Regardless, Robb, that’s still going to stir some trouble, especially if the media catches my pair-up with him at your wedding. Trust me.”

“I never said the media was invited to my private wedding, Arya. The media can kiss my perfect ass.” Robb’s complacent retort provided a temporary balmy relief to her sudden apprehension. But then the idiot only had to raise an eyebrow as if to challenge her when he added, “And why would it stir some trouble when we all know that you’re both just attending my wedding as platonic friends with no feelings for each other? Unless there’s really something between you—”

“Quit it!” She hissed, feeling a blush creep through her cheeks.

He so knew her history with Gendry. Apparently, Jon couldn’t keep his mouth shut either. Gendry was close with her brothers, especially Jon, so at some point while she was exiling herself in Braavos, he must have told Jon everything, and Jon must have leaked the details to Robb.

The elation from seeing the beautiful design of the wedding invitation was suddenly extinguished after Robb tried to tease her.

Huffing a deep sigh, she stuffed her invitation inside her purse.

“I should head back to my place now before the rush hour, or else I wouldn’t be able to finish working on my designs for Uncle Robert’s project.” She explained.

“The deadline for my father’s project isn’t for another two months or so, Arya. Why the hurry?” She heard Gendry’s deep voice from behind her. “Besides, today’s your day off.” He added as he finally stood in front of her, right beside Robb.

She wanted to tell him that he could really use a shirt on him right now because he was very distracting, but she might as well admit that his half-nakedness was affecting her.

Instead, she replied with dry sarcasm, “Oh, the joy of loving my job!” Turning away from them, she raised her hand for a parting wave. “Bye, everyone!”

“Let me drive you back to your apartment, Arya.” Gendry offered, immediately rushing toward her, sweat-soaked skin and all.

“Why? So that can you discover the exact address of my apartment without looking like a stalker? I don’t think so.” Smirking sinisterly, she added, “Bye, Gendry! Nice tats, by the way!” Her wink
came in a flash.

She didn’t really know what had gotten into her for being so brazen that day. She even left him speechless at her sudden remark as she smoothly exited the gym with his tongue still stuck inside his throat.
“Got a B+ in my math finals,” was the text Arya sent to Gendry right after their last period ended that afternoon. She couldn't literally contain her happiness as she tucked her phone back inside the pockets of her school blazer.

If only it was that easy to slip a genuine smile on her face, but knowing that her bullies were just lurking around the corridors, she couldn't just show her real emotions or else they'd use that to their advantage. So, she went about the halls with a neutral face, careful to avoid the places where they'd usually hang out.

She reveled at the fact that it was only a matter of weeks before senior year would officially end, which also signified the end of her days in this godforsaken school. But then her abrupt elation instantly deflated when she unknowingly passed by the bulletin boards where a big poster was taking up the entire space on the largest board and she was suddenly reminded of this one last obstacle prior to being finally free of her ordeal: The Graduation Ball.

She was certain that it wouldn't be complete without all those formalities the upper class had all been used to, thanks to the Disney-princess-wannabe student-organizers who had been planning this event at the beginning of their term. If anything, their inflated egos only just strengthened her theory that they were the worst versions of Cinderella's step-sisters.

These were the kind of girls who practically lived for fairy tales and happily-ever-afters, prince-charmings and the occasional self-entitlement based on their untouchable status. They also happened to be the very same girls who enabled bullies into tormenting students like her.

They were an epitome of obnoxious vanity.

Apparently, being different from the rest was a sin in her school.
She contemplated ditching the ball entirely all because of that reason. But then doing so would greatly affect her grades in homeroom, ergo, the lesser chances for her to be allowed to move out.

She took a large intake of air as she tried to think of how she could endure one night alone with all those people who hated her because she wasn't really planning on bringing along a date, lest her date would find out how she was being treated.

The upcoming event was literally a modern-day trap complete with the whole ball and chain ensemble.

Thankfully, her thoughts were brought back to the present when she felt her phone vibrating.

*I'm one hell of an irresistible tutor, that's why. Good chances of memory retention because of my irresistibility. ;)* -Gendry

Her eyes found the need to roll up to the tops of her head after reading his cocky response.

There was another text before she could even compose her reply.

*Picking you up today. I'll be there in ten. Let's celebrate at Tiffany's with HP. You deserve a treat for being such a good girl.* -Gendry

*You don't have to treat me. It was imperative that I should pass Math, anyway.* -Arya

*Would you rather I punish you instead? Because I know a dozen ways how. And you'd still enjoy it.* -Gendry

Arya stopped in her tracks the moment she read his last text. Then she could feel her core reacting to his offer, which was nothing short of lascivious. It was another one of their many suggestive yet harmless banters. Harmless, as far as platonic friendships went.

Instead of cowering at his words, a lop-sided grin formed on her face as she replied:

*Why don't you show me how good you are at punishment then?* -Arya

*I don't think you'd be ready for it.* -Gendry

*Try me.* -Arya

*We'll see.* -Gendry

*Bloody coward is what you are.* -Arya

In the depths of her subconscious, she badly wanted for that proposition to actualize, but given their still-platonic kind of friendship even after more than a year of knowing each other, she knew that that kind of ideation only dwelled in her fantasies.

Her phone fell silent after her last response.

**Gendry**

She fell asleep on his bed. And it wasn't even late into the evening yet.
One moment she's finishing the book she was reading on his bed and the next moment she was already sprawled on his sheets with reckless abandon. He was at the kitchen cooking dinner for them when he caught a glimpse of his oversized shirt hiking up to reveal the tops of her thighs.

While it seemed only fitting to see her wearing his clothes, he also couldn't discount the evident weariness on her features. It was only yesterday when she fell asleep as he drove her home after their mini-celebration at Tiffany's with HP. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that the week after her finals was more brutal than the actual finals week itself.

Knowing Arya, he knew that she'd brood for the rest of the time until she could finally get hands on those final grades. The waiting was more agonizing according to her.

She might look nonchalant about grades and shit, but deep down there's a nerd in her that cared about her actual grades. Nevertheless, he was still proud of her for having achieved outstanding remarks in most of her subjects.

The screaming started in the middle of him preparing their plates on the counter. He abruptly stopped everything when he heard another disturbing sound and rushed toward the source. Which was his room.

On his very bed, Arya was thrashing as if she was fighting against a non-existent enemy. Her face was contorted with palpable fear.

"Please…Stop… please…” Came her broken cries.

He was mortified at the scene playing before his very eyes.

She was having a nightmare.

He didn't waste time in trying to figure how to best deal with it and instead plopped on her side in the attempt to wake her up. But as he tentatively brought his hands on her shoulders, she was slapping him away as if he was the one trying to harm her.

"Arya!” He tried to shake her gently.

Tears were now streaming down her face and she was cold with sweat.

Cupping her cheek with his hand, while the other was carefully threading on her back, he tried to wake her again. "Arya, please. Wake up."

"No! Don't hurt me, please."

Her cries were heart-wrenching. It's as if he was also going to fall apart just looking at her in that condition.

"It's me…” He whispered, drawing his face closer to her so that his breath tickled her lips. "It's only me, Arya." He tried again with more resolve, finally resting his forehead on hers. "Please. Wake up."

She finally relaxed at the sound of his voice and he pulled away when he was sure that her erratic breathing evened out.

Still keeping a short distance, he noticed her eyes flutter open.

Blinking back a few more tears, she finally squinted her eyes and heaved into full consciousness.

"Arya. It's me. You were having a nightmare.” Gendry revealed in his most tender voice, wiping
away a stray tear.

The grip of her clammy hands on his wrist felt like she was trying to tell herself that she was already back to the here and now.

"Gendry… I…" Her voice was hoarse and feeble.

"It's alright. It was a dream."

"I'm sorry…" She finally said, swallowing back the threat of fresh tears.

He bunched his eyebrows together. "What are you sorry for?"

"I mean, I didn't mean to—I was just reading and then I didn’t know that I already fell asleep." She tried to explain, her cheeks flush with embarrassment.

The hand on her back moved to cup the other side of her cheek, his thumb giving a gentle caress on her jaw while the other was absently stroking her lip.

"It's not your fucking fault for falling asleep and having a nightmare, Arya. You were dead tired."

She finally nodded her head as if to internalize what he just said without saying another word before relief washed over her features.

Why she was even apologizing for what had happened was already beyond him. But what bothered him more was the dead giveaway of the consistency of her nightmares whenever she slept tired. He couldn't help but draw a concrete conclusion of all the observations he'd gathered from before.

The dark bags underneath her eyes along with her deteriorating weight finally made sense, added to her obvious avoidance of the subject about her overall health.

He took her silence as a cue to drop the impending questions parking inside his head for now, as he settled for "Come on, dinner is ready."

Fighting the urge to pull her in his arms and creep her out with his undying declaration of protective assurance, he reluctantly pulled away from her and headed back to the kitchen without looking back.

They ate their dinner in contemplative silence with her eyes solely focused on the dish as if it was the most interesting thing in the world.

She was only back to her usual self as she did her part in washing the dishes diligently post dinner, talking about how Anakin Skywalker felt too much to lead himself to the Dark Side, and how he was just misunderstood rather than plain evil.

She was good at hiding her problems like that, easily compartmentalizing what transpired inside his bedroom into that tiny corner of horrors and nightmares inside her head before pushing back the façade of smooth nonchalance.

*****

"You have to talk about it eventually, Arya." He finally had the guts to open up some time after their trip from the elevator to the floor of his parking space.
"It was just some random nightmare, Gendry." She replied dismissively.

"There you go again." His tone was now on the verge of losing all composure.

She gave him a sideways glare before her renewed mask of stoicism.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He noticed a large breath of air leaving her lungs as he remained silent for a few heartbeats.

They finally reached his car and hopped in. He was in the middle of turning on the ignition when he could no longer hold it back. "See, that's what's wrong with you. You're always in denial, always trying to brush things off just to avoid talking about them."

She snorted in her seat, crossing her arms. "That's really the point, isn't it? Because I really don't want to talk about it hence the avoidance. So why can't you just take a hint?"

He stepped on the brake a little too harshly before he faced her. His left hand gripped the wheel as if his life depended on it, his knuckles turning white. "I can't take a hint because I can't just pretend that there’s nothing wrong with you! Not when every fucking thing points out to the obvious signs. And I can’t just bloody ignore them because I fucking care about you!"

She flinched at the angry tone of his declaration. It was the first time he was ever this mad in front of her. But he couldn’t help it. He was infuriated because he couldn't do anything about it unless she’d willingly share to him what's really been going on with her.

It rendered him helpless and useless.

And he was supposed to be there for her no matter what.

After what felt like centuries, he finally saw a glimpse of reaction from her. Then she swallowed a huge lump on her throat and shook her head stubbornly, practically closing herself off from him again. "Just drive me home, Gendry."

"Fine." He resigned with gritted teeth.

It was an awkward fifteen or so minutes after that, both of them drenched in tendrils of stony silence.

*****

Tiffany’s bell gave the usual cacophony of rings as Gendry opened the door and stepped inside the small café that late Friday afternoon. He was going to meet with HP to catch up on things. But then as he took another step inside, he heard a familiar voice calling out his name.

“Gendry?” Came a befuddled Brea who was sitting at a window seat to the left.

“Hey, Brea.” Was Gendry’s autonomic response, his eyes scanning each of her familiar companions -Pandora, Ned and Mycah before giving them all a brief wave.

Then realization hit his senses as he noted the absence of one particular person. “Where’s Arya?” He simply asked.
All of their eyebrows shot up in confusion.

“What do you mean ‘Where’s Arya?’ I thought she was with you?” Pandora piped in the same time that Brea said, “Wait, what?”

Gendry made to move toward their table.

“Arya said she was going to hang out with you tonight, man. That’s why she’s not with us.” Ned explained in a calmer voice, but his expression reflected the same concerned features as his friends.

Gendry shook his head. “No. She told me she’s hanging out with you guys tonight at Brea’s place, that’s why I just decided to come here and catch up with HP.”

“So, if she’s not hanging out with our gorgeous group, or with your handsome, irresistible face, then where the fuck is our girl?” Mycah added, holding a hand to his heart for effect.

“She’s not answering any of my calls because her phone’s dead, you guys.” Brea inserted as she placed her phone on the table.

Fuck.

Panic crept through Gendry’s system at the thought of his best friend suddenly gone missing.

He picked up his own phone and dialed her number, despite knowing the fact that her phone’s dead, anyway.

What the fuck was she playing at?

Ned stood up and placed a comforting pat on Gendry’s shoulder before offering him a seat. “Come on, man. Sit down with us for a moment while we try to sort things out.”

He only nodded appreciatively, somewhat rendered speechless at this whole situation.

It was a few minutes after when he noticed HP finally coming out of the kitchen, still wearing his apron.

“Hey, Gendry! I see that you’ve already met my lovely visitors for this afternoon.” HP smiled, giving Gendry’s back a gentle slap before eyeing Brea and the rest warmly.

He might have noticed their sullen mood because he was suddenly asking them, “Why the long faces?”

“We can’t seem to find Arya, HP.” Pandora supplied for him worriedly.

HP gave Gendry an I-thought-she-wasn’t-with-you-because-she’s-with-them look, in which Gendry only shot back with a furious glare.

As HP was also one of his smarter friends, he was able to get the implication right away.

“Oh, I see. Well, she doesn’t have a boyfriend that she’s hiding from you guys, does she?”

“No!—

“We don’t know.” Gendry and Brea said at the same time, with Gendry’s firm “No” resonating all over the small café.
He didn’t give a flying fuck what they thought of his blatant response because his fear and worries were already consuming him and slowly fueling his rage.

It wasn’t until Pandora spoke again that he felt a bit more relieved.

“I just called their place and asked if Arya was around. And Dorota said that she’d seen Arya heading out of the apartment bringing a weekender bag with her, along with a gown garment bag. Said she was off to some ball or something.” Pandora informed them.

“Ball, what fucking ball does she mean?” Gendry snapped.

“Wait—” Mycah suddenly said, frantically scrolling through his phone for something. “Ohmygod! Look at this!” He told them as he pushed his phone toward the center of the table, showing them some photos. “I looked up the Facebook page of Constance and they’re posting preparation photos of a Graduation Ball that their seniors are having tonight.” His eyes then glinted toward Gendry. “Looks like we’ve found our missing princess and she’s off to the ball tonight.”

“Wait, that’s tonight already?” Ned exclaimed, suddenly lost in thought. “If that’s the case, then my sources were all wrong. They said it’s not for another week.”

“But the real question here is, why is Arya trying to hide this information from us?” Brea contemplated.

Gendry ran a rough hand through his already ruffled hair. “Simple. She thought it’s better to attend that ball without a partner.”

“Why is she not bringing a partner with her?” Pandora asked.

Gendry finally rose from his seat with renewed determination. “Well, I guess we’re going to find out soon… If you’d excuse me, I have one missing little princess to escort to the ball tonight. Whether she likes it or not.” His declaration was humorless, and he was aware that they too could feel his simmering anger brewing on the brink.

Fuck it.

With that, he stormed out of the café to head back to his apartment. He located his most pristine suit and readied himself for tonight’s event.

He was so going to punish her tonight.

Arya

Arya was heading back to the ballroom with haste to have a refill of her punch. She’d been staying in a secluded balcony after she had her name listed in the attendance sheet to avoid any encounters from her bullies. Luckily for her, she hadn’t been recognized yet.

Maybe the rest of the girls in her year were just busy comparing their outfits with the others, or better yet, criticizing based on who’s wearing who. That’s practically what greeted her the moment she set foot in the grand ballroom of The Palace Hotel.

Or maybe it had something to do with the fact that she looked like someone else with her dress. She
had to admit that it wasn’t the kind of dress most people would expect her to wear during formal gatherings as she’d been accustomed to the regular satin dresses that brought out her innocent femininity. Mother always had the final decision as to what kind of dress to wear during those social functions.

But as for this graduation ball, it was in some way special despite her lack of a partner because she had all the liberty to choose the kind of dress to wear that would let her be herself and at the same time make her more comfortable.

As opposed to the conventional wide ball gowns that all the girls were wearing tonight, she instead opted to wear a flowy pastel mint-colored floor-length gown. It was made of layers of sheer fabric with a long slit on the right side to give emphasis to her legs. The upper part of her dress consisted of two panels of soft material to cover her breasts.

Her left arm had a golden arm cuff with a simple leaf design and she was only wearing flat strapped sandals instead of high heels. She wore her hair in a bundle of messy chignon with small wisps decorating the sides of her face.

She completed her look with a soft neutral-brown eye makeup.

The entire ensemble basically gave her that Greek-goddess slash mermaid vibes and she was proud of her work because she’d done it all by herself. She’d never realized how strong her DIY game was until she saw herself in the mirror for the first time that night. And instead of feeling self-conscious about her entire get-up, she felt good about herself, an affirmation she was slowly starting to develop one step at a time.

It felt so empowering all at once.

Just as she was about to head back to her own bubble of comfort that was the balcony, a shadow clouded over to the left side of her proximity.

“It looks to us like you’re in the wrong party, Stark. The Whore Convention is over at Slut-Town a million miles away from here.” Came the familiar voice of one of her bullies, eyeing her from head to foot disgustedly. The rest of her minions burst into gales of mocking laughter.

“And what’s she even wearing? That’s just, like, the ugliest effin’ dress I’ve ever seen.” Another one chimed in.

“Perhaps sluts like her do not really have style because all she cares about is having as many dicks as she can inside that wide cunt of hers.” Their pug-faced companion added.

Arya counted three seconds before facing them indifferently.

Another two more seconds before one side of her lip upturned sinisterly.

“Wow. An entire school year just passed and here you are still acting like uneducated mongrels whose only parting wisdom is to ingratiate yourselves to the social ladder by acting like shallow pre-pubescent.” She countered sarcastically. “God, this place has gone to the dogs.”

Gone was her fear of facing them as she finally spoke her mind.

That left two of her bullies gaping, while the other one looked like she didn’t really understand what mongrel and ingratiate meant.

Pity.
Their expressions right now were an obvious reflection of their piteous ignorance.

“You stupid whore! How dare you talk back to us like that!” Their so-called leader spat. “My parents will hear about this!”

It was Arya’s turn to laugh. But there was no humor in it. Rather, it sounded taunting and intimidating.

“Go ahead! Go tell mommy and daddy that their precious little cupcake was called illiterate and ignorant by the Arya Stark, and let’s see who they’ll believe.”

Another series of incredulous gasps followed.

“What makes you think they would believe a single word from you, you filthy slut?”

“Oh, I don’t have to confront them to state my defense. Because as far as I recall, you three are at the bottom rung in terms of academic sensibilities.” She told them smugly, her smile growing wider and more malicious. “And before you start opening your witless mouths, yes, I’ve done my research. It’s a shame that you had to have your mommies and daddies make a donation for the university you’ll be attending all because you failed in every entrance exam you took. It’s an absolute pity, really, that they would have to oblige admitting brainless twits like you to their school. And to think that your family businesses are going down. How on earth could mommy and daddy ever pay for every teacher to let you pass?”

“Bitch! You don’t know anything about our families! And we happen to belong to one of the upper-class circles in King’s Landing! So, you better shut your mouth!” The pug-faced bitch reacted.

“Oh, I know everything. Because unlike you morons, I did my research before firing back. Maybe you should try that sometimes before relying on false assumptions based on idle gossip and then making a big deal about it.” She moved an unflinching step closer to them, “And I don’t give a fuck about your upper-class delusions because I can still always buy you, your friends and every family business you own just because I am a Stark. It would do you well to remember your rightful place because I’m so fucking tired of you cunts pathetically harassing every girl in this school whom you think are weak. You don’t know our real story, so stop judging us!”

“You think you’re so smart just because you threatened to buy all of us, don’t you? Well, we could always have our guys have a repeat encore of what they tried to do to you so that they could finally put that smart mouth of yours to use when we’ll order them to rape every last piece of your fucking filthy soul just to shut you up!”

Before that familiar fear could register again in her thoughts to remind her of why she’d avoided this kind of confrontation in the first place, a well-recognized voice spoke just right behind her, strong, muscled arms wrapping possessively around her waist as she was drawn to a furnace-like warmth she knew too well.

“Been looking everywhere for you, love.” He spoke. Another second more and she could feel his lips kissing her neck tenderly. Heat rushed to her face as she felt the lick of his tongue on her sensitive flesh before he finally faced her tormentors.

She was rendered speechless by his sudden action, and most especially by his very presence.

“You dare threaten my girl in front of everyone in this place? How pathetic could you all get?” Gendry questioned in his deep yet menacing raspy voice that was guaranteed to bring them all to kingdom come.
“Who the hell are you?” Pug-face asked, her voice shaking a little.

The two bimbos flocking her side remained tongue-tied until one of them finally had the courage to say in a whisper-shout tone, “Don’t you know him? That’s Robert Baratheon’s son, Gendry Waters-Baratheon.”

Pug-face’s mouth fell to the floor after her friend spoke as if his very name could instill fear on their very bones.

Gendry used this to his advantage as he finally replied smoothly, “My apologies. Where are my manners?” Feigning politeness, he continued. “My name is Gendry Baratheon, Arya’s date for tonight.”

Silence.

Then, “So, you guys are a thing?” The other one asked out of pure curiosity after wiping the drool of her face.

Gendry only held Arya tighter in his arms, her back pressed to his warm front snugly as he replied with brooding confidence, “Oh, yes. She’s mine.”

Arya prayed to the non-existent gods that Gendry would not feel her heart trying to leap out of her ribcage at his unexpected response.

She’s mine.

She’s mine.

She’s mine.

The words sent shivers all over her body as they rang back inside her head over and over again. Possessive Gendry was making her so hot, she could feel her panties soaking.

But of course, she’s also too aware that he was just pretending to be her boyfriend for the sake of saving her ass.

Arya discreetly cleared her throat, and her salacious thoughts in the process, as she finally glared at her bullies. “It’s really none of your business if we’re a thing or not, so we’re not obliged to give you anything at all. Come on, Gendry. Let’s not waste our intellect on these daft bimbos.” She tugged on his arm.

Before they could start walking away, Gendry gave each of them another scathing look. A familiar terrifying sneer etched on his face as he said, “Threaten her like that again and you will all feel my wrath. And if you so much as breath in her space the next time I see your hideous faces, then I will no longer be responsible for my actions. Do I make myself clear?” They all nodded like obedient little shits. “And it would do you well to learn from my girl here. She’s, after all, a lot smarter than all of you combined.”

The crowd parted as they traversed through the center of the ballroom, giving them mixed expressions of shock and disbelief after that short scene.

Gendry was holding her hand the entire time until they finally reached the secluded balcony where he suddenly pinned her to the wall. He looked enraged and for the first time in her life, she was afraid of him, not because of what he would do to her, but because of what he could actually do to her bullies after he made his threat clear.
She finally looked up to meet his eyes and realized that he had been giving her that familiar look she could never decipher.

“Gendry?” She managed to ask before her throat closed in on her.

She made a small jump as he slammed his palm on the wall, cursing in seething rage before caging her in between his two strong arms. “Fuck!”

She noticed him breathing heavily in the act of gathering all the strength to control his anger.

What he couldn’t express in words, he did so in his actions by slowly drawing closer to her until their foreheads met, his breathing slowly trying to stabilize back to its normal rhythm. Then he moved himself a few inches away to plant the softest kiss on her forehead before his lips travelled to the nook between her neck and shoulder, sucking her skin and nipping her pulse points before laving it with his warm, wet tongue.

Arya realized that the sound she could hear was her own moaning voice in reaction to what Gendry was doing to her.

This was like the garage all over again as he devoured her neck insatiably, moving from one side to the other while he held her in place. She was starting to lose control as she moved her hands to rake the raven strands of his brushed-up hair, disheveling it in the process and tilting her head a little bit more to give him more coverage.

They were on the brink of completely crossing the line between platonic and something more, and Arya wanted nothing more than to give in and finally capture his lips with hers.

But before she could even act on the impulse, they were doused back to the reality when Gendry’s familiar ringtone violated their air of heady need.

Gendry gave her neck one final lick before kissing her temple and then backing a huge step away from her intimate space.

He fished his phone out of the pockets of his suit and answered it with renewed calmness. “Yes?”

Arya couldn’t comprehend what the person was talking about on the other line, but all she could make out of it was the unmistakable voice of a female.

Before she could instinctively react out of irrational jealousy, Gendry handed his phone to her. “Brea wants to speak with you.”

With still slightly shaking hands, she took his phone. “Hey, Brei. What’s up?” She asked with fake cheerfulness.

“What’s up your ass, you had us all worried, Arya! What the fuck were you thinking?! For one second we all thought that you ran away with some creepy serial killer guy that we clearly do not approve of, or worse been kidnapped by said creepy serial killer and hid your remains somewhere in Atlantis or something. Do you know how livid all of us were?!”

“You know, we’re all just lucky to have come across a very clueless Gendry this afternoon at Tiffany’s with no fucking clue about your whereabouts because he was clearly thinking you’re with us the whole time! Like, what the fuck, Arya?!” She winced at Brea’s almost bottomless ranting.

She cleared her throat and finally managed a short, “I’m sorry, okay? It won’t happen again.”
“Damn right it won’t because I’ll have Gendry tie you to your bed just so that you won’t go sneaking around like that again! You fucking gave me a mini-heart attack! What’s wrong, Arya? You can always tell us your problem, you know.”

She finally sighed in defeat. Now that her secret’s out with Gendry witnessing the entirety of the conversation earlier, might as well tell the rest of her friends for their peace of mind. “Fine, I guess I will. After this bloody ball, I’ll tell you everything.”

A few more of Brea’s rantings here and there later, Arya finally gave the phone back to Gendry. He talked to Brea for a few short seconds before he suddenly asked her, “Brea wants to know if you’d like to spill in her place or yours.”

She rolled her eyes, the mood finally shifting to a lighter shade. “I booked a room in this hotel. Guess they can come over and slumber party the fuck out of my brains and everything.”

Gendry relayed the message back to Brea in which she asked Gendry to inform Arya that Pandora and Mycah would also be coming over.

“Yeah, you guys come over and beat the shit out of my best friend for me please. And tell Ned and HP that we’re also having a guys’ night out. The booze is on me. You girls can’t have all the fun, can you?” Gendry joked, that familiar boyish smile finally forming on his lips.

God, why was he so painfully handsome?

She only just noticed now how good he looked in his black suit.

After the call with Brea finally ended, Gendry shifted his eyes back to her again. This time his gaze bore a lesser weight than its intensity earlier.

“Come here.” He commanded her with utmost confident ease before he took her hand and pulled her to him for a lingering embrace.

“Are you alright?” He asked in a gentler tone, all his anger from earlier clearly dissipated.

Arya only replied with a nod as he buried his face on her neck, feeling the warmth of his breath as he inhaled her scent then exhaled deeply. His arms tightened around her small frame while her hands curled around the inside shirt of his crisp suit.

“Are they the reason why you chose to come to this ball alone? Because you don’t want any of us to find out about those girls bullying you?” He asked again, one of his hand caressing the smooth expanse of her bare back.

“Yes. I’m sorry for not telling you, Gendry.”

“I understand.” Was all he said before the song from the ballroom inside changed into a familiar tune that they both loved so much.

It was Bic Runga’s magnum opus, Sway.

“Dance with me.” It wasn’t even a request but a whispered declaration as he pulled away from their embrace only to hold her hand and lead her out of the balcony and back into the ballroom where most of the people were already starting their slow dance.

He lead her to the center, taking both of her arms this time and planting them around his neck before his very own made a possessive grasp on her hips.
Their gazes locked, bringing to the surface that one unspoken truth they still refused to acknowledge.

Her smile conveyed what she couldn’t admit in words, reveling in the rhythm of the powerful song ensnaring them both to an alternate universe where only the two of them existed.

Tucking a stray strand of her hair, Gendry suddenly brought his lips to her ear and whispered, “You look ethereal, by the way.”

She said a mumbled “Thanks” as she brought her head to rest on his shoulder, the song woefully nearing its end.

They stayed that way, carefully holding each other as another one of their favorite songs began playing. It was another classic 90’s favorite this time from Paula Cole.

She closed her eyes, humming the tune of the song to heart as Gendry softly sang the lyrics in her ear. It was the first time she’d ever heard him sing, and the bastard even has a nice voice that gave her all the right shivers.

I don’t want to wait for our lives to be over
I want to know right now what will it be
I don’t want to wait for our lives to be over
Will it be yes, or will it be sorry?

He pulled his arms around her tighter as he sighed in quiet content, humming the rest of the song away.

For a few short minutes, she pretended that time had stopped for them if only to preserve this moment for when she’d want to look into the million and one memories she shared with him.

And then finally, she resigned into the temporal limitations of their reality, happy to just have his arms around her in that unforgettable night.

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